DYNAMICS OF DOMINATION AND DIALOGIC NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN CHARLES JOHNSON'S *MIDDLE PASSAGE*, RICHARD POWERS'S *THE TIME OF OUR SINGING*, AND LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S *ALMANAC OF THE DEAD*

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Abstract

Dynamics of Domination and Dialogic Narrative Strategies in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*, Richard Powers's *The Time of Our Singing*, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*

The dissertation investigates narrative strategies employed by the contemporary American novel to criticize and counteract the dynamics of domination. The study focuses primarily on Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990), Richard Powers's *The Time of Our Singing* (2003), and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991). These three novels address problems of sociopolitical repression and racial discrimination arising from the preconditions and heritage of colonial rule and the enslavement of Native Americans and African-Americans. While Johnson, Powers, and Silko refer to concrete historical moments, the critique implicit in their novels does not primarily arise from narrated historical facts or fictional experience, but from the narrative configurations they construct, and in which they embed these facts and experiences. They juxtapose naturalized assumptions about fixed meanings of space, temporality, and ensuing notions of self prevailing in the narrated historical past to ever changing combinations of ethnic, cultural, and social belonging within shifting spatial and temporal parameters, until these assumptions become untenable. Their method of exposition is therefore basically dialogic, and the insights that these novels yield constitute a form of knowledge that becomes available precisely through the combination of dialogics and literary narrative. To the degree that previous assumptions still prevail, all three novels provide a critique of the foundations on which members of Western culture across racial and ethnic lines construct their sense of authority within dynamics of power today. Johnson, Powers, and Silko are associated with African American, mainstream American, and Native American literature, or, in the case of Silko, with the field of American women's writing, and yet, while belonging in these subfields of American studies, go beyond and indeed defy such institutional categories in the conceptual reach of their work. Their novels participate in ongoing inquiries about the epistemological assumptions of our present moment beyond the confines of literary composition and join efforts with those theorists whose conceptions imply a similar commitment to the open-endedness of dialogics. Among these theorists are Mikhail Bakhtin, who most prominently links literary methods of inquiry to general questions of epistemology and ideology, Michel Foucault and his genealogical examination of the concept of race and subsequent project on governmentality, as well as Adorno and the non-identity thinking inherent in his negative dialectics. Reading Silko's, Johnson's, and Powers's novels as interventions in these critical debates recognizes the potential of literary texts to challenge prevailing assumptions by embedding the demand for theoretical alternatives in the narration of lived experience. The dissertation proceeds from the conviction that the discipline of literary studies can discern and contribute to possible beginnings of such a shift within its field of application.

Résumé

Dynamics of Domination and Dialogic Narrative Strategies in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*, Richard Powers's *The Time of Our Singing*, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*

La thèse examine les stratégies narratives employées par le roman américain contemporain en vue de critiquer et de contrecarrer la dynamique de la domination. L'étude se concentre principalement sur *Middle Passage* de Charles Johnson (1990), *The Time of Our Singing* (2003) de Richard Powers et *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) de Leslie Marmon Silko. Ces trois romans abordent les problèmes socio-politiques de répression et de discrimination raciale découlant des conditions préalables et de l'héritage de la domination coloniale et l'asservissement des Amérindiens et des Afro-Américains. Tandis que Johnson, Powers et Silko se rapportent à des moments historiques concrets, la critique implicite que l'on retrouve dans leurs oeuvres n'est pas principalement issue des faits historiques narrés ou des expériences fictives proposées, mais des configurations narratives qu'ils construisent, et dans lesquels ils intègrent ces faits et ces expériences. Ils juxtaposent des hypothèses établies touchant les significations convenues de la temporalité et de l'espace qui mènent des notions d'autonomie en vigueur dans le passé historique rapporté jusqu'à l'évolution constante des combinaisons de facteurs ethniques, culturels et sociaux appartenant au transfert des paramètres temporels et spatiaux, et ce, jusqu'à ce que ces hypothèses deviennent insoutenables. Leur méthode d'exposition est donc essentiellement dialogique et les propositions offertes par ces romans constituent une forme de connaissance qui devient disponible notamment à travers la combinaison de la dialogique et de la narration littéraire. Dans la mesure où les hypothèses antérieures continuent de prévaloir, les trois romans fournissent une critique des fondements sur lesquels les membres de la culture occidentale à travers les frontières raciales et ethniques construisent leur sens de l'autorité au sein de la dynamique du pouvoir exercé aujourd'hui. Johnson, Powers, et Silko sont associés à la littérature afro-américaine, « mainstream » américaine, et à celle des nations amérindienne ou, dans le cas de Silko, avec le champ de l'écriture féminine américaine, et pourtant, tout en appartenant à ces sous-champs des études américaines, se rendent au-delà et en fait, défient ces catégories institutionnelles à travers la portée conceptuelle de leur travail. Ces romans font partie des recherches en cours sur les hypothèses épistémologiques de notre moment présent au-delà des limites de la composition littéraire et conjuguent leurs efforts avec ceux des théoriciens dont les conceptions supposent un engagement similaire vis-à-vis du caractère ouvert de la dialogique. Parmi ceux-ci se retrouvent Mikhaïl Bakhtine, qui de façon notoire lie les méthodes littéraires d'enquête aux questions générales touchant l'épistémologie et l'idéologie, l'approche généalogique de Michel Foucault à l'histoire et son écriture sur l'art de gouverner, et la non-identité inhérent à la pensée dialectique négative d'Adorno. Lire les romans de Silko, Johnson, Powers en tant qu'interventions dans ces débats importants c'est reconnaître le potentiel des textes littéraires à remettre en cause les interprétations en intégrant le besoin d'alternatives théoriques dans la narration de l'expérience vécue. La thèse est basée sur la conviction que la discipline des études littéraires peut discerner et contribuer aux débuts possibles d'un tel changement dans son champ d'application.

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INTRODUCTION

"An individual cannot be completely incarnated into the flesh of existing sociohistorical categories. There is no mere form that would be able to incarnate once and forever all of his human possibilities and needs, no form in which he could exhaust himself down to the last word, like the tragic or epic hero; no form that he could fill to the very brim, and yet at the same time not splash over the brim. There always remains an unrealized surplus of humanness; there always remains a need for the future, and a place for this future must be found."

— Mikhail Bakhtin

Preliminary Remarks on Dialogics

This study explores the relationship between conceptual knowledge, literary practice, literary criticism, and theoretical discourse in the contemporary American novel. It contends that literary practice produces conceptual knowledge, and that literature therefore complements literary criticism and theoretical discourse rather than serving as a subjugated object of inquiry. The critical method of this study is dialogic and informed by Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of language and the novel, as well as by other theories that are inherently dialogic or open-ended, particularly Adorno's negative dialectics and Foucault's genealogy of history and later work on governmentality. These three theorists made important inroads into the practice of conceptualization as an open-ended thought project. As Adorno affirmed, "Open thinking points beyond itself," a maxim that can legitimately be extended to all three of them.[1]

[1] Quoted in Martin Jay, *Adorno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984), 54.

The thematic focus of this study will be on notions of race and ethnic and cultural belonging, as well as how those notions intersect with epistemology. Race and ethnicity imply notions of self and other, and in Western hegemonic epistemology, self and other form a dichotomous pair that has generated dualist and essentialist notions of race and ethnicity. Other, more continuous conceptions of race and ethnicity imply non-dualistic epistemologies that are instead dialogic in orientation, and therefore challenge Western hegemonic epistemological assumptions. The three novels on which my discussion concentrates—Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990), Richard Powers's *The Time of Our Singing* (2003), and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991)—propose such dialogic conceptions of self and other, and thereby of race and ethnicity, that move beyond essentialism and the dualism that it implies. The novels do not merely represent and reflect culture, but rather "suggest" culture through the intricate interweaving of multiple voices into a heteroglossic outlook on the possible meanings of ethnic and cultural belonging.[2] Their implied conceptualizations of the relation between self and other are significant contributions to ongoing debates about epistemological foundations of thought. The insights these novels yield do not stem merely from their thematic focus, but from the specific narrative devices they employ. A major focus of this study will therefore be the literary treatment to which these novels expose their themes, and the kind of knowledge that emerges from such literary treatments.

Johnson's, Powers's, and Silko's fictional characters participate in the conflicted experience of ethnic and cultural belonging and exclusion, and their narratives register contemporary reality as the palimpsest of a far from pure or simple past. While evoking

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[2]David Treuer writes, "It is crucial to make a distinction between reading a book as culture and seeing books as capable of suggesting culture" (*Native American Fiction* 5). His comment on reading literature as suggesting culture receives closer attention in chapter 1, p. 17.

empathy for history's victims, they destabilize any habitual position from which such an emotion might emerge. From a Western perspective, such positions include assumptions about the linearity of time and the self-evidence of space. By their literary treatment of spatial and temporal relations, the three novelists offer a critique of these two central Western concepts. Thus, these novels contribute to an ongoing scholarly, artistic, and everyday debate about the feelings and presuppositions of ethnic and cultural belonging. Reading Silko's, Johnson's, and Powers's novels as interventions in this debate recognizes the potential of literary texts to challenge prevailing assumptions by embedding theoretical alternatives in the narration of lived experience. The "non-identical" aspect of experience, as Adorno called it, makes it different from received ideas and perceptive expectations and may therefore lead to the revision of both (Zuidervaart).

At the base of the ultimately aesthetic enterprises of these novels is what Linda Hutcheon has called "the acknowledgement of the meaningmaking function of human constructs" (89). As she puts it, "postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us . . . that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past ('exertions of the shaping, ordering imagination'). In other words, the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those past 'events' into present historical 'facts'" (*Dialectic* 89). Like Bakhtin, Hutcheon recognizes that discourse is not merely concerned with the object(s) at which it is directed, but with "alien words that have already been spoken about it" (276). Discourse enters into a dialogical relation with that which has been said about an object before—the perspectives and value judgments with which the object has

been already invested—to join them, or disagree with them.[3] Johnson's, Powers's, and Silko's novels display awareness of the constructedness of historical fact, and exploit the potential of the novel to suggest alternative constructions to those that are prevalent: their projects interrogate the underlying assumptions of the kind of derogatory "othering" that has permeated Western hegemonic discourse on race and ethnicity throughout the last few hundred years and that continues to inform racial discrimination today.

Instead of merely targeting Western hegemonic epistemology with their inherent critique, however, the novels are more broadly opposed to monolithic thought, including notions of ethnic and cultural identity that crystallized around resistance movements against Western domination, such as black cultural nationalism. The three novels address problems of sociopolitical repression and racial discrimination arising from the heritage of colonial rule and the enslavement of Native Americans and African Americans. Repression and discrimination are thereby considered within and beyond specific racial and ethnic boundaries: in Johnson's *Middle Passage*, the trauma of impressment looms in the background as the reader gets acquainted with the crew of the *Republic*, the ship that is the setting for a large portion of this narrative; in Silko's *Almanac*, Native Americans who set out to reclaim their land are depicted alongside Vietnam veterans marginalized by a society that wants to forget about the nightmare of the Vietnam War. In Powers's *The Time of Our Singing*, the African-American Daley family is challenged by and ultimately rejects their daughter's interracial marriage, a conflict that destroys their family bond. All three novels integrate the multiple voices of ethnically and socially different groups and individuals who form American society, and they thereby

[3] A more detailed outline of Bakhtin's thought follows in chapter one.

suggest dialogic interactions to be at the base of ethnic and cultural belonging. The novels thereby address incompatibilities between American cultural identity patterned on narratives of European immigrants and the real make-up of American society today and throughout the process of its formation. Yet through their complex narratives, Silko, Johnson, and Powers enact a dialogue between different traditions and emergent modes of thought and thereby critique not only European hegemonic epistemology, which took hold of America along with European imperialism, but also the idealization of a holistic 'Native worldview' or innocent African tribal traditions. Furthermore, these novels surpass critical approaches that tend to dichotomize American as opposed to ethnic American literatures and subjectivities. The three writers have in the past been considered separately either within the narrow if comfortable frameworks of African-American literature, American literature by authors of European heritage, and Native-American literature, or, in the case of Silko, within the field of American ethnic women's writing. Johnson, Powers, and Silko, while certainly fitting into these subfields of American studies, go well beyond and indeed defy such institutional categories in the conceptual reach of their work. The present project is thus inscribed in the sector of American studies that seeks to work both within and beyond those categories.

One might still ask: How potent is literature as a participant in debates on conceptual thought? What kinds of insights can it yield where other discourses might be limited in their revelatory force? These questions are in themselves indicative of a rationalizing tendency that started with the Renaissance: the increasing marginalization of artistic practice in general, and of literature in particular, and the exclusion of the arts from debates of public interest. The political philosopher John H. Schaar momentarily overcomes this division in his article "Melville's *Benito Cereno*" (1979), in which he

advocates the idea that literary discourse, among other marginalized discourses, has the potential to enrich political discourse. He maintains that "the mainstream tradition of American political thought flows from the twin fountains of Enlightenment Liberalism and laissez-faire capitalism," which have imbued a "set of political terms and attitudes . . . [with] a public and authoritative, an almost-official, status" (417). Terms such as "contract, right, law, due process, liberty, . . . , opportunity, competition, private, property, majority, . . . , progress, power," and with the emergence of corporate capitalism a new cluster of terms including "corporation, market, organization, regulate, administer, bureaucracy, production, growth, pluralism, union, welfare" have in common that they are "latinate . . . abstract, cool, [and] distancing" (417). Schaar calls them "a lexicon of surfaces and structures . . . [that] directs our view toward large-scale phenomena, big and tangible things, and routine and complex processes, while it veils interiors and mutes emotions" (417). His concern is that this kind of language "leaves out half of life, and renders much of our real politics inaccessible to ourselves" (418). Countless reactions to social and political circumstances and events cannot be expressed through this vocabulary, and are therefore relegated to the private sphere, which has led many to feel a deeply-frustrated alienation from the polity.

There are voices that speak in other words than the official ones, though, and Schaar enumerates them as "the voices of the losers and the outsiders. These include both actual groups – native Americans, blacks, displaced farmers and craftsmen, among others – and the greatest of the great American writers." He remarks, "from the anti-Federalists to the New Left, from Cooper to Faulkner, many have tried to show us a politics other than the one that is official" (418). Strikingly, he mentions in one breath Native Americans and blacks, the two major ethnic others in American history, and

American writers. Schaar does not attempt to summarize what the many voices in the margins of American culture have articulated, but focuses instead on Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* as "a case study in how certain kinds of materials might be used to enrich the meager resources of the mainstream political vocabulary" (420). His choice of a story concerned with the experience of racial difference in the pre-abolition era is not surprising. The term that he seeks to enrich through his study is "authority." More will be said below about how Schaar approaches his subject, but for now it is enough to note that he proposes to treat Melville "as a storyteller" (420). Schaar distinctly appreciates that the very art form of storytelling helps constitute the insights that the story yields, and emphasizes its potency to be a valuable source for enriching stale applications of the term "authority". While this present project will not focus on political discourse as such, but on conceptions of and interrelations between time, space, race, ethnicity, and cultural belonging, Schaar's point is of critical relevance to this study, since the terms and concepts under scrutiny here are those on which much of the political discourse and attitudes of the past few hundred years have been based.

Schaar is not the only contemporary thinker who points to the limits of abstract and rational discourse or warns against the dangers of its increasingly singular valorization in the course of modernity. Jean-François Lyotard observes in his critical analysis *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, also published in 1979, that scientific knowledge has taken precedence over narrative knowledge in modern Western societies. He describes the "social bond" as made up of the various Wittgensteinian language games, and he claims that scientific knowledge is "set apart from the language games that combine to form the social bond," since scientific knowledge "requires that one language game, denotation, be retained and all others

excluded." Scientific knowledge, however, becomes prominent in the process of forming the social bond because it "develops into a profession and gives rise to institutions" whereby "in modern societies language games consolidate themselves" under the control of "qualified partners" (*Postmodern* 25). What results is the dominance of scientific knowledge over narrative knowledge, a hierarchical ordering that he regards as an unfortunate modern development:

> Lyotard sees a danger in this dominance, since it follows from his view that reality cannot be captured within one genre of discourse or representation of events, that science will miss aspects of events which narrative knowledge will capture. In other words, Lyotard does not believe that science has any justification in claiming to be a more legitimate form of knowledge than narrative. (Woodward)

Nevertheless, scholars in a variety of disciplines routinely question the legitimacy and even accuracy of narrative knowledge and doubt its capacity to describe exhaustively processes and phenomena.[4] Furthermore, narrative knowledge, fictional or otherwise, has the potential to covertly support ideologies. An example of such a fictional text is Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe.* When the protagonist is confronted with Friday's custom of cannibalism, the reader will likely applaud Crusoe for choosing universal standards of morality over cultural relativism when he condemns cannibalism and forces Friday to refrain from it, yet it might escape this same reader that Crusoe's universal standards of morality seem in perfect harmony with the practice of slavery! Whereas cannibalism is

[4]James W. Dow argues for the greater accuracy and verifiability of scientific knowledge as opposed to narrative knowledge in the field of anthropology. He does not dismiss the potential of narrative knowledge to convey anthropological findings, but criticizes the fashionable preference of narrative knowledge over scientific knowledge that took hold of the discipline of anthropology in the 1990s. "The Evolution of Knowledge Systems: Narrative Knowledge vs. Scientific Knowledge," personalwebs.oakland.edu/~dow/ personal/papers/theory/eks.dis.1.pdf, accessed May 2, 2009.

repulsive by European standards of the early eighteenth century, Defoe accepts the existence of slavery as an integral part of colonial reality, and thus his protagonist struggles with the question of how to react to Friday's cannibalistic customs without questioning the legitimacy of enslaving him. On the other hand, such reservations about possible ideological biases in narrative knowledge are hardly unique to it, but can equally be found in scientific knowledge. The relatively new discipline of critical studies of science has begun to analyze the ideological and political assumptions that undergird scientific knowledge, with results that Alan D. Sokal summarizes as follows: "scientific 'knowledge,' far from being objective, reflects and encodes the dominant ideologies and power relations of the culture that produced it" (417).[5] Margaret Reeves makes a similar observation about narrative knowledge, namely, narratives embedded in literary histories. She writes about the "seductive pleasures of narrative" in literary histories and their possible ideological import, but "rather than undermining the possibility of narrative knowledge in literary histories," she recommends their critical reading "with and against the grain to see the imbrications of meaning encoded within narrative form" (9). Neither scientific nor narrative knowledge exempts us from such a critical reading.

In the postmodern era, Hutcheon claims, history "seems to be inevitably tied up with that set of challenged cultural and social assumptions that also condition our notions of both theory and art . . . : our beliefs in origins and ends, unity, and totalization, logic and reason, consciousness and human nature, progress and fate, representation and truth, not to mention the notions of causality and temporal homogeneity, linearity, and continuity" (87). Historical accounts that take any of these concepts for granted have lost credibility, and theory and art have sought to destabilize

[5] A more detailed discussion of his argument follows in chapter one.

these concepts and assumptions and to refer to the past in new, less totalizing ways. Johnson, Powers, and Silko participate in such debates and interrogate the relevance of these concepts to received notions of American history.

Whereas dialogic thought has been formulated by theorists throughout the twentieth century – and if one includes hermeneutics, Lebensphilosophie, and Nietzsche, from whom both Adorno and Foucault draw, since the later nineteenth century – the terms "dialogism" or "dialogics" have become conventional in literary studies only since the late 1980s. The work of James Clifford and Arnold Krupat has been central to this development, as both are interdisciplinary and combine the fields of ethnography, literature, and art, and anthropology, history, and critical theory respectively.[6] Krupat points out in *Ethnocriticism* that his view of culture is not identical with but similar to Bakhtin's view of language as dialogic; culture, he argues, "[i]s never absolute and exclusive unto itself" (18). It should not be surprising that both scholars are engaged in ethnography or anthropology and in literary criticism of ethnic literature, fields in which the increasing inadequacy of certain dualistic approaches became more painfully evident than in others. While both have become major referents to those literary critics who approach literature from a dialogical perspective, much remains to be done to delve further into the possibilities of a dialogical approach, and the present study seeks to contribute to such explorations.

My first chapter begins by outlining the relevance of concepts and reflections of theorists such as Bakhtin, Adorno, and Foucault, who have in common an open-ended

[6]James Clifford's *Writing Culture – the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), authored with George Marcus, is a literary critique of written ethnography. The book contributed largely to the self-critical phase of the discipline throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (1988) has been equally important. Arnold Krupat's *Ethnocriticism* (1992) formulates a new approach to literary criticism that takes into account the cultural otherness of ethnic writing and approaches culture as heterogeneous.

conception of theoretical thought. The relevance of Bakhtin's theory of language and the novel for the dialogic critical method of this study is twofold. First, it informs the way in which I set up the discussion as an exchange between different discourses, without giving any structural predominance to one discourse over the other. Second, I rely on Bakhtin in order to establish that the dialogic inherent in language implicates the activity of conceptualizing, and that the production of conceptual knowledge therefore pertains to all forms of discourse, including the novel. Foucault's writing on governmentality complements Bakhtin's thought in that he looks concretely at the historical conditions and circumstances from which particular discourses, notably the discourse of race, have emerged, a dimension that Bakhtin only partially addresses. Adorno's negative dialectics equally relies on a dialogic orientation of philosophical thought, and it shares with Bakhtin and Foucault an open-endedness and an ethics of responsibility to critique contemporary society and strive for change that will alleviate suffering. References to Krupat, Clifford, and other critics who have worked from a dialogic perspective give an overview of the debates that have animated literary studies in the past two decades, and how these debates relate to shifting paradigms of reading. The initial discussion of these theorists and critics will set up my "dialogic" approach to the novels' aesthetics, their relation to each other, and their bearing on epistemological and critical concepts.

The section is followed by an outline of historical and conceptual connections between the three novels analyzed. Narrated time in these texts refers to both overlapping and corresponding historical moments. Johnson's narrative is set in the interval between the ban of slave importation in 1808 and the abolition of slavery in 1865. This historical moment corresponds to the setting of Powers's story in the civil rights period, when America confronted the hypocrisy of segregation laws and came

face to face with the intensity of violence that the gradual abolition of such laws unleashed. These two historical moments converge in Silko's novel, which is set in the near future as an apocalyptic vision of the possible decline of American society, and which uses narrative digressions to cover five hundred years of colonization and shifting borders in the Americas.

The second chapter analyzes how Johnson's *Middle Passage* challenges racial stereotypes and historiographical assumptions that have defined African-Americanness. Johnson's novel depicts the sea voyage of a freedman and stowaway, Rutherford Calhoun, on a ship outbound to Africa, which takes on board an illegal slave cargo and sinks on its way back to America. Johnson constructs racial difference as a nonessential set of characteristics, cut across by social stratification in a cluster of permeable categories. He uses Calhoun's "middle" position in the novel between white crew members and the Allmusari tribespeople to destabilize "blackness" as a homogeneous category while affirming the cultural difference between the Africans and Calhoun's African-Americanness. At the same time, the cruelties suffered by white crew members undermine "whiteness" as synonymous with colonial and dominant. Johnson's remark that oppression is not exclusively a black experience, but is shared by "among others, the Jews of Europe and native Americans" (*Being and Race* 19), clearly extends to the exploitation of white men on the lower end of the social ladder. Captain Falcon, as a transporter of slaves and hence an agent of colonization, is shown to depend on a group of financiers who include the black Creole Philippe Zeringue—a reminder that agency in the slave trade is not exclusively white.

Johnson questions Western linear history through the spatiotemporal configurations of his narrative. Shipping Calhoun out on an inverted middle passage to

Africa confirms Calhoun's American identity. However, Johnson's depiction of the Allmusari people as highly cultured seafarers in an earlier era when Europe was still barbaric and before America was discovered by Europeans, links Calhoun to a past that predates Euro-American culture. Johnson uses logbook entries as an aesthetic device to define space and time in relation to the specific location of the traveling ship. The logbook foregrounds questions of authority, but also enables Johnson to work with a twofold time-line: dates of entries and events depicted lie months apart, yet both are constantly situated within the novel's diegesis. Since Calhoun never writes from the position of a completed event, his narrative not only denies a sense of closure to the story he tells but also suggests the continuous duality of black experience in American society as cultural (non)belonging. Just as Calhoun's inscription of increasingly complex spatiotemporal relations strains the logbook's structural capacity, the human relationships and events aboard the *Republic* test the constraints of the Eurocentric imagination, which has repressed African Americans' pre-American history and cultural heritage. Johnson shows that such repression of the historical past leads to violence. His treatment of African history prior to the Euro-American slave trade and his complex plotting of spatiotemporal relations, and racial and social relationships, postulates the need for Eurocentricity's self-effacement in favor of a non-centric understanding of humanity.

Chapter Three considers how racial configurations in Richard Powers's *The Time of Our Singing* challenge dichotomies on which identity politics has relied to affirm and reinforce racial difference. The novel thematizes racial discrimination through the story of the Strom family. The German-Jewish and African-American couple David Strom and Delia Daley try to shield their children from the realities of racial discrimination

through home education and a shared passion for music, but their attempts ultimately fail in the hostile sociopolitical climate of the civil rights era. The children in this family saga are simultaneously too black to be accepted in a white culture, and too white to be welcomed into the local African-American community. When their "blackness" is not at issue, their Jewishness emphatically is, doubling their position of exclusion. The Strom brothers' light skin color contrasts with their sister Ruth's darker complexion, and in Powers's vocabulary, the diverse shades of skin colors range from "honey to tea, coffee to cream," and all imaginable tinges one can observe in humans (141). In contrast to the black power movement and African-American identity politics, which rely on a clearly identifiable racial difference, Powers's configuration of ethnic and cultural identities and physical traits trouble such neat assumptions. Ruth Strom, who suffers most from discrimination based on her color, joins the Black Panthers. The novel suggests that she physically fits the Black Panthers' image of blackness, which they affirm as "negritude," a positive concept of blackness developed between 1934 and 1948 by Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire and used by pressure groups as a vehicle of ideological criticism. According to Johnson, however, negritude is "an inversion of black typifications derived from earlier white stereotypes" (*Being and Race* 19). Powers uses unconventional metaphors for differing shades of skin because our racial lexicon knows only white and black, whereas for everything in between there is only the term "mulatto," signifying "of mixed blood." Mixed ethnic identity hardly has any place in American English today any more than it did in American society in the 1950s. Joseph Dewey observes that Powers "cannot accept any limiting definitions of the individual," but that he seeks instead to "track the lived life using the broadest possible conversation with the widest range of influences" (*Understanding Richard Powers* 13). By telling his

story alternately from the perspective of Joseph, one of the mixed-blood Strom sons, and from the perspective of a third-person-narrator whose focus is their mother Delia Strom, Powers denies the validity of simply ethnic writing or congruence of ethnicity between author and protagonist(s) as one of those "limiting definitions."

Music, the refuge of the artistically-gifted Stroms, affords a rich and nuanced vocabulary for describing artistic forms ranging from *lieder* to jazz to pop to rap, but we have yet to develop comparable language conventions to indicate racial shades. Powers likewise evokes the paradox that while music measures time, the experience of music can suspend the sense of time passing. David Strom, a quantum physicist, believes that the elapse of time is an illusion. This is a comforting thought for him, since it makes the past and present one moment, in which his family, who were killed in the Holocaust, live on. It also prevents him from facing the present moment in which his children struggle with racial discrimination. Powers's story is largely told in the present tense, and through his use of two narrative voices and a thoroughly unlinear sequence of narration, the novel emerges as one extended moment that continues into the present. Through Powers's intricate narrative structure, his thematic emphasis on music, and his references to quantum theory, time becomes a question of desire and imagination as much as of rationality. While the Strom father draws the imaginative comfort of wish-fulfillment from the idea of suspended time, the novel implies that desire equally motivates and drives linear history. Desire provides the illusion of a monolithically stable past and present that accepts the formation of the nation-state as the constitutive moment of boundary-drawing. Such an illusion of stability and natural authority is a precondition of the racism that Powers attacks. As *The Time of Our Singing* depicts particular historical events of racial violence – the murder of Emmett Till, the Watts riots, and numerous sit-

ins and marches for civil rights – it measures the distance separating Johnson's protagonist Calhoun from cultural integration into American society.

The fourth chapter treats Silko's monumental *Almanac of the Dead*. The novel depicts the decline of American society, its corruption and spiritual degeneration, and the rise of the dispossessed, who reclaim the Americas as their homeland. I begin by acknowledging the unquestioned difficulty of analyzing the novel. As Gregory Salyer says, "because there are so many characters, plot lines, and settings, paying attention to the particulars in the novel is practically impossible" (100). Salyer continues: "There is a point to this confusion: literary criticism, whether traditional or contemporary, depends upon certain assumptions about time and place, namely, that time is stable and apolitical, and the landscape is a palimpsest for culture" (100). In *Almanac*, notions of time and place are unmasked as shifting and political, and the landscape is perceived, not as a palimpsest for culture, but as the surface of the animated earth on which we all depend. This statement also epitomizes the major deceptions of Western epistemology and its differences from native culture, which acknowledges the shifting parameters of its surroundings. However, while *Almanac* promotes and plots the reclaiming of the land by the dispossessed, Silko's comments on the novel indicate that she proposes no simple reversion of history through an expulsion of Euro-Americans from American soil. Her statement that "the retaking of the Americas [. . .] has to be done with the help of everybody," not in a "literal" way but through "spiritual" agreement (*Conversations* 194), should guide us away from reductive early misreadings of *Almanac* that failed to recognize its allegory of inner revolutionary change.

Silko's novel emulates the old almanacs of the Maya by making every day into one story. The novel's many stories align themselves into two tidal waves: one is the

decline of American society, and the other is the rise of marginalized groups to a central position. Native Americans, African Americans, Vietnam veterans, homeless people, eco-activists, and Marxist revolutionaries – in short, those who feel alienated in American society – join ranks to retake the land. Given the virtually total omission of temporal references, it is impossible to identify the time of the northward march that *Almanac* records. Silko's own observation on the spiritual retaking of the Americas recommends an allegorical reading of this march. Her comment demands that the reader either join or reject such a mobilization. The allegory thus calls for reflection on what either choice would entail.

Crucial to Silko's novel is the theme of complicity that pervades its many stories. Depictions of characters in *Almanac* do not rely on a reductive distinction between glorified Indianness and degenerate Euro-Americanness. While some native characters assume roles of spiritual guidance, they are simultaneously involved in corruption and criminality. Silko thereby demystifies what Gerald Vizenor calls “the absolute fake” (*Manifest Manners* 4), an image of Indianness made up in the European mind. Silko's poignant message is that there is no position of innocence in the world, only choices that have to be rethought. Instead, she envisions the universe as permeated by forces reminiscent of tidal waves: “In this universe, there is no absolute good or absolute bad; there are only balances and harmonies of ebb and flood” (*Yellow Woman* 64). Her novel, like those of Johnson and Powers, highlights the destructive and dangerously worsening imbalance of power that characterizes the past few hundred years of Western history. According to *Almanac*, such outer imbalance and inner disharmony will forge a new equilibrium over time, with or without our participation. Silko's narrative thereby points imaginatively towards a greater whole that escapes rational description. Although her

predictions can lay no claim to validity as truth, there is no way of refuting them, and her sprawling novel conveys its message powerfully by eschewing our familiar conceptual frameworks. *Almanac*'s provocative method of narrative argument is to transcend any available theoretical model and to subsume any rational or ideological position as one of the novel's many stories that create the oscillating waves of history. Silko is thus performing what Walter Mignolo demands when he argues for post-occidentalism as the "decolonization of knowledge" that will involve "learning to think with, against and beyond the legacy of Western epistemology" (7, 31).

My concluding chapter will revisit the historical moments encompassed by the three novels of Johnson, Powers, and Silko. In an analysis of the multiple forms of spatiotemporal relations these texts imply, I will argue that they challenge linear temporality and the freezing of spatial allocations into naturalized givens. They thereby question the intellectual foundations of European hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. More importantly, their narrative strategies suggest new conceptions of spatiotemporal relations that invite critical effort to formulate new models of thought. The terminologies that arise from a critical reading of these novels imbue the provisionality of previous poststructural discourse with concrete meanings and referents in the outside world. "Narrative knowledge" can thereby overcome an impasse encountered by more strictly formal or abstract critical reflection. My "dialogic" approach to the contemporary novel, moreover, proposes to avoid re-importing the dynamics of domination into the realm of literary analysis. New terminologies should serve to enable more adequate forms of awareness, as in Powers's simple but compelling suggestion of "honey to tea, coffee to cream" for mixed-blood skin colors (*Time* 141). Even the profoundly pessimistic Horkheimer and Adorno believed that, although a hierarchically structured system of

knowledge leads to domination, outside of such a paradigm knowledge can become the "dissolution of domination" (*Dialectic* 42). My examination proceeds from the conviction that the discipline of literary studies can discern and contribute to possible beginnings of such a shift within its field of application.

CHAPTER ONE

Domination and the Dynamics of Dialogics and Relationality

The critique of Western hegemonic epistemology, due to this very description of its aim, can easily be misconstrued as the attempt to divide different epistemologies along the lines of geo-cultural boundaries of Western versus others. However, the work of those Western critics, theorists, and writers who pursue epistemological approaches other than the dominant Western dualistic one undermines such facile border-drawing. Delineations do not accord with neat geographical boundaries, but span cultural realms, including the Western world, in terms of dominant and marginalized voices. This chapter outlines theoretical and critical positions that contribute to the advancement of dialogical thinking against the grain of hegemony and domination. Subsequently, it gives an overview of the historical and conceptual connections between the three novels studied to indicate their shared participation in such debates.

Bakhtin's Theory of Language

Many threads of scholarship on dialogics in the past two to three decades intersect in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Since he uses the novel to elaborate an extensive theory of language, yet always relates it to the social realm, he has been an important resource for critics in literary studies and in the social sciences alike. Bakhtin wrote much of the work on which this study draws in the 1920s and 1930s, and it would be inconsistent with his own theory of language to be surprised that his writing bears the marks of its time. To clarify the degree to which this project relies on Bakhtin's thought, it is best to begin an outline and discussion of his theory of language by considering the primary and most tenacious charge that has been brought against his work. That critique,

as Michael Gardiner explains, targets a position "that Bakhtin shares with the Western Marxists, who became increasingly preoccupied with aesthetic and cultural questions after the wide-spread failure of the workers' movements in the late 1910s, and also with the left *avant-garde* in the inter-war period" (176). Gardiner specifies:

> . . . perhaps the central shortcoming of a politically-engaged social and cultural theory [is] that [Bakhtin] seriously overestimated the capacity of dialogic literature and popular culture to effect the liberation of human consciousness from the grip of monologism. The corollary is that he fails adequately to grasp the social and institutional realities of power and domination – indeed, at times Bakhtin seems to equate the whole machinery of class rule with the suppression of unhindered dialogic communication. This is a serious charge, one that is generally admitted even by Bakhtin's staunchest supporters, and it is not without some justification. (176-77)

Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* is perhaps the most prominent example of the shifted focus among Western Marxists to which Gardiner alludes: a move from the political to the aesthetic and cultural sphere as the carrier of hope for socialist reformation through poetic and artistic innovation. Kristeva makes extensive reference to Bakhtin's dialogics in, among other works, her theory of the subject in process and her analysis of the work of Stéphane Mallarmé and the Count of Lautréamont. Needless to say, the concrete sociopolitical reform to be set in motion by literary and artistic innovation as Bakhtin, Kristeva, and others envisioned it did not materialize. The hopes entertained in this project are less ambitious, and in comparison to the explicitly socialist leanings of Kristeva's work, they are void of a specific political program: this project

seeks to contribute to a literary criticism that encounters literature with an open-ended attitude of "listening" and that is willing to view its own discourse not as about literature, but instead as in dialogue with literature. The difference between these two attitudes is most readily apparent in the encounter of multiethnicity—of authors and fictional characters alike—since such encounters can rely even less on common assumptions than those entirely within one's own ethnic and cultural sphere.

Despite the valid criticism of Bakhtin's presuppositions concerning the capacity of dialogic literature to effect sociopolitical change, his attempt to formulate an open-ended theory of language was extraordinarily successful due to his constant efforts to avoid monologism. Since most of his writing became available to an English-speaking audience only in the 1980s, scholarship on Bakhtin in the anglophone world has taken off more recently than might be wished. On the other hand, the belated availability of his work occurred at a crucial moment: it coincided with a growing awareness in literary and anthropological studies that a dialogic approach to the different cultures within the Americas is crucial to contributing to what Mignolo has called "the decolonization of knowledge" (7).

As noted above, Bakhtin's theory of language and the novel is relevant for the dialogic critical method of this study for two central reasons. First, it informs the way in which I set up this discussion as an exchange between different discourses, without giving any structural predominance to one discourse over another. In referring to a number of theories, the project risks undermining this method at times, and it is hard to avoid this danger. However, the following discussion supports the endeavors of those who have tried to track down and counteract the relations of domination and subjugation in the realms of language, discourse, and knowledge. Second, I refer to Bakhtin in order

to establish that the dialogic inherent in language implicates the activity of conceptualizing, and that the production of conceptual knowledge therefore pertains to all forms of discourse, including the novel. Given the importance of the term "dialogic" in Bakhtin's work, a detailed discussion of his ideas should begin with a clarification of the very term. When Bakhtin refers to the dialogic character of language, he "mean[s] by it not only direct and *viva voce* verbal communication between two persons, but also all verbal communication, whatever its form."[7] The following remark reiterates the point in slightly different form: "It could be said that all verbal communication, all verbal interaction takes place in the form of an *exchange of utterances*, that is, in the form of *dialogue*" (Todorov 44).[8] This broad definition views all verbal communication as in dialogue with what has been said before on a given subject: dialogue is intimately related to culture. In fact, Tzvetan Todorov claims that Bakhtin "f[ound] himself forced to sketch out a new interpretation of culture: culture consists in the discourses retained by collective memory (the commonplace and stereotype just as much as the exceptional words), discourses in relation to which every uttering subject must situate himself or herself" (x). It becomes immediately evident that ongoing dialogues in a given culture depend, among other things, on two elements. The first of these elements is an awareness of the fact that what one refers to in any discourse is earlier discourses uttered by others, an awareness, in other words, of the constructedness of discourse. Todorov's terms "commonplace" and "stereotype" signal that such an awareness is not always

[7]With regard to quotations from Tzvetan Torodov's *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, when he quotes directly from Bakhtin or other writers from the Bakhtin circle, the reference to Torodov's book in parentheses will be accompanied by a footnote that cites the source. Quotations from Todorov's own writing will be referenced in parentheses only. V. N. Voloshinow, Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, trans. L. Matejka and I. R. Titunik (NewYork: Seminar P, 1973), 113.

[8]V. N. Voloshinow, "Stylistics of Artistic Discourse: 2. The Construction of Utterances," trans. Wlad Godzich. *Writings by the Circle of Bakhtin* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, n.d.), 68.

present, that in fact discourses are often naturalized, not being questioned or related to their generic context, but taken as given. In sum, while discourse always refers to earlier discourses, that fact often remains concealed. This first element is extremely important for the consideration of discourse on race, since the effacement of its generic context made racial essentialism so effective. A second decisive element revolves around the question of whose voices are heard, of who participates in the ongoing dialogue within a culture. Although not exclusively an issue of racial discrimination, having no voice in the cultural sphere, or at best having one heavily distorted by other-cultured understandings, has been the reality of Native Americans and African Americans alike.

Both the naturalization of discourse and the marginalization of voices are considered in Bakhtin's work, and both are most distinctly captured in his realization that language always involves a struggle between two opposing forces, centripetal and centrifugal ones, or those that seek to unify versus those that seek to divide and decentralize (*Dialogic* 272). This struggle is not apolitical, and Bakhtin, although cautious in his diction, makes this point perhaps most fervently in relating centripetal forces to "language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion, insuring a maximum of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life." He makes an explicit link between these unifying forces in language and politics when he explains, "thus a unitary language gives expression to forces working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization, which develop in vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization" (271). He specifically accuses the disciplines of stylistics and linguistics, as practiced in his time, of being complicit with the "centralizing tendencies of European verbal-ideological life" in that they "sought first and foremost for *unity* in diversity," and

focused on "the firmest, most stable, least changeable and most mono-semic aspects of discourse—on the phonetic aspects first of all—that are furthest removed from the changing socio-semantic spheres of discourse" (274). These disciplines have therefore, he contends, failed to grasp those distinctive and specific features of the novel that operate on the socio-semantic level.

Bakhtin's preference for studying language as speech/utterance over studying language as a sign system tries to grasp these sociopolitical processes. His approach is crucial for both key assumptions of the method of this study, the non-hierarchical relation between different discourses and the activity of conceptualizing implicated in all language usage. For Bakhtin, the utterance does not merely encompass its linguistic elements, but is also marked by the context in which it occurs. Context, or the "extraverbal situation," is not "only an external cause of the utterance; it does not work from the outside like a mechanical force. On the contrary, *the situation enters into the utterance as a necessary constitutive element* of its semantic structure" (Todorov 41).[9] The utterance forms as it does because of specific space-time relations, ideologies, and axiologies that are its extraverbal parts.[10] It is "the expression of the concrete historical situation that engendered [it]" (Todorov 45).[11] The same close relation between language and context is at work in the process of understanding, about which Bakhtin

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[9]V. N. Voloshinow, "Discourse in Life and Discourse in Poetry," trans. Wlad Godzich, *Writings by the Circle of Bakhtin*, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, n.d.), 251.

[10]Axiology: "(from Greek *axios,* 'worthy'; *logos,* 'science'), also called Theory Of Value, the philosophical study of goodness, or value, in the widest sense of both terms. Its significance lies (1) in the considerable expansion that it has given to the meaning of the term "value" and (2) in the unification that it has provided for the study of a variety of questions—economic, moral, aesthetic, and even logical—that had often been considered in relative isolation" ("Axiology").

[11]V. N. Voloshinow, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. L. Matejka and I.R. Titunik (NewYork: Seminar P, 1973), 119.

asserts, “It is not at all a question of an exact and passive reflection, of a redoubling of the other's experience within me (such a redoubling is, in any case, impossible), but a matter of translating the experience into an altogether different axiological perspective, into new categories of evaluation and formation” (Todorov 22). Both dimensions of language use—utterance and understanding—are parts of discourse understood as “language in its concrete living totality” (Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky* 181). Discourse, under this definition, is language in use, situated in social context and thus historically bound: it always carries within it the mark of its own sociohistorical conditions. Whereas dialogue opens up a productive disjunction between utterance and understanding, since they never share an identical context, this productive disjunction risks foreclosure if one begins to prioritize structurally one form of discourse over another. Institutionalized discourse prioritizes its own utterances, and is therefore prone to obscure its own situatedness, to reify meanings into ahistorical universalities, and thereby covertly to give preference to one sociohistorical context over another. What ensues under such circumstances is monologism, and Gardiner summarizes Bakhtin’s notion of that vital term as follows:

> Monologism, for Bakhtin, describes a condition wherein the matri of ideological values, signifying practices, and creative impulses which constitute the living reality of language are subordinated to the hegemony of a single, unified consciousness or perspective. Whatever cannot be subsumed under this transcendent consciousness is regarded as extraneous or superfluous. (26)

The one-sided perspective of monologism is part of the danger that Lyotard sees in the dominance of scientific knowledge over narrative knowledge. And Schaar sees the

exclusiveness of monologism as intrinsically related to its impoverished and remote vocabulary. Dialogic exchange between different discourses, on the other hand, tends to reveal their respective contexts and is likely to prevent their reification.

My contention that literary practice produces conceptual knowledge equally draws on Bakhtin's dialogics. Conceptualizing is a fundamental element involved in any discourse, and in his definition, the term encompasses "any concrete discourse (utterance)," down even to the single word, as well as more complex formations, such as "languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social groups, 'professional' and 'generic' languages, languages of generations and so forth" (*Dialogic* 272). In order to explain more precisely the dynamics of discourse previously outlined, he focuses in on the level of the word. Basically, he argues that a speaking subject never relates a word *only* to the object it seeks to denote. Speaking subject, word, and object find "an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that it is often difficult to penetrate," an environment rife with "value judgments and accents" (276). The difficulty lies in recognizing value judgments and their sources. "All objects," Bakhtin claims, "are open to dispute and overlain . . . with qualifications, are from one side highlighted while from the other side dimmed by heteroglot social opinion . . ." (277). By cutting through the maze of heteroglot opinion, "the word conceptualizes its object i[n] a complex act, . . . it becomes saturated with this play, and must determine within it the boundaries of its own semantic and stylistic contours" (277). These contours are not defined as a solipsistic act of discovery. For Bakhtin, utterance is, even in the momentary absence of an interlocutor, a social activity directed toward at least one other individual from whom the speaker tries to elicit understanding. This individual might only be imagined and an abstraction representing a

social group or several groups, as in the case of a writer who speaks to his reader. The speaker, Bakhtin argues, is “oriented toward the listener and his answer” (280). As he further explains, the orientation of the speaker “toward the listener is an orientation toward a specific conceptual horizon, toward the specific world of the listener” (282). He elaborates that “It is in this way, after all, that various different points of view, conceptual horizons, systems for providing expressive accents, various social 'languages' come to interact with one another” (282). The speaker might seek to be either “crassly accommodating” or “provocatively polemical,” but in both instances he “breaks through the alien conceptual horizon of the listener, constructs his own utterance on alien territory, against his, the listener's, apperceptive background” (282). Conceptualizing thus encompasses the acute analysis of the store of meanings enveloping an object in order to discern one’s own view of it, and reflections about how one can convey that view to a listener. Thus perceived, conceptualizing does not belong to any particular discourse. Rather, it is constitutive of the dialogics of language in general, or in other words of all discourse. It follows that the novel differs from those discourses that conceptualize in abstract terms not in the sense that it does not conceptualize, but in that it embeds its conceptualizations in narrated experience, relayed through “a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages [polyglossia]) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (262). Bakhtin underlines the innovative potential of the novel when he observes that the novel is the genre that most fully realizes the “dialogization” of “social heteroglossia,” and therefore carries within it the impulse of “novelization” (263, 6). The segregation and exclusion of literary practice —as well as other artistic practices—from dominant forms of knowledge is in the end historically constructed, and by no means justified by an ontological difference between

novelistic and other discourses.

The non-hierarchical relation between different discourses suggested by Bakhtin's theory of language implies open-endedness, and such a dialogic relation between discourses underlies the work of other theorists as well, among them the negative dialectics of Adorno as well as Foucault's genealogy of history and his later work on governmentality. Open-endedness is also key to the dialogical approach to criticism in literary studies, anthropology, and the critical studies of science, as well as to those writers and novelists who write dialogically, like the three on whom this project focuses. Bakhtin has most exhaustively explained dialogic dynamics, but the work of these other theorists, critics, and writers, diverse in perspectives, complement his views. A point that Marie-Christine Leps makes about Marc Angenot's work on social discourse, which she discusses in the context of Bakhtin and Foucault, is relevant to Bakhtin's writing as well. She claims that "Angenot's work literally demands to be studied in relation to other correlated practices—and it would be theoretically inconsistent to consider it *in vacuo*" (263). Leps's comment suggests a valuable insight, namely, that it is incumbent on dialogically-oriented theories to presume their own limitations, but at the same time to transcend them by conceptually anticipating and accepting complementary or corrective contributions of others. They are therefore methodologically open-ended conceptions, not closed systems of thought. Bakhtin offers just such a stance in the introductory remarks to his long essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," when he states:

> We do not pretend to completeness or precision in our theoretical formulations and definitions. Here and abroad, serious work on the study of space and time in art and literature has only just begun. Such work will

> in its further development eventually supplement, and perhaps substantially correct, the characteristics of novelistic chronotopes offered by us here. (*Dialogic* 85)

Bakhtin's remark expresses an attitude that is characteristic of dialogics: there is a creative difference between its overall approach to analysis and the particular claims one might make in any specific analysis. As an approach, it provides a framework for the understanding of language and communication and for the several discourses that ensue, while remaining open to evolving views on particular questions that pertain to these areas. As a critical approach to the study of literature, dialogics brings this sense of open-endedness to literary analysis, and it involves a self-perception of criticism as one discourse in dialogue with others.

Joseph Tabbi captures this non-hierarchical critical approach to literature when he writes, "The critic's function, when observing an author's recorded observations, is not primarily to judge the work, produce its history, or even reflect on its meanings. A far more integral activity is to *think with* the work, to converse through it and explore social forms and possibilities at the level of the work's autopoiesis, its coming to form" (xxvi). Tabbi's demand on criticism shifts attention from how literature represents reality to how it adds thought processes that have transformative potential for that reality. These thought processes can only be captured if criticism employs an open-ended approach to analysis and accepts the possibility that some literary texts might call into question established conceptions and theories on which its own assumptions rest. The method of this study adopts such an attitude, and sets up and traces a dialogic exchange between different kinds of discourses—in novels, theories, scientific discourse, philosophy, and everyday oral and written discourse—in an attempt to avoid the subjugation and

therefore silencing of one by the other.

Dialogic and Relational Approaches in Criticism, Writing, and . . .

In recent years, some scholars of ethnic literatures and anthropology, like Arnold Krupat, David L. Moore, and James Clifford, have prioritized dialogics as a critical method to avoid perpetuating colonial hegemonies. At the same time, critical studies of the natural sciences recognize dialogics as a more suitable approach than dualistic approaches for describing natural phenomena (Sokal 218). The dialogic orientation of these diverse intellectual and scientific projects—I will refer to literary criticism first, followed by remarks on recent trends in critical studies of natural sciences—demonstrates that the demarcation between different epistemologies does not neatly follow geo-cultural boundaries, such as Western versus other, but that delineations span cultural realms in terms of dominant as opposed to marginalized voices.

The decision to relate epistemology to issues of ethnic and cultural belonging raised by Johnson's, Powers's, and Silko's novels recognizes important contingencies that are relevant to the relationship between literary practice and literary criticism. David L. Moore claims about reading Native-American literature that "the colonial, hence racial and ethical, context moves the discussion of ways of reading Native American literature toward issues of epistemology" ("Decolonizing" 7). Moore's point is applicable far beyond the reading of Native-American literature; race and ethnicity are constructed in accordance with the epistemological assumptions by which they are informed, and the way in which critics read "multiethnic" elements in literature depends on their own epistemological orientations. Moore explains, "If how we know the world begins with how we know the nexus of self and other, then our view of that nexus structures our

ethical relations. . . . Colonial cognitive structures underlie cultural definitions of race and ethnicity, embedded as those definitions are in colonial history" (7). It is widely accepted that dichotomies such as mind and body, self and other, and culture and nature, which are paradigmatic in the Western epistemological tradition, have contributed greatly to preparing the ground for the intensity and scale of slavery, genocide, and racial discrimination in North America.[12] However, Moore's remarks are directed at the fact that these dichotomous structures continue to inform presuppositions that lie at the base of critical readings of ethnic literature today. His position raises questions about the sociopolitical influence of different critical approaches. He cites a non-dichotomous definition of self and other formulated by Clifford, an historian and critical scholar in anthropology, in his study of a land-claim suit filed by the Mashpee tribe in a Boston court in 1976. Clifford finds among the Mashpee a sense of identity that resembles "a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject," and in whose communal life "exchange rather than identity is the fundamental value to be sustained" (*Predicament* 344). Their own felt cultural identity as Indian has not been compromised by three centuries of intermarriage with other ethnicities, since their sense of identity assumes changing and transforming relations to others as an integral part of that identity. However, from the perspective of stakeholders who sought to undermine the Mashpees'

[12]In "René Descartes, Last Year in Marienbad," Jorn K. Bramann explains that when Descartes posited the essential self as mind, he made possible a change in view of the physical world. Mind dwelt in the body, but it was not only separate from it, but also in control of it. One of the legacies of Descartes is the view that the sovereignty of the mind over the body extends to parts of the external world as well. Like the devalued human body, nature came to be seen as inanimate matter, rather than living entities, and once this mechanistic view was extended to the human being, the large-scale exploitation of humans as expedients for economic advantage, particularly during the colonial period, became acceptable. Bramann gives a comprehensive account of the context in which Descartes worked, his motivations, and the legacies of his philosophies (Bramann n. pag.). Moore's statement that how we know the world depends on our assumptions about the relationship between self and other implies that a Cartesian view of this relationship might inadvertently inform attitudes of a superior mind speaking its knowledge about the external world.

legal right to file a land-claim suit, their status as an Indian tribe had become questionable through their frequent mixing with other ethnicities. But, as Clifford points out, to construe ethnic and cultural identity on the basis of purely aboriginal roots or the lack thereof betrays a dualistic conception of identity and its ideological implications. He writes, “Stories of cultural contact and change have been structured by a pervasive dichotomy: absorption by the other *or* resistance to the other. A fear of lost identity, a Puritan taboo on mixing beliefs and bodies, hangs over the process” (344). Of particular interest in Clifford's formulation is that it specifies the two options that have traditionally been considered as the necessary outcome of contact between Euro-Americans and Natives, either “absorption by the other” or “resistance to the other.” Both options assume that Native culture will be changed by the colonial culture; yet the notion that contact with Native culture necessarily changes the colonialist culture, as well, has been carefully left out of official accounts of contact. Clifford therefore asks, “What changes when the 'subject' of history is no longer Western? How do stories of contact, resistance and assimilation appear from the standpoint of groups in which exchange rather than identity is the fundamental value to be sustained?” (344). His question suggests that criticism needs to include a critique of its own premises if it wants to avoid reductive readings of multicultural encounters based on notions of cultural identity and subjectivity that are limited to the dualistic paradigms of thought characteristic of Western hegemonic epistemology.

Both Moore’s and Clifford’s points are well exemplified in Leslie Marmon Silko’s short story “The Man to Send Rain Clouds.” As Clifford observes, the capacity of Native Americans to adapt Western or Christian ways and rituals has been repeatedly mistaken as a sign of their loss of tribal identity. However, many Native-American

literary texts imply a correlation between the capacity to adopt foreign cultural customs on the one hand and a dialogic notion of cultural identity on the other. One reaction of Native-American cultures to foreign cultures has been to selectively adopt foreign ways and experience them as an expansion, not a loss, of cultural identity. A reading that assumes identity to be dualistic will miss this culturally specific meaning and assume absorption by Western culture. Silko's “The Man to send Rain Clouds” begins with the death from natural causes of an old Native man. In one of the first scenes, his grandson puts yellow paint under the old man's nose and green paint across his chin and says, ”Send us rain clouds, grandfather” (Rosen 4). Relatives prepare his funeral without notifying the Catholic priest of the community. The funeral is held and Indian rituals are performed, but before the deceased is buried, his granddaughter wants the local priest to “sprinkl[e] holy water for Grandpa. So he won't be thirsty” (5). The priest's answer to this request indicates the difference of perspective between him and the Indians, as he responds to one of the family members, “You know I can't do that, Leon. There should have been the Last Rites and a funeral Mass at the very least” (7). In the end, the priest comes out to sprinkle the holy water on the old man's body, despite the regulation he thereby violates. The story ends on a happy note: “He [Leon] felt good because it was finished, and he was happy about the sprinkling of the holy water; now the old man could send them big thunderclouds for sure” (8). The old man's family sees no need for a Christian funeral, but choose to have holy water administrated to their deceased grandfather. Whereas the Last Rites and a funeral Mass conducted by the priest are not regarded as a significant contribution to their own cultural rites, the administration of holy water appears useful, since they associate it with the rain water they hope the grandfather will send in return; this element of the rite resonates with their beliefs that

the dead remain close to the living and provide for them. The Indian family's selective decision shows autonomy and critical judgment, not passivity. Their relation to the Catholic priest is neither one of resistance, nor of absorption, but one of dialogic exchange.

. . . in Adorno's Negative Dialectics

Moore remarks of dialogism that it "acknowledges not only the primacy of context but also the impossibility of textual resolution, a productive indeterminacy, because it simultaneously accounts for a generalized force-field while it acknowledges the specificity of the other in that field" ("Decolonizing" 19). He takes the notion of the force-field from Adorno, and he quotes Martin Jay, who explains Adorno's metaphor as "a relational interplay of attractions and aversions that constituted the dynamic, transmutational structure of a complex phenomenon" (Jay 14). A second and equally important metaphor in Adorno's thought is the constellation, "an astronomical term Adorno borrowed from Benjamin to signify a juxtaposition rather than an integrated cluster of changing elements that resist reduction to a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principle" (14-15). Both metaphors exemplify non-identity thinking, crucial to all of Adorno's thought, by which he opposed the subsumption of the object under the concepts formed by the subject, i.e., the human mind. Following the radical division of object and subject in Western thought since Descartes, "the subject reduces [the object] to its own measure; the subject swallows the object, forgetting how much it is an object itself" (Adorno, "Subject-Object," *Essential* 499). Adorno's insight points to the ultimate destination of a hierarchical conceptualization of the subject-object relationship: the subject forgets the mutuality involved in subject-object relations and

conceives of itself as forever subject, never object. Such a view is sustained by and fosters power relations that keep certain objects or humans from becoming subjects. As Jay summarizes Adorno's critique, "A radical humanism carries within it the latent threat of species imperialism, which ultimately returns to haunt human relations themselves. Indeed, from the first, the domination of nature was intertwined with social hierarchy and control" (62). This social hierarchy is articulated along the lines of class, gender, and race; and Moore sees literary criticism that remains informed by the traditional Western radical division between subject and object as bound to perpetuate colonial power relations through reductive readings of ethnic literature.

Criticism that approaches Silko's "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" under dualistic assumptions might interpret it as indicating continuous absorption by Western culture and the loss of Native cultural identity. Even a dialectical approach, Moore claims, although it might "suggest[] the changeability or indeterminacy of dialogics, [will] . . . never mov[e] beyond the objectizing and commodification inherent in the self-other paradigm of the dualistic mode" ("Decolonizing" 19). Less rigid than dualistic readings that often idealize or scorn otherness, a dialectical reading will still assume a subject-object relation of knowledge-gathering about "the Indian problem," and it will seek to resolve the tension between opposing terms through synthesis (19). However, the narrative perspective that Silko employs—a third-person narrator who remains equally distant from all characters without a specific focus on any one of them—supports a reading of the story that leaves the conflicting cultural values of priest and Indians unresolved. At the same time, contact between the two cultures is depicted as effecting changes on both parties, without, however, assigning a dominant role to either of them in their exchange, even if the story is situated in a context of colonial rule.

The recognition of different epistemologies through critical readings is not only a question of enhancing knowledge. In fact, it involves the realization that knowledge of self and other is not, and can never be, static. What *can* be attained through dialogic readings is a shifted response to reading that involves "participation," an interrogation of how the self relates to the other (19). Such a shift has ethical implications and conceives of Native-American literature not as narratives about "the 'Indian problem,'" as Moore puts it, but comprehends the relation between dominant and repressed cultures as

> everyone's responsibility, no[t] . . . a canon and its exclusions, perhaps not even a set of 'American' and 'Native American' literatures. Critiques would thus be able to measure themselves against history not only in retrospect but also within the present perspective of ethical relations to community contexts. The linkage of ethics with epistemology ultimately generates participation rather than information, an epistemology of active exchange, an intersubjective knowledge of how to participate with the other. (19-20)

Moore's remarks underline the implications of epistemological domination, which, when related to Native Americans, misreads age-old survival strategies of dialogic exchange as narratives of vanishing cultures. He promotes readings that proceed from "text to context, and thence to participation with textual and extratextual concerns of Indian communities" (20). By considering Silko's story as expressive of views of cultural exchange that are akin to dialogics and non-identity thinking, we can recognize similarities between Western critical, non-hegemonic thought and non-Western notions of identity or personhood that point to an epistemology of relationality. As Karin Bauer explains, "non-identity thinking, for which Adorno uses the model of constellations,

gives expression to the conceptless (*das Begriffslose*), and to what is repressed, reduced, forgotten, and eliminated by the abstract nature of concepts and categories" (85). That which does not find expression under the mode of identity-thinking is nevertheless present, in Bakhtin's terms, in the heteroglossia inherent in discourse from its most concrete instance, the utterance, to more complex formations of discourses, among which those that do not use the unified language of their time might be ignored or misread. But as Moore points out, "[i]f Bakhtin is correct, a dialogic heteroglossia is a given element of linguistic systems whether or not its users acknowledge those dialogic dynamics" (19). The question is whether disciplinary practices repress or seek to reveal these dialogic dynamics. In the field of literature, discourse about that which is as yet "conceptless" in Western hegemonic thought becomes more readily perceptible if criticism succeeds in self-critically analyzing and rethinking its own epistemological assumptions. Both Bakhtin's dialogics and Adorno's negative dialectics strive towards such a self-critical stance and attempt to avoid monologism and the domination that ensues from identity thinking. Adorno's negative dialectics withholds the synthesis so characteristic of dialectics, instead "construct[ing] constellations that bring to light the surplus of the non-identical excluded by conceptual thought and identity thinking" (Bauer 197). Silko's tale creates such constellations through a narrative of lived experience, and her story reconceptualizes relations of self and other without closing either off within definitions of absolutes.

Criticizing Criticism

While a self-critical stance in literary criticism is desirable, it is far from easy to achieve, and ingrained epistemological assumptions may well elude honest self-

inspection. Krupat, one of the key voices in self-critical approaches to the study of ethnic literatures, observes that criticism may inadvertently perpetuate what it overtly claims to oppose. He notes that even if criticism recognizes the historical suffering and lasting consequences inflicted by colonial rule and slavery, such an attitude does not automatically serve to change the dynamics of domination and repression. As Krupat points out, "Just as dichotomized, binary, oppositional, or manichean reasoning once served as a justification for imperial domination, so, too, is it too often retained today to justify that form of postcolonial revisionism that produces what Donald Bahr has called 'Victimist . . . history,' a very specific form of narrative which 'tells how one people was damaged by another'" (*Ethnocriticism* 20).[13] While such a revisionism has had the merit of identifying the victims that historical accounts have often concealed, it nevertheless operates within the very same epistemological assumptions as the imperialist narratives it challenges, except that "in victimist history," it is now "the second term of each dichotomous set that is valorized" (20). Such a binary approach reifies cultural identity into two different and separate entities. Even if it is now the colonized other who constitutes the ideal, such reasoning nevertheless perpetuates dualistic thinking. More importantly, it risks maintaining the myth of the "noble savage," forever caught in the position of the "vanishing Indian," or of the downtrodden African American who remains perpetually associated with the hardships of racial inequality. In the end, the Western position remains the agent and is therefore central, even if now in the dishonorable version of the "genocidal Euramerican" (20). The dualism of self and other remains intact. Krupat's insight arises from one of the tentative definitions of

[13]Krupat quotes Donald Bahr, "Indians and Missions: Homage to and Debate with Rupert Costo and Jeanette Henry." *Journal of the Southwest* 31(1989): 300-29, 316.

ethnocriticism that he proposed in 1992, a notion that has been equally influential in literary studies and anthropology. He notes, "[E]thnocriticism's self-positioning at a great many frontiers . . . consciously and intentionally courts the questioning of any premises from which it initially proceeds" (7).

Deepika Bahri detects just such a dubious premise in the brand of postcolonial criticism of ethnic literatures that proceeds from a dialectical approach, namely, that "commonalities with dominant cultural texts are ignored by ghettoizing these texts and segregating them in their enclosed space" (157). Cross-cultural dialogue between authors is thus obstructed, even if the literature itself engages in such a dialogue, as in the case of Johnson, Powers, and Silko. To be sure, the division of the study of contemporary American literature into multiethnic subcategories has been and remains crucial in drawing scholarly and public attention to the literary practice of diverse ethnic groups in America. It has contributed to establishing an infrastructure of funding and publication possibilities formerly not readily available to ethnic writers. However, such subcategories, if eternalized as impermeable and closed, risk replicating within ethnic boundaries presuppositions that were once linked to national literatures, namely, that they be representative of a particular homogeneous cultural identity. In order to avoid this repetition of segregation along the lines of homogenizing notions of cultural identity, multiethnic American literary studies must maintain categories permeable to approaches that cut across and move beyond ethnic boundaries.

MELUS—The Society of the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature in the United States—demonstrates its awareness of the danger of scholarly segregation by encouraging in its constitution the study of ethnic issues across the divide of ethnic and mainstream American literature. Article II, entitled "Purpose of the Society," Section 4,

of the constitution reads as follows:

> We propose to study the ethnic component in all American literature. Many writers who have been classified as "mainstream" or canonical have been sensitive to the pluralistic nature of our society. "American" and "ethnic" writers have influenced each other; we propose to explore these influences.[14]

Despite the commitment of MELUS to promoting the study of multiethnic literature, this statement reinforces the importance of exploring commonalities with the literature of dominant cultural writers. Furthermore, the wording of the passage undermines any essentialist connection between being of a certain ethnicity and writing about a certain ethnicity, a critique of essentialism that my project shares. By bringing together the three novels by Johnson, Powers, and Silko, this study aims to complement the examination of American literature within established multiethnic subdivisions and to bring into view the relationship of multiethnic American literatures to their other, as well as to each other.

What is Mainstream American Literature?

One way to begin to address the first of these relationships is to note that the difficulty begins with trying to refer properly to American literature that is *not* considered ethnic literature, since there are only generic terms for it. The constitution of MELUS, quoted above, uses the formulation "writers who have been classified as 'mainstream' or canonical," and then further distinguishes—although in parentheses—

[14]MELUS – The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, "Constitution, Article II, Section 4." 23 March 2007 <http://webspace.ship.edu/kmlong/melus/.

between "'American' and 'ethnic' writers."[15] These and other definitions avoid specifying exactly which group of writers comprises the "mainstream" category. To conclude that "white American literature" is the avoided but underlying and understood term is only partly correct, given that societies such as MELUS include under the category of ethnic literatures the literature of "Americans of European extraction like Italians and the Polish, and specifically, religious ethnic groups such as Jews who have been ignored, misread or underrepresented in the past."[16] "White" seems to be a minimal requirement for belonging within "mainstream" American literature, although, as the quotation from the constitution of MELUS demonstrates, it does not follow that all white literature is included in it. Given the lack of clarity of terms, it is significant to note that there are at least two reasons why "mainstream" American literature is not denoted as ethnic literature: first, it does not need the protection and promotion of societies such as MELUS, on which other ethnic literatures have depended to gain wider distribution and to become a voice within American society and culture. This is so because the group that has been sociopolitically dominant in America has regarded the mainstream segment of American literature as its own, and has therefore promoted and provided it with resources as part of American dominant culture. Second, mainstream American literature consists in fact of writers who descend from various ethnic groups, albeit those that are not presently viewed as marginal in American society. Many exceptions could be found to this generalizing statement, but the tendency has been that those writers who have become explicitly categorized—American women's literature is a prime example, as is queer literature—have collectively had difficulties in gaining

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

recognition as part of American literature. It is not the objective of this study to explore where exactly race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality intersect, and how all four relate to class, an inquiry that has been amply pursued elsewhere. However, it is fair to emphasize that the absence of a specific term that defines mainstream American literature confirms the assumption of a norm, whereas aberrations from this norm have been perceived along the lines of the categories just noted. In order to define this norm, "white" seems too broad a term, whereas "Anglo-Saxon" and even "male" seem too narrow, which suggests that the norm has been shifting and transforming itself alongside the movements within the dominant sociopolitical group within America that has promoted it.

Furthermore, one cannot assume that all writers who have been considered as part of mainstream American literature subscribe to the values and ideologies that have allowed a particular group to dominate American society and culture; nor can it be assumed that their writing necessarily reflects such values and ideologies. The "other" of multiethnic American literature is ultimately a fuzzy set, and any generalizations about it are susceptible to error. It is therefore more promising to analyze the relation between both on a case by case basis. Investigating the commonalities or differences between specific works of literature across ethnic boundaries should be beneficial and in fact make important contributions to the revision of existing categories of thought.

Richard Powers is a revealing case in point. Scholarship on his novels displays a noteworthy pattern that, furthermore, does not seem applicable to his 2003 novel *The Time of Our Singing*. His novel *Galatea 2.2* has been discussed together with John Updike's *Roger's Version* and Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs* (Miller), while his novel *Gain* has been related to Don deLillo's *White Noise* (Heise). Powers's work has been

critically assessed in conjunction with the work of Jonathan Franzen and David Foster Wallace (Little, M.). Finally, his novel *The Gold Bug Variation* has been related to William S. Burrough's *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, *Nova Express*, and Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* (Sander). However, scholarship on his novel *The Time of Our Singing* has been slow to emerge. While the novel was initially praised by reviewers, the only scholarly essay on Powers's mixed-race family saga was written by Joseph Dewey and published in an anthology of critical essays on Powers's work in 2008. Apparently, the novel cannot readily be related to the same writers with whose work Powers's fiction has previously been compared, and thus far scholars have not suggested any alternatives. This striking silence, in my opinion, is related to the fact that Powers's novel challenges a number of dichotomous assumptions, among them the ethnic congruence between writer and narrator, and the ideological tensions evoked by the Strom family's reverence for classical European music from the Romantic period, which is also the period in which European pseudo-scientific justifications for colonial racism were produced. Ethnic tensions between African-American and German-Jewish characters add to the themes that place the novel between many categories of scholarly investigation; and the critical community in American Studies has yet to come to terms with where such a novel belongs in the landscape of American literature, or in conjunction with which other works it can be most fruitfully examined.

Cross-Representation or the Question of Ethnic Congruence in Literature

By writing in the mode of cross-representation, Powers touches upon questions of ethnic and racial essentialism that have been crucial in black writing since at least the

1930s. Charles Johnson analyzes what is at stake for African Americans in debates about racial essentialism. As an opponent of it, he observes that "black writing rarely, if ever, reconstructs the complexity of the world as seen through the eyes of a richly detailed, three-dimensional white character, or of other non-whites (native American, say, or Asian)" (*Being* 31). In the context of racial essentialism, the popular idea that "direct experience" is an indispensable element of creative writing led "many black writers to claim they cannot imagine what it is like to be white, that all they know is the 'black' experience" (42, 43). Influential on such a stance was the concept of "Negritude," which Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire articulated between 1934 and 1948, and which has had a lasting effect on African-American writers up to the "Black Power" movement and the black cultural nationalism of the 1960s, and beyond. Johnson recognizes Senghor's and Césaire's "well-intended effort to correct destructive racial images," but notes that the "dualism" that Senghor employs to explain the concept is "almost Cartesian at times," as he "equates consciousness, *res cogitantes*, with Europe and the disembodied mind while he equates the body and its vegetable and mineral processes with Africa" (19). The concept of "Negritude" explained differences between the black and white race as essential, and served as a justification for claims by black writers that from their "black" position "white" experience was not imaginable and that such an imaginary transfer was not even desirable. In the end, "Negritude" reaffirmed the existing dualism of black and white under inverted premises, which remained as ill-defined as those that had enabled European imperialism and colonialism. Johnson remarks that "Negritude" depicts Africa as a "homogeneous culture," whereas Africa is a continent that hosts a multitude of different cultures, and the concept of "Negritude" ignores that the African continent "has its own history of oppression" (19). To

essentialize Africa thus merely responds to the notion of an essentialized Europe, which is but a myth.

One factor complicates any criticism of black racial ideologies and the literary tradition that they have engendered since the nineteenth century: the magnitude of suffering imposed on African Americans by slavery and its aftermath. Yet, if taken as a justification for racial essentialism, the awareness of that suffering reproduces dualities that facilitated the implementation of slavery. As Johnson writes, "Always, and forever, these forms must be understood in terms of the catastrophe of American slavery, . . . a bloody history of atrocity, of stripping a people of cultural identity, then grotesquely caricaturing them in the national (white) imagination" (7, 8). A rejection of essentialism, Johnson implies, should not be misunderstood as a denial of history, or as the incapacity to sympathize with those who saw racial essentialism as the answer to the questions that the historical period of Euro-American slavery necessarily raised about humanness. Nevertheless, African-American racial essentialism is likely to ignore that "oppression is shared across racial lines, involving, among others, the Jews of Europe and native Americans" (19). Powers's *The Time of Our Singing*, by choosing to foreground a mixed-race German-Jewish and African-American family, addresses competitions between Jews and African Americans that revolve around the question of who has suffered more, and more greviously. The novel exemplifies the futility of such concerns. In fact, to acknowledge the suffering of different ethnicities is not only a question of doing justice to other victims of history, but to see the larger patterns of human behavior and reasoning within which oppression has historically occurred.

Like Johnson, Krupat negotiates between rejecting essentialism and recognizing the gravity of historical realities of oppression. When he criticizes certain strands in

postcolonial revisionism for not having moved beyond the entrenched dichotomies of imperial domination, he also notes that to reject dualistic or dialectical methods of analysis is not equivalent to taking a neutral stance towards history. Krupat asserts that "the indigenous peoples of [the American] continent, along with African Americans, women, and many other groups, have overwhelmingly been more sinned against than sinning" (*Ethnocriticism* 21). Nonetheless, both Johnson and Krupat consider racist essentialism or the idealization of the colonized culture as ultimately inadequate responses to the history of slavery and colonial rule, since they remain within the same thought paradigm. Or, as David L. Moore puts it, "A postcolonial rather than neocolonial critique must by definition be non-oppositional and heteroglossic, because colonial hegemonies are based on dualistic oppositions" ("Decolonizing" 17). Literary practice is unlikely to probe beyond such constraints if it endorses racial ideologies, since they tend to "close[] off the free investigation of phenomena" that is the "vexing, but also liberating destination" of literary practice (Johnson, *Being* 26). Only if writers shed such constraints can writing as liberation of thought begin.

Novelistic Discourse, or the Relation of Word to World

In the field of Native-American literature, David Treuer is one of those novelists and critics who reject essentialist attitudes toward literature. Questions pertaining to ethnic essentialism are, however, as complex as in African-American literature. Treuer takes a stand against overemphasizing authenticity and identity—complicated terms in themselves—in criticism of Native-American literature. He notes, "It is crucial to make a distinction between reading books *as* culture and seeing books as capable of *suggesting* culture" (5). He deems it important that we begin to "un-wed ourselves from

looking at Indian fiction in terms of origination and to start thinking of it in terms of destination" (5). He adds, "If we can force ourselves to read Native American fiction we will find style, not culture. Or, rather, we will find that, as far as literature is concerned, style IS culture; style creates the convincing semblance of culture on the page" (5). Instead of reading Native-American literature as recordings of tribal and cultural history, he suggests that we look at what it proposes, at its orientation toward the future. As Krupat points out in *All That Remains* (2009), Treuer's *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual* (2006) is a strong reaction against nationalist trends in Native-American literary studies, and the volume *American Indian Literary Nationalism* (2006), co-authored by Jace Weaver, Craig S. Womack, and Robert Allen Warrior, makes a case precisely *for* nationalism. Weaver, Womack, and Warrior regard as seminal Simon Ortiz's contribution to the field in his 1981 MELUS essay, "Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism." They remind their audience that it has been just over thirty-five years since American Indian literature began to be accepted in academia. Weaver, Warrior, and Womack would like to see more Native Americans participate in literary criticism to articulate what connections exist between Native-American literature and Native communities. They deem a "nationalist" approach to Native-American literature and criticism not only legitimate, but necessary in order to assert Native sovereignty and self-determination. At the same time, they distance themselves from those

> fellow critics who seem to expend all their energy in exposing and attacking "the evil White man" and his "racist hegemony" over publishing and universities and so forth. While we do not avoid confrontation and while we will continue to critique those critics, both

> Native and non-Native, with whom we disagree or whom we see as misguided or, worse, destructive of Native agency and self-determination, we would rather commit considerable energy to the explication of specific Native values, readings, and knowledges and their relevance to our contemporary lives. This difference in focus is crucial to American Indian Literary Nationalism. (6)

The views expounded here demonstrate that Weaver, Womack, and Warrior are not abstractly endorsing racial dichotomies, but speak from their own experience as Native-American writers and critics concerned with the preservation and survival of Native cultures. Krupat, himself opposed to essentialism, nevertheless recognizes the importance of addressing the "possible sociopolitical *functions* of culture in minority literature," and he faults Treuer's book for not confronting this issue. He notes that Treuer instead "insist[s] upon an esthetic orientation to the novel, attentive foremost . . . to *language* and to *style*" (*All* xi). According to Krupat, Treuer pays too little attention to culture, and he has a point in claiming that Treuer does not problematize the particular function of culture in minority literature. On the other hand, Treuer offers arguments against an overemphasis on authenticity and identity, and in favor of his attention to language and style, that are not easily dismissed. His first point concerns the way in which cultural identity and literature have at times been connected in largely futile ways. He observes, "the sentiment (and it *is* a sentiment) that Native-American literature should be defined by the ethnicity of its producers (more so than defined by anything else) says more about politics and identity than it does about literature" (4). Treuer notes that it is not his intention to define what constitutes Native-American literature. However, he raises the important point that if one considers for a moment the great

diversity within Native-American literature, the decision to assign a work to the field cannot be based on strictly intrinsic factors, but will resort to criteria that are external to it.[17] Inevitably, one enters the realm of politics. The question is whether politics is a legitimate concern of literary studies, and Weaver, Wormack, and Warrior's answer is affirmative. I doubt that literary studies are ever apolitical, even when no overt political aims are proclaimed and pursued. The issue has long been a point of contention in literary circles, and it remains so. From a dialogic perspective, all criticism refers to what has been thought, said, and done earlier. Furthermore, referents are not restricted to the literary realm, but include the sociopolitical sphere. It is therefore hard to imagine how literary criticism could ever be entirely devoid of political commentary, even if it is not explicitly stated.

Treuer's second argument concerns the question of how we know Native culture at all. "Native Americans, more so than any other group," he claims, "are experienced through image and text and story more so than through shared, lived experience. How we are created and recreated on the page, by ourselves and others, is the matter at hand" (4). His point recalls Linda Hutcheon's observation about "the acknowledgement of the meaningmaking function of human constructs."[18] If Native culture is first and foremost textually mediated to most of us, we need to pay attention to how these textual representations are constructed. Most professional and non-professional readers have no first-hand experience of Native cultures to which they could compare a novel in order to make judgments about its level of authenticity. It should be added that this is, again, not

[17] It should be added that this holds true for all national literatures, a fact that for some invalidates categories of national literatures altogether.

[18] See p. 3 of the introduction to this study.

a problematic unique to Native-American literature. Rather, "to consider just exactly what it meant to be culturally and individually Indian in the second half of the twentieth century," as Native literature began to receive some public attention, is a comprehensible preoccupation for any people who survived the "near-genocidal extended colonial assault on indigenous peoples by the Europeans who would become Americans" (Krupat, *All* ix,x). Treuer nevertheless advocates reading Native-American fiction as literature. He means to focus on questions such as "what traditions of thought have been mobilized and by what means in Native American fiction?" (5), or, how a particular novel inscribes itself into specific contexts of discourses and literary traditions, and by which aesthetic means. Native culture will be a reference point, but by no means the only one; and Treuer insists that attention be paid to how a novel weaves its different elements together, and to what end. It should be added that in the specific literary analyses following a general introduction in his book, Treuer has far more to say about culture than Krupat's critical remarks suggest. At the same time, (a) parallels between Treuer's argument and postmodern discussions attest to his Western training in literary studies, and (b) one cannot dismiss the question of how postmodern and contemporary literary debates relate to Native communities, a concern that Weaver, Wormack and Warrior raise. Krupat's ethnocritical approach to literature from "between many frontiers" and under constant questioning of its own premises is once again validated. Debates about authenticity and identity, and language and style, continue to pervade Native-American and African-American literary studies alike, and the points just outlined can only confirm that there is no easy answer to any of the pertinent questions.

Henry Louis Gates's *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988) exemplifies the complexity involved in navigating a course

that considers specifics of a particular ethnic literature and the universals that are potentially shared by diverse literatures. Gates claims a specific "theory of criticism that is inscribed in the black vernacular tradition and that in turn informs the shape of the Afro-American literary tradition" (xx). As one of the relevant terms in his framework, he uses Bakhtin's "double-voiced word," and he introduces his reference to Bakhtin as follows: "The process of semantic appropriation . . . has been aptly described by Mikhail Bakhtin as a double-voiced word, that is, a word or utterance, in this context, decolonized for the black's purposes 'by inserting a new semantic orientation into a word which already has—and retains—its own orientation'" (50). Gates's reference to Bakhtin is one further example of criticism in ethnic American literature that deems Bakhtin's theory of language relevant for literary analysis. At the same time, Gates's reading of Bakhtin is not without its problems, since it informs a theory that for the most part claims exclusiveness to the African-American tradition, even though Gates concedes at times that the signifying process that he describes is inherent to all literatures. Johnson scholar William R. Nash quotes Sandra Adell, who claims that Gates's "effort to assert a uniquely black theory of reading breaks down because it requires the existence of and reinscribes itself in the white Western tradition against which he defines signifying" (Nash, *Charles Johnson's Fiction* 36).[19] Adell's point is well taken, although it is troubled by the evoked dichotomy of white and black and the assumption that Bakhtin necessarily belongs to the white Western tradition.

It is worth noting that Gates, who analyses the work of several African-American writers, among them Raph Ellison, Ishmael Reed, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice

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[19]Nash refers to Sandra Adell's *Double Consciousness/Double Bind: Theoretical Issues in Twentieth Century Black Literature*, p. 135.

Walker, makes no mention of Charles Johnson's work, a fact that has been interpreted by some critics as an indication of differences in position between critic and writer. Indeed, Johnson rejects exclusivity based on race, and he seeks instead to find the common human element in the specifics of black experience. How far their positions really differ has been subject to debate and depends on which of both of their arguments and positions one emphasizes. It is interesting to note, however, that Gates considers Bakhtin's theory as relevant to African-American literature, as it has been recognized as relevant to other ethnic literatures. Gates reads Bakhtin less for the open-endedness of his theory of language and the novel than for his conceptualization of the sediments through which a writer has to pierce to impose his or her own meaning. It might be added that the signifying process that ensues may be informed by ethnic and cultural belonging, yet is irreducible to such associations—from Johnson's point of view, a reduction that is furthermore undesirable. Relevant to this study is how literary practice and criticism relate to life, how word relates to world, where the world in question is shared by many ethnicities.

One may ask how stylistic analysis can help us to discern relations between word and world? If Bakhtin claims that to avoid the thorough analysis of style in a novel means to "limit oneself to purely thematic analysis," he does so because of the proliferation and separation of discourses in modernity and the novel's capacity to combine these creatively (*Dialogic* 261). Michael Holquist explicates why dialogism takes such an interest in *how* literature treats its subject matter by taking a closer look at the function of novelistic discourse in relation to other discourses:

> Dialogism assigns so much importance to literature because the kind of authoring that is characteristic of discourses that have been labeled

> ‘literary’ is not – and can never be (despite what some poets and novelists may have thought) – narrowly professional in the same sense that the institutionalized languages of the human sciences generate such professions as psychology or sociology. (87)

Holquist chooses the two disciplines of psychology and sociology to exemplify his point because, as institutions, their areas of investigation are delineated and entirely separate from each other and yet are thoroughly interdependent, since both fields combined address a wide range of issues that pertain to the human condition of simultaneously singular and collective existence. The separation of the two disciplines is arbitrary and effected through discourse. Holquist elaborates on the difference and relation between psychology and sociology, “Ultimately, the difference is between two different kinds of knowledge, perceived by most as antithetical to each other” (86). In order to demonstrate the level of separation between the two discourses, he refers to Émile Durkheim’s 1897 study on how the two disciplines approach the vexing social phenomenon of suicide quite differently:

> [Durkheim] draws an opposition between realms appropriate to the psychologist, who may be able to explain why this person killed himself, but could never grasp the principles that enable sociologists to perceive conditions that affect the behavior of whole communities. The study of individuals cannot say why more persons of one group constituted by a certain age, class, or profession commit suicide more frequently than do persons in other groups. (86-87)

Whereas Durkheim’s point at the time was to demonstrate the necessity of sociological studies, which he implemented in the French educational system, Holquist’s interest is to

show that the study of any social phenomenon in psychology or sociology alone yields only a partial picture. Knowledge in the two disciplines, he writes, "differs because the discourse of each is defined by only one of several levels of perception; the language practices that define sociology and psychology as distinct professions are mutually exclusive" (87). Novelistic discourse, on the other hand, does not maintain such divisions. It investigates issues that pertain to both professional fields: how do individuals act, and what are the possible parameters in which individual agency can be imagined? What are the collective opinions, values, and patterns of behavior prevalent at a given time? How do the two spheres interact? The novel, by bringing different fields of human application into contact, investigates these questions in an interrelated fashion, adopting a perspective that would be obstructed by the boundaries that institutionalized discourses draw around disciplines. This function, which Bakhtin calls "novelistic" (*Dialogic* 59, 83), generates "a *form of knowledge* that can most powerfully put different orders of experience – each of whose languages claims authority on the basis of its ability to exclude others [–] into dialogue with each other" (Holquist 87). Whereas specialized discourse separates out the specific aspects of experience that pertain to its field, the novel combines different discourses, can make possible incompatibilities visible, and reconnect experience to a continuum.

What is a Novel?

One important observation should not be omitted before the discussion proceeds. A stylistic feature of Holquist's text, as of Bakhtin's, which I adapt in the previous paragraph and elsewhere—the personification of the novel—merits critical attention. Such a style suggests a unified meaning of the term "novel," which is not borne out in

Bakhtin's work. In fact, he uses the term for a number of different referents, and Nancy Glazener provides a useful overview of them:

> Bakhtin's conception of the novel uneasily promotes several claims: the roots of the novel in ancient serio-comic genres and in the carnevalesque modes of popular discourse in the Renaissance; the novel's early (pre-nineteenth century) association with low genres . . . ; the novel's formal capacity to represent heteroglossia; and the potential within the novel form for differing degrees of ideological conformity or enforcement. (158)

Basically, the term "novel" denotes in one instance novelness, a characteristic or trait, and in another a more recognizable, albeit always open, form. The novel emerged in lower discourse that attacked, mimicked, and subverted higher forms, in the way that comic forms have undermined tragedy. Carnivalesque modes likewise intentionally assailed official discourse and its vacant style—"the abstracted, disembodied concept of meaning that the Platonic philosophical tradition has favored"—by crudely reinstating the body and its physicality in discourse. Glazener writes:

> The novel does not simply espouse the values of the body deriving from the carnevalesque, but neither is it a value-free form that relativises all discourse indiscriminately. The heritage of the carnevalesque provides the novel with a set of specific strategies for relativising the discourses it portrays, strategies such as their incarnation in vividly embodied and concretely situated characters and the juxtaposition of discourses marked as high and low, inner and outer. These strategies lend themselves to the purpose of specific historical critiques with varying degrees of

receptiveness. (163)

Glazener's commentary suggests that the novel has in the course of different historical periods been impregnated with the various forms and shades of discourses to which it has reacted, and thereby developed as its most enduring characteristic heteroglossia, which is woven together in shades of opposition to or affirmation of dominant discourse. The novel thus has the "potential to be oppositional without being merely reflexive, qualified by the individual novel's capacity to enforce or undermine dominant ideologies" (164). Its potential both to undermine and to enforce dominant ideologies has been seen as a blessing by some and as a curse by others.

One can easily see that in the case of novels commissioned for purposes of ideological infiltration, the characteristic of "novelness" might be entirely obliterated. Silko mentions just such a case, a novel entitled *Stiya, The Story of an Indian Girl*, published in 1881 under the pseudonym "Tonka." The novel was meant to bring graduates at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School to decide against returning to the reservations, and "instead to melt into the cities in the east to work as maids and farmhands" (*Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* 162). The novel was in reality written by Marion Bergess, a teacher and dormitory matron at Carlisle, who "projected all of her own fears and prejudices toward Pueblo life into her Stiya character" (162). The novel describes nauseating dirt, filth, and odors of a supposedly uncivilized community, with its "gibberish" language, and refers to the sacred *ka'tsina* dances as "lewd" (162). It promotes the ideology of assimilation and is from its first to last page an assault of dominant American culture on Indian culture in an attempt to undermine and destroy it. In such writing, novelness is entirely absent. On the other end of the spectrum, by making different discourses interact with each other, novelness can develop

and enhance our understanding of possible realities. Holquist writes, "literary texts do not merely reflect changes in development, but also serve to bring them about. Literary texts are tools; they serve as a prosthesis of the mind. . . . Literature, when it enacts novelness . . . is a loophole through which we may see a future otherwise obscured by other forms of discourse" (83, 84). This testing of new possibilities can only occur when writing is not constrained to represent a given reality but relates creatively to reality.

Hierarchical Divisions Between different Ways of Knowing

Despite its potential to become a "loophole" through which otherwise unavailable insights might be gained, literature, and more generally artistic practice and its discourses, have been firmly relegated to a low status in the Western hierarchical order of knowledge. The monologic definition of objective knowledge as obtainable through the scientific method, which emerged in the seventeenth century and became from the nineteenth century the domain of the natural sciences, consigned artistic practice, including literature, to the field of hermeneutics, "which covers both the first order art and the second order theory of understanding and interpretation of linguistic and non-linguistic expressions" (Ramberg and Gjestal). The differentiation between epistemology as scientific "objective" method and hermeneutics as "subjective" understanding and interpretation created a hierarchical relation not only between the two approaches to knowledge, but also between the very practices that they examine. Practices perceived as "objectively" examinable and supposedly leading to stable knowledge were valorized over those that require a "subjective" approach and lead to knowledge that is qualified by interpretive understanding. Sokal describes the prioritizing of the scientific paradigm as the

> dogma imposed by the long post-Enlightenment hegemony over the Western intellectual outlook, which can be summarized briefly as follows: that there exists an external world, whose properties are independent of any human being and indeed of humanity as a whole; that these properties are encoded in 'external' physical laws; and that human beings can obtain reliable, albeit imperfect and palpable, knowledge of these laws by hewing to the 'objective' procedures and epistemological strictures prescribed by the (so-called) scientific method. (217)

This dogma is being undermined through new findings both in the natural sciences, the focus of Sokal's article, and in the humanities. Scholars in the natural sciences work to articulate how new insights gained through quantum theory relate to the general scientific paradigm (quantum theory is one of the themes in Powers's *The Time of Our Singing*, and will be addressed in chapter 3). Sokal concedes that among new scientific theories that travel further in the directions outlined by Einstein's relativity theory and quantum theory, none has yet succeeded in incorporating both theories into a new paradigm of thought, but he points out that these theories have "similar conceptual characteristics: strong non-linearity, subjective space-time, inexorable flux, and a stress on the topology of interconnectedness" (224). These scientific theories refer to the work of Heisenberg on quantum theory in the late 1950s, and to the work of scientists such as Bohr, Kuhn, Feyerabend, Latour, Aronowitz, and Bloor in the subsequent decades. Debates around the reliability of scientific knowledge were joined in the late twentieth century by feminist and postmodern critics such as Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles, who "reveal[ed] the ideology concealed behind the facade of 'objectivity'" (217). Combined, these studies have strongly argued, as Sokal writes, that

> scientific 'knowledge,' far from being objective, reflects and encodes the dominant ideologies and power relations of the culture that produced it; that the truth claims of science are inherently theory-laden and self-referential; and consequently, that the discourse of the scientific community, for all its undeniable value, cannot assert a privileged epistemological status with respect to counterhegemonic narratives emanating from dissident or marginalized communities. (217-18)

Remarkably, it is in the natural sciences that new findings have undermined the assumption of an essential difference between scientific objectivity and other, presumably subjective, discourses. These insights, however, have yet to be followed by changes in the hierarchically structured order of knowledge that is still the dominant paradigm in Western culture.

In the last two decades, scholars in the humanities have expanded the terminology of literary studies that conceptually parallel the emergent scientific vocabulary indicated by Sokal. To explore what Krupat calls "ethnocritical" perspectives, scholars and writers have introduced "borderlands" (Anzaldua), "border thinking" (Mignolo), and "third space" (Arnold). Through the coinage of such terms, scholars and writers attempt to move beyond notions of difference as the demarcation line between dichotomous pairs toward difference as a space of gradual and mutual dynamic influence between dialectically related entities. In Krupat's words, these terms express the desire of academics to "undo the imperial legacy of Western knowledge-gathering" and to situate themselves instead "where two cultures meet" (*New Voices* xix).

These new currents in the humanities and in critical studies of science

approximate the interrrelatedness, dependence on context, and open-endedness that Bakhtin observes in language. Yet, in their emphasis on the constructedness of epistemological hierarchies and ideologies, they also reach beyond Bakhtin's work by turning their attention to concrete historical moments of colonization, repression, and epistemological exclusion. To be sure, Bakhtin writes about the centripetal and centrifugal forces and their connection with the "processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization." But while he claims that "a unitary language is not something given [dan], but is always in essence posited [zadan]," he oscillates between these more specific statements and a choice of diction that casts the struggle of centripetal and centrifugal forces in rather ahistorical terms intrinsic to living languages (*Dialogic* 270). While he uses the terms "socio-ideological" and "verbal-ideological," he avoids translating them into the concrete forces that he sees at work, as well as commenting explicitly on how both relate to his initial remark that centripetal forces of language are not "given" but "posited."

A question that has occupied Bakhtin scholars in the last two decades—among them Ken Hirschkop—concerns the degree to which Bakhtin deliberately omits any reference to actual forces confronting each other on the political scene in the 1930s, when he wrote his essay "Discourse in the Novel" while exiled in Kazakhstan. Hirschkop points out that Russian scholars such as Seigei Bocharov and N. I. Nikolaev take the view that there is a difference between Bakhtin's thought and the language in which he chose to express it—a language that avoided any offense to the Soviet authorities ("Introduction," *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory* 4). In "Conversations with Bakhtin," Bocharov writes of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* and *The Formal*

Method in Literary Scholarship[20] that the Marxism of both texts

> is the first and exterior layer of the text, which the reader meets in the first lines and then mainly in the initial parts of the works. Closer to the essential problematic, the weight of the Marxist phraseology disappears. The attentive reader will notice that the required phraseology does not affect the specifically Bakhtinian theoretical core of the work and can easily be distinguished as a separate layer. (15-16)

Hirschkop calls attention to a problem with such a figural reasoning. He writes, "When the metaphor of kernel and shell is applied universally and rigorously to Bakhin's texts, it suggests one can, and should, literally strip history away from them" (5). Such a procedure seems contrary to Bakhin's own claims that language is always bound up with its context. One might say that a Bakhtin minus the context of the Soviet regime is hard to come by, if not altogether irrecoverable. It seems futile to push any such attempt at recovery to its limits, and Bocharov and others recognize this fact. More productive are attempts to consider the thought expressed in Bakhtin's work and see where it leads as one tries to think with it, as Tabbi demands,[21] and to discern where Bakhtin's work displays similarities with the ideas of others. Instead of putting the weight of exhaustive articulation on the shoulders of just one theorist, dialogism implies an appeal to thinking further about what others have begun to formulate, a kind of weaning from the thinker as an authorial figure to whom we must look for universal truths.

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[20] Whereas the former book was published under the name of V. N. Voloshinov, and the latter under the name of P. N. Medvedev, there is evidence, including testimony from Bakhtin published in Bocharov's "Conversations with Bakhtin," that he wrote the books for his friends (27).

[21] See page 29 of chapter one.

Foucault's Genealogy of Racism and his Trajectory as a Critical Thinker

Michel Foucault's work is a case in point: he questions his own assumptions and seeks to discern their potential and limits as valid tools for historical analysis of discourse. Pertinent to this study is Foucault's examination of racism, which he frames in a larger exclusionary dynamics of the modern nation-state. In a series of lectures at the Collège de France from 1975 to 1976, he outlined his views on the generic history of race and racism. These lectures are of interest for another reason as well: they mark the beginnings of the shift in Foucault's work from war-repression as the inevitable plot of history to more constructive forms of agonism and problem analysis. Whereas he had previously viewed relations of power and resistance as asymmetrical forces emerging inevitably from the battles of history inspired by Nietzsche's genealogical method, from the mid-1970s on he now sought to envision resistance as not restricted to reaction against the imposition of power, but as a more autonomous form of agency that encounters power as a form of action that does not necessarily involve repression. This shift in focus will be discussed below, but the important point for the moment is that Foucault approached his own work with the kind of self-critical attitude that is requisite for any non-foundationalist theory. Since the complete transcriptions of the lectures have been available to an English-speaking audience only since 2003, and have not been extensively discussed in scholarship, it is worth examining his argument in some detail. Furthermore, since Foucault's method is to unfold his critical thought gradually, with attention to historical detail, to abridge it unduly runs the risk of critical entropy.

In two of his major works, *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (1976), Foucault describes the historical emergence of disciplinary power and biopower, two forms of power that become technologies of

power in the modern nation-state. “Disciplinary power has as its target the individual, employing surveillance, normalizing techniques and a 'panoptic' grid of institutions. Biopower, on the other hand, has as its target the population as a whole” (Marks 128). Disciplinary power targets the individual with a network of controlling institutions and normative discourses that lead—like the design of Jeremy Bentham’s panopoticon—to autodisciplinary behavior of individuals. Foucault observes this shift in France particularly between the middle of the eighteenth century and the first three decades of the nineteenth century. By this time, monarchical power and punishment with its occasional display in public spectacles loses efficacy due to rapidly growing populations, whereas disciplinary power with its growing omnipresent potency becomes important as a measure to affect mass populations. With the rise of capitalism, biopower becomes an important tool as well: it responds to the demands of the capitalist system to maintain the workforce needed for economic growth. Biopower aims at whole populations, it works on the level of the masses, and it organizes social life from the perspective of public health and socially functional behavior. Disciplinary power and biopower work in tandem to attain and stabilize the cohesion of society, and to foster economic growth.

Foucault relates his genealogical analysis of disciplinary power and biopower to the phenomenon of racism in the series of lectures entitled *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, which he gave between the publication of *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality.* Racism, in his account, precedes disciplinary power and biopower and exists first in forms that do not discriminate on the basis of biological descent. The discourse of race struggle, Foucault argues, becomes a paradigm of historical discourse due to a new awareness among different interest groups

that historical discourse is one-sided: “historical discourse was no longer the discourse of sovereignty, or even race, but a discourse about races, about a confrontation between races, about the race struggle that goes on within nations and within laws” (*Society* 69). This new discourse constitutes “counterhistory,” and it is affirmed by “those who have no glory, or by those who have lost it” (70). Foucault makes particular mention of the Levellers in England, who fought for popular sovereignty during the first half of the seventeenth century, and the French aristocracy, who felt wedged in between the Absolutist monarchy and the Third Estate—whose rise to power they feared and opposed—about half a century later. These diverse groups assert historical subjectivity in a counterhistory against an existing historical discourse that had celebrated sovereign power. The discourse of race struggle opposes this official historical discourse, and the result of this opposition is a view of society as bifurcated in the battle of two races within one realm. Foucault emphasizes that at this stage, “although this discourse speaks of races, . . . the word ‘race’ itself is not pinned to a stable biological meaning. And yet the word is not completely free-floating. Ultimately, it designates a certain historico-political divide” (77).

Counterhistory, however, does not remain consistently the story of one social group fighting for its rights or privileges against others; it does not remain “a critical discourse . . . [but] may be integrated into 'official,' institutionalized discourses, or reinvent itself as a mythic demagogic form which, nourishing the crazy desire for revenge of the 'first race,' sees itself as displaced by invaders” (Marks 132). In the former instance, it becomes attached to the growing interests of the bourgeois class that gains power through changing economic conditions. In the latter instance, it feeds into movements such as National Socialism. In both cases, the heritage of former battles

against an oppressive race pervades the discourse of authorized power.

With increasing industrialization, the question that the bourgeoisie faces is how to "extract time and labor, rather than commodities and wealth, from bodies," a shift from serfdom to industrial labor. At this point, disciplinary power comes into play. While the social body of modern societies gains sovereignty, individuals delegate their sovereignty to the state and come under its disciplinary power as "a tight grid of disciplinary coercions that actually guarantees the cohesion of that social body" (Foucault, *Society* 37). Disciplinary power relies on the distinction between state and society, and allows once again those who "have won a temporary victory" to establish a relationship of domination; and "given that the relationship of domination works to their advantage, it is certainly not in their interest to call any of this into question" (54-5). Counterhistory has become institutionalized at the service of a new dominant group.

With the growing density of populations, the state is more and more in the role of caretaker. "Biopolitics [, which] will derive its knowledge from, and define its power's field of intervention in terms of, the birth rate, the mortality rate, various biological instabilities, and the effects of the environment," emerges and constitutes the state's administration aimed at the well-being of a society (245). The enumerated phenomena, to which biopolitics responds, are collective, occur at the level of the masses, and therefore have economic and political effects (246). Yet, Foucault observes that biopower does not distribute its life support evenly, and that it develops hostilities towards groups internal and external to itself. In short, the state also preserves and administers the right to kill. Foucault asks, "How can a power such as this kill, if it is true that its basic function is to improve life, to prolong its duration, to improve its basic chances, to avoid accidents, and to compensate for failings?" (254). And he specifies,

“When I say 'killing,' I obviously do not mean simply murder as such, but also every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on” (256). In his effort to account for this contradictory role of the state, Foucault discerns new dynamics of racism; these dynamics, he claims, are not so much diametrically opposed to the former power of the sovereign to take lives, but are rather an inversion of that power: “Sovereignty took life and let live. . . . And now we have the emergence of a power that I would call the power of regularization, and it, in contrast, consists in making live and letting die” (247). If a state's power does not assert the equality of all those on the receiving end of its support, while being based on the idea of a sovereign people, it needs a means to justify the grounds on which it differentiates. According to Foucault, ”[i]t is at this moment [at the emergence of biopower] that racism is inscribed as the basic mechanism of power, as it is exercised in modern States” (254). Whereas races were formerly understood as the major interest groups facing each other, the term “race” now denotes an in-group that forms the core of a population and needs protection. Biopower appropriates and reinterprets racism as a justification for its decisions to supply or withhold life support within its own realm, and to justify genocide and the repression of exterior populations. Race in the sense of biological descent is therefore not the only differentiating category that informs the internal and external politics of inclusion and exclusion, up to and including literal death; but gender, class, and the medical discourse of madness serve as such categories as well.

Nonetheless, racism, as Foucault uses the term, does not in and of itself provide a justification to differentiate; a state’s power based on the sovereignty of the population needs a rationale that renders differentiation acceptable. It has to pass off differentiation

as in the interest of the population that is at least ostensibly the sovereign of the state. Foucault links racism to evolutionism, which, he claims, becomes during the nineteenth century more than a way of explaining political discourse in biological terms; it becomes a "real way of thinking about the relations between colonization, the necessity for wars, criminality, the phenomena of madness and mental illness, the history of societies with their different classes, and so on" (257). The discourse of evolutionism, namely, natural selection and survival of the fittest—even though the latter expression was not coined by Darwin, but by Herbert Spencer, who applied it to his "synthetic philosophy"—justifies the racism exercised by biopower. Foucault explains that under the rationale of evolutionism, "racism justifies the death-function in the economy of biopower by appealing to the principle that the death of others makes one biologically stronger insofar as one is a member of a race or a population, insofar as one is an element in a unitary living plurality" (258). Evolutionism allows the state to conceive of its dominant group as a race, and to prioritize maintaining or increasing its strength. The death-function comprises acts of killing aimed at the state's own population, as Foucault puts it, "to defend society against all the biological threats posed by the other race, the subrace, the counterrace that we are, despite ourselves, bringing into existence" or potentially all those groups in society that hinder the advance of the dominant race (61-62). On the state's exterior, acts of killing include genocide and repression of colonized or enslaved populations. Disciplinary and regulatory power work in tandem to compel acceptance by those whom the system puts at a disadvantage. Racism based on evolutionism thus implies the transformation of the former notion of a battle between races into socio-biological terms of the inherent superiority of one race over others, in all its possible applications. It becomes a coercive force that creates a consensus among

populations to accept these internal and external differentiations and their personal cost to individuals.

According to Foucault's historical analysis, racism is thus embedded in a larger paradigm of exclusions, on which the modern state relies for the acquisition and redistribution of scarce resources, the creation of a cohesive society, and the fostering of economic growth that serves the interest of those who have been able to make the system work to their advantage. While Foucault's analysis is to some extent reductive, as he himself admits, the connections that he draws are nevertheless compelling and indicate that any notion of racism as related merely to biological ancestry misses the larger dualistic paradigm of exclusions that undergirds it. This paradigm of exclusions enjoys a continued existence, albeit under constantly changing conditions according to new structures of organization that have recently exceeded the domain of the nation-state.

At the time he delivers these lectures, Foucault is engaged in intense self-critical reflection. He considers that even though the paradigm of exclusions/racism characterizes modern state power, governmentality does not necessarily take the form of racism in the larger sense of exclusions. He questions his previous approach to the historical analysis of power and resistance by means of a "war-repression or domination-repression schema, . . . in which the pertinent opposition is . . . between struggle and submission." He concedes that the schema has not been sufficiently elaborated, and begins to think "that the twin notions of 'repression' and 'war' have to be considerably modified and ultimately, perhaps, abandoned" (17). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault still claims, "we must hear the distant roar of battle," and battle here refers not only to physical war, but also to discourse as a form of continuation of war by other means

(308). However, the notion that battle underlies all historical development becomes increasingly unsatisfactory to Foucault. As he says in the lectures, he begins to call into question the method of genealogy modeled after Nietzsche "because it is limited to a reductive image of history as battle," and because it is infused with a Nietzschean polemics and therefore is itself an expression of the dynamic of battle that is inherent in polemics (Marks 133). Foucault's concern is the exemplary effect that polemics might have:

> There is something even more serious here: in this comedy, one mimics war, battles, annihilations, or unconditional surrenders, putting forward as much of one's killer instinct as possible. But it is really dangerous to make anyone believe that he can gain access to the truth by such paths, and thus to validate, even if in a merely symbolic form, the real political practices that could be warranted by it. ("Polemics" 383)

Even if in different historical periods battle has been an important response to conflicting interests, to approach history with a polemical attitude, as Nietzsche did, endorses battle as a valid means and might to some seem a legitimization of real battle as a way to establish domination by subjugation or annihilation of opponents. Form, in other words, is an important carrier of meaning in critical discourse and involves questions of responsibility.

While Foucault never utilizes polemics as a style himself, at this point in his career he is more aware than ever that we need to avoid taking any term or concept at face value "if we want to understand how we have been trapped in our own history" ("The Subject and Power" 210). The danger, in other words, is to arrive at some model that seems always to work out in history and to give it a status of quasi-universality. This

insight applies particularly to the concept of power, which is, Foucault notes, not something that "universally" exists, but that "exists only when it is put into action" (219). His endeavor from the mid-1970s is to complicate the relation between power and resistance, and to envision possibilities of resistance that are irreducible to reaction.

Foucault had earlier distinguished between power and domination, and insisted that domination denotes a state of things where a system of power has become "permanent, repetitious, inert and self-reproducing" (*History* 1: 93). Domination obliterates the freedom of the subject and subjugates it through violence, the literal putting into chains of the slave, at which point a power relation ceases to exist and is replaced, at least temporarily, by violence. Relations of power, by contrast, involve free subjects that are able to act. Power seen as "action, . . . not act[ing] directly and immediately on others . . . [but] . . . on their actions," implies agency on the side of the other ("The Subject and Power" 220). Foucault now grasps power in terms of government, which "designate[s] the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed" (221). On the side of the subject, he comes to realize that for a genealogy of the Western subject, one needs to take into account not only techniques of domination, but also techniques of the self, which he derives from the ancient Greeks and Romans (Hartmann 7).[22] Techniques of the self involve a creative relation with oneself: "subjects came to conduct their own conduct, or engage in a relation with themselves which did not devolve to a state of domination" (8). This conceptualization of power and the free subject envisions "agonism" as "less a face-to-face confrontation . . . than a permanent provocation" (Foucault, "The Subject and Power" 222). The subject encounters structuration of actions, yet also acts upon himself or herself, and does not

[22]Quoted with author's permission: John Hartmann, email to Christina Oltmann, May 26, 2009.

merely react or submit, but acts creatively. As Hartmann puts it, "Resistance – positive resistance – is no longer merely reversal, but consists in a subject's becoming-autonomous within a structured set of institutions and practices through immanent critique" (10).[23] Foucault's new account of relations of power and resistance enhances his earlier view of asymmetrical force relations always tilted to one side by power and knowledge, and emphasizes instead the transformative and creative possibilities of human agency. History bears out that even the most severe forms of domination of humans by humans do not last. Foucault's later conception of power and resistance encourages critical attitudes towards dominant paradigms of power, and one might even discern here an admonition to those who seek to perpetuate them, inasmuch as he insists that subjects will not permanently accept domination. Foucault shifts his account of power relations away from a deterministic model that necessarily involves war-struggle on all sides, and introduces a more open-ended model of human agency that involves multiple possibilities of interaction.

The Relation between Discourse and Meta-Discourse; or, God is no Theorist

The ability to question one's previous assumptions openly and publicly, as Foucault did, requires a good measure of humility on the part of anyone, let alone such a renowned thinker. At the same time, re-conceptualization is inherent in theory. This is an argument that Schaar advances when he quotes the French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville: "As Tocqueville put the point, God has no need of theory, for he knows all

[23]John Hartmann traces Foucault's trajectory during the period between his *Society* lectures in 1975-76 and the publication of "The Subject and Power" in 1982: in several lectures, Foucault interrelates Greek and Roman techniques of the self, the advent of pastoral power, and Kant's critical inquiry in "What is Enlightenment" to envision non-dominant forms of government and positive means of resistance.

the facts" (Schaar 451n41). Theory, in this view, is a necessity born out of the lack of knowledge. Humans form theories to explain phenomena as best they can by considering insights available to them under particular circumstances at given times. Schaar continues, "Theory is in one sense the highest form of knowledge, and in another sense the confession of ignorance" (451n41). The relation between these two characteristics is striking: the highest form of knowledge that humans are capable of conceiving is simultaneously a confession that they can never have full knowledge of all things. This irresolvable tension makes theory just one form of reasoning among others: to conceive of theory as meta-discourse therefore ignores the historicity of theory, i.e., its being in time as part of ongoing thought processes. The celebration of particular theories as universal truths is motivated by the desire to find final answers to the troubling questions of our existence, rather than by the confirmed assurance that answers to such questions have already been found. Objects of human desire are themselves not naturally given, but related inevitably to history, to a specific social realm with its own relations of power and established dominant ideologies. Since these configurations of the social realm are themselves always susceptible to change and transformation, they cannot possibly serve to assure sustained and fixed meanings.

Bakhtin's reflections on the relation between language and metalanguage, or text and metatext, point in a similar direction. Todorov remarks, "Logically, one can certainly distinguish between language and metalanguage, text and metatext, but, for Bakhtin, the metatextual relation is not specific; the metatext is actually an intertext; the utterance that describes another utterance enters into a dialogical relation with it" (22, 23). For Bakhtin, there is no ontological difference between "the knowing discourse and the discourse to be known" (22). Consequently, he writes, "Thoughts upon thoughts,

experiences upon experiences, discourse upon discourses, texts bearing upon texts. Therein lies the fundamental particularity of our (humanistic) disciplines by opposition to the natural sciences, although there, too, there are no absolute or impenetrable boundaries" (qtd. in Todorov 22).[24] Bakhtin refuses to conceive of the relation between different modes of language as hierarchical. Descriptive or analytical discourse cannot lift itself out of the mode of utterance, or from the context that suffuses it.[25] It is therefore ontologically no different from the sequence of language that it describes or analyzes. Given that Bakhtin posits a non-hierarchical relation between different kinds of discourse, it is entirely suitable that Holquist refers to Bakhtin's work as "theory and not system," since "Bakhtin's motivating idea is in its essence opposed to any strict formalization" (xvii). Bakhtin's theory is, in fact, an attempt at understanding how humans structure their communication with each other. His work is not an attempt to posit ultimate and universal truths.

Schaar, when he enlists Melville's *Benito Cereno* to enrich political discourse—particularly the term "authority"—states his intention to listen to Melville, and to listen to him "the way one listens to a wise and compelling storyteller, rather than the way a psychologist listens to a patient, an anthropologist to a native informant, or a jury to a witness" (422). It is noteworthy that Schaar does not describe his approach in terms of a definite methodology, but in terms of an attitude, and he thereby indicates from the outset that the outcome of his endeavor is open-ended. Schaar describes this attitude as "a compound of ardor, humility, and openness to surprise," and the listening he

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[24]Mikhail Bakhtin, "Problema teksa v lingvistike, filologii i drugikh gumanitarnykh naukakh. Opyt filosofskogo analiza" [The problem of text in linguistics, philology, and the other human sciences: An essay of philosophical analysis.] First published in *Voprosy literatury* 10 (1976).

[25]See p. 26-27 of this study for Bakhtin's definition of "utterance."

recommends requires that “one must have real questions whose answers [one] does not have but fervently seeks,” so that the conversation can begin (422).

History and Spatiotemporality in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*, Richard Powers's *The Time of Our Singing*, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*

Whereas the critical thought outlined in this chapter explicitly speaks to paradigms of dualism and exclusion that became dominant in the Western Hemisphere in the last five hundred years, Johnson, Powers, and Silko embed their critique of these paradigms in narratives populated with characters who live their fictional lives at one point or another throughout this historical period. Narrated time in their novels refers to both overlapping and corresponding historical moments. Johnson's narrative is set in the year 1830, during the interval between the ban on slave importation by act of Congress in 1808 and the abolition of slavery in 1865. Enslavement of those already living in or born into bondage continues until its eventual nationwide abolition through the 13th amendment. During this period, no serious measures are taken to enforce the non-importation law, though, and by 1820, when American ships become involved in slave trade between Africa and such countries as Cuba and Brazil, the American government refuses requests by the British to grant the right to search and seize ships in American waters (TED Case Studies). The slave trade thus continues to thrive illegally without a threat of serious reprimand in the case of discovery, at least not from American officials. It is during this period that Johnson’s *Republic* sails to the West coast of Africa to collect an illegal slave cargo.

The slave trade is also part of the historical background against which Powers's story of the Strom family unfolds, since Delia Strom’s parents are descendants of

Africans who where enslaved and brought over to America, a fact to which Powers makes reference in a number of narrative digressions. His mixed-raced family saga of the German-Jewish and African-American Strom family unfolds between the 1939 free open air concert by black singer Marian Anderson on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial —famously organized by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt—and the 1992 Los Angeles riots. David Strom and Delia Daley marry when anti-miscegenation laws are still in place in a majority of states. The harsh reality of their family life under conditions of segregation, racial discrimination, and the turmoil of the civil rights era during the mid-twentieth century is part of the future that lies generations ahead of Rutherford Calhoun's newly gained liberty. The nineteenth-century abolitionist era and the twentieth-century civil rights era converge in Silko's novel, which is set in the near future as an apocalyptic vision of the possible decline of American society, and which uses narrative digressions to cover five hundred years of colonialization and shifting borders in the Americas.

None of the three novels can be properly called "historical" novels, mainly because none of the authors makes any attempt to veil the late twentieth-century position from which they write. These works give voice to characters who in their own historical periods remained simply anonymous or were dismissed as inferiors. In *Middle Passage*, descriptions of the slave cargo brought on board the *Republic* enter into dialogue with the discourse of the slaves themselves, who regard their American captors as brutes and barbarians; Powers juxtaposes the official discourse about the arrest of Rosa Parks that triggered the Montgomery bus boycott with Parks's own comments on the event; Silko relays the ruminations of homeless people and Vietnam veterans on the distribution of wealth and the many facets of slavery. The truth claims of discourses are contextual and

change over time, a fact that these novels register by bringing past discourses into contact with the present, a process by which "an object is attracted to the incomplete process of a world-in-the-making, and is stamped with the seal of inconclusiveness. . . . [I]t is connected to our incomplete, present-day, continuing temporal transitions, it develops a relationship with our unpreparedness, with our present" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 30). A less convenient question, however, concerns the degree to which naturalized assumptions about space, temporality, and ensuing notions of self prevailing in the narrated historical past remain unchallenged at the moment of the novels' creation, and, as time moves on, in their continuing reception. Through the exploration of this question, Johnson, Powers, and Silko move beyond black writing, the representation of black experience, or of Native experience, towards a critical inspection of the naturalized assumptions that pervade Western culture, across racial lines, today. As Bakhtin notes, the "surplus of un-fleshed-out humanness may be realized . . . in the author's point of view . . . . Reality as we have it is not inevitable, not arbitrary, it bears within itself other possibilities" (37). In the case of Johnson, Powers, and Silko, these other possibilities are constructed particularly by means of literary devices that incorporate into the novels an acute sense of materiality and textuality: the logbook, music, and the almanac, with their physical and sensuous characteristics, structure the novels into narratives that derive their significance from forms of connectedness that distinctly differ from linear concatenation and its implications.

CHAPTER TWO

Inversion, Subversion, and Transformation in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*

We are each other's business.
We are each other's magnitude and bond.

— Gwendolyn Brooks

Laud Deo

Journal of a Voyage intended

by God's permission

in the Republic, African

from New Orleans to the Windward

Coast of Africa

(Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage*)

Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990) opens with this inscription and thereby immediately marks itself as the report of a sea voyage. The dated "entries" that divide the novel into chapter-like units suggest that the text is in fact a logbook, and references to the log in the text itself confirm this initial impression. The genre suggests reliability and a high regard for accuracy; yet, through a number of narrative turns, Johnson casts doubt on precisely these two features of his fictional log. Inconsistencies between entry dates and reported dates of departures and arrivals soon make the reader wonder how well time is being kept in the novel. The first entry dates from June 14, 1830, whereas the ship takes to sea two months earlier, on April 14, 1830. Moreover, the departure date is relayed on the first page by the narrator and protagonist Rutherford Calhoun, who identifies himself as a "newly freed bondman" (1). Instead of the captain of the ship

Republic, who would be endowed by his office with the authority to write the ship's logbook, Calhoun narrates; and he does not begin his account with the departure of the ship, but with the story of how he ends up on the *Republic* as a stowaway and eventual assistant to the ship's cook. Calhoun alludes early to the calamities that will eventually put the log into his hands, when he refers to “the log in which I now write (but this months later after mutiny and death, the reporting of which I must put off for a while)” (27). Indeed, his report of these misadventures only occurs three-quarters of the way into the novel (146). Until then, questions of authority concerning the recording of the ship’s voyage remain unresolved. In the same vein, it is worth observing that a voyage of more than four months is covered by a “logbook” of only nine entries, the contents of which constantly exceed the parameters of the ship's voyage. Any remaining expectation of a faithful account of events is dispelled by Calhoun's initial self-description, which culminates in the light-hearted words “In plain English, I was a petty thief” (2), an assessment on which he elaborates by saying, “My master, Reverend Peleg Chandler, had noticed this stickiness of my fingers when I was a child, and a tendency I had to tell preposterous lies for the hell of it” (3). Through this testimony about his honorable former master—an abolitionist who manumitted him, his older brother Jackson, and all his other slaves before his death— Calhoun thoroughly destabilizes his own credibility.

The credibility of the log continues to be undermined on a number of occasions, one of which comes in the form of Captain Falcon's "rough log," which Calhoun refers to as “the one a ship’s master edited to produce a more polished book for his employers” (64). In his “rough log,” Captain Falcon lists the cargo that he takes on board after the ship has reached the West Coast of Africa. One entry, listed among goods and provisions, reads “40 slaves,” and their transportation into American slavery is the

primary mission of the ship (65). Since the entry in the "rough log" is for the time being the only record of these forty tribespeople, there is no official trace of their presence aboard the *Republic,* and one suspects that the captain will edit the entry in the official log to his advantage. The captain's peculiar attitude towards writing is demonstrated when, on one occasion, Calhoun knocks at his door, upon which, as he reports, "the Old Man stood before me naked except for his gunbelt and steel-toed boots" (94). Seeing the captain with "his bare, freckled shoulders hunched over whatever he was writing" makes Calhoun think that the captain "threw off his habiliments and wrote naked as the newborn for purely literary reasons" (94). The captain's habit reminds Calhoun of a poet in New Orleans who did the same because of "something to do with inspiration and freeing themselves up" (94). Neither an earlier description of the captain's cabin as having "the dank, ancient dampness of old ships, or a cave—that, and the clamlike, bacterial odor of tabooed pleasures" (27), nor the "gunbelt and steel-toed boots" he keeps on while writing, suggest that the captain will be inspired by some sense of primary truth. All of these circumstances mark the beginning of a series of narrative turns that continually undermine the ostensible reliability of the logbook as a chronicle of the ship's voyage. *Middle Passage*, it becomes clear, both is and is not a fictional logbook of a sea voyage, a generic ambiguity I examine below.

A second and related feature of the first few pages is the novel's strikingly humorous style, which is oddly conjoined with the somber subject matter of enslavement, suffering, and death. In *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* (1999), a volume that investigates literary representations of the Middle Passage in the last two hundred years, from Olaudah Equiano's autobiography *Equiano's Travels: The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African*

(1789) to contemporary fictions such as Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993), Johnson's novel figures as the only one that employs humor as a prominent stylistic element.

Critical responses to the novel have invariably acknowledged Johnson's formal choice of this seafarer's sub-genre, and his humorous style, yet have had a tendency to treat both as accessories to the novel, not as central to its process of "meaningmaking."[26] Consequently, no detailed analysis of Johnson's formal choices has been properly attempted, even though some commentary has appeared, as the review of critical responses below shows. The two main topics on which criticism has focused are the novel's philosophical import and its relation to Buddhist teachings; together with its humorous style, these features also permeate what Johnson sometimes calls his "platform novel" *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and, to varying degrees, his other fiction.[27] These three elements relate to Johnson's professional and private trajectory, as he holds a doctoral degree in philosophy, is an avowed Buddhist, and started his artistic career as a cartoonist. Johnson himself refers to his narrative work as black philosophical fiction—a term that is crucial to his writing project—and he has gained particular praise for the way in which he makes philosophical contemplation accessible to the uninitiated, as Gary Storhoff remarks:

> Philosophical discourse tends to be formidable, even forbidding, reaching conclusions as finished products and often offered with clenched minds. Yet Johnson's fiction is wonderfully accessible to lay readers interested in

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[26]For Linda Hutcheon's term, see p. 49 of this study.

[27]Johnson writes, "The reference is to the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, a foundational work of Buddhism. For me, *Oxherding Tale* was to be similarly foundational in that I hoped to lay the groundwork for my future fiction" ("*I Call Myself*" 24).

> philosophical reflection. They will find at the center of his rigorously intellectual work his celebration of the ordinary, prosaic, typical activities of life. But his work is not simply a salute to the way things already are, a simple acceptance of the status quo. Instead, his work stresses the need for transformation of ordinary experience. (2)

Through his extensive learning in Western and Eastern traditions of thought, Johnson is able to draw on a wide variety of philosophers and thinkers, but his Buddhist experience directs his attention to the small things in life, to the mundane, to the everyday. Storhoff observes, "Johnson's Buddhism has led him to reject a prevailing impulse to discover meaning in an abstract, concealed, metaphysical order," and he notes that there is no "reductive, one-to-one relationship between [Johnson's] text and the Buddhist 'sources.'" Johnson avoids dogmatism and reductionism and "(like many Buddhist writers) imbues his work with rich humor. Johnson's reader should always be prepared to laugh." His attention to everyday experience and its transformative power evokes the Buddhist term for "mindfulness (sati)" (6, 7). Storhoff's comments imply more attention to humor as a stylistic element than has been typical in Johnson criticism, including Storhoff's own. The major formal features of *Middle Passage*—logbook-like structure and humorous style—have so far stood in the shadow of thematic analysis, and have not been considered together as related. I will argue that attention to the joint functioning of these two formal features in relation to thematic elements unlocks meaning that otherwise remains unrevealed.

Consequently, this chapter provides a close reading of *Middle Passage* with emphasis on Johnson's strategic use of the logbook and humor. Among the formal features that Johnson simultaneously invokes and subverts are conventions about the

authority of voice, truth claims, and conceptions of time and space. On another level, the temporal gaps between the dates of logbook entries and narrated events allude to a hidden subtext, the story of what Calhoun experiences while he records earlier events. At all times, he remains within the diegesis of the story, in contrast to the many narrators in the American novel who recount events from a distant and detached position. Yet another level on which the logbook signifies consists in its physical presence, which can be traced throughout the novel, and which undermines its generic function through its metaphorical meaning. In all these instances, the novel opens a dialogue with preexisting conceptions that it subverts and transforms through the concrete situations lived by the characters who populate Johnson's novel. A closer look at the humorous style reveals that it relates closely to the naturalism that Johnson rejects in *Being and Race*, but which is still partly present in *Middle Passage*.[28] The novel avoids a consistently naturalistic style precisely by means of the humor that keeps any tragic aura from taking hold. The deterministic tendencies of naturalism are curbed by the endless possibilities of humorous perspectives. Humor is one of the most basic human resources that all cultures share; it thus accentuates the common element in the humanness of all souls on board.

This last point, the humanness of all characters regardless of race and ethnicity, and ultimately of all humans across different cultures and historical periods, is one of the major concerns that drives Johnson's writing project. One statement among the commentaries on his writing best summarizes the interest that my study takes in Johnson's practice: "His fictive goal is to create a dialogic interaction between those elements that have usually been thought of as exclusive to very diverse traditions" (Storhoff, *Understanding Charles Johnson* 14-5). His investment in writing black

[28]John Whalen-Bridge makes this point (see p. 115).

philosophical fiction—a term he uses to refer to his own work—relates directly to his goal of creating new and unusual dialogic interaction, as does his adherence to Buddhism. The formal elements of his novel and of his fiction in general are, however, equally crucial to these dialogues and, as I argue, enhance their dialogic range. In the following sections, I therefore first trace the significance of black philosophical fiction; second, I discuss critical responses, which focus largely on both philosophical and Buddhist elements in his work; and, finally, I provide a close reading of *Middle Passage* that establishes how Johnson's particular formal choices and treatment of subject matter contribute to the dialogic reach of his novel.

Johnson's Writing Project of Black Philosophical Fiction

Looking back to the beginning of the twentieth century, one finds an important voice emerging among African Americans. W. E. B Du Bois, who was the first to investigate the historical and sociological conditions of black Americans, captured the psychic condition under which they had been living, when he famously wrote in *The Soul of Black Folk*:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels this twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose

dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (4)[29]

It is also the condition under which African-American writers have created their literary works from the beginning of Black American literature. Du Bois's words are a touchstone in almost any attempt to define "black experience." The difficulty of defining the term lies in its narrowness on one end, and its potentially infinite meanings on the other. African Americans carry on their shoulders the baggage of ancestors who came to the Americas as captives in the holds of ships and lived during or after slavery; yet, the meaning of living the black experience is potentially infinite. The issue appears more complex as one considers the diverse origins—themselves difficult to specify—of those who were shipped across the Atlantic, a past of African-Americanness that has been all but effaced in Euro-American history. The problem for African-American writers has been how to navigate between these two poles without obliterating one or the other. In an interview with Nicholas O'Connell in 1987, Johnson remembers the time when he read black American literature and found himself "impressed by what [he] didn't find there" (22). What was lacking, according to Johnson, was "black fiction addressing some of the perennial problems of Western man, taking up questions of value, ethics, meaning, the good, the true, the beautiful, the self, epistemology—right on down the

[29]Du Bois's remark has been the subject of scholarly debate, partly because of its variable history of reception. Adolph L. Reed argues in *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* that "Du Bois's double-consciousness was embedded most significantly in the neo-Lamarckian thinking about race, evolution, and social hierarchy that prevailed in a strain of reform-oriented, fin-de-siècle American social science." He claims that, "in appropriating the notion, sundry intellectuals misread Du Bois ahistorically and instead project their own thinking onto him. . . . These appropriations have clustered, roughly chronologically, around three ideological programs: an integrationist-therapeutic motive from the 1920s to the mid-1960s, a nationalist-therapeutic one from the mid-1960s to the 1980s, and an academic race-celebratory one ever since" (92). Other commentary has revolved around the gendered character of Du Bois's remark, as in Barbara Johnson's "Metaphor, Metonymy, and Voice in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God,"* where she argues that Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson associated twoness with a male voice, whereas black women writers equally lived a two-voiced reality (214-15). The debates demonstrate that racial issues have constantly been complicated by contingent sociopolitical issues, a fact that Charles Johnson addresses when he comments on the ideological dimension of racial discourse.

line. There was none of that" (22).[30] His reading experience made him realize the need for black fiction that would go beyond the constraints of describing "black experience," albeit without ignoring it altogether. Johnson's response to this dual demand has been to develop an aesthetics of black philosophical fiction, which he defines as fiction that dramatizes the issues listed above "against the backdrop of black American life" (23).

The question arises: why is it important to address these issues in philosophical fiction that is specifically *black* fiction? To answer the question, it is useful to cast it somewhat differently: what is the result if one writes black fiction that is not philosophical fiction? Johnson elaborates, "If you're going to talk about the assault on black identity in a culture that is primarily white, primarily Christian, then you must talk about the higher question of identity in an intelligent way. You must take up the question and follow it through as methodically and systematically as you can" (22). The personal experience of racial discrimination, Johnson argues, leads to "murky" feelings, and the emotional response to bigotry is prone to induce reactions that are not better reflected than the insult to which they respond (23). He has dramatized this type of reaction in *Oxherding Tale* in the character George Hawkins, slave and butler of Jonathan Polkinghorne and father of the mulatto protagonist Andrew Hawkins. Andrew is conceived—in another of Johnson's hilarious narrative moves—during a night of mutual drinking by master Jonathan and his slave butler George, and as a consequence of the foolhardy idea of the two men switching slave cabin and master bedroom for the night, including the respective wives therein. The scheme, it should be added, is Jonathan

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[30] Johnson sees an emerging tradition of black philosophical fiction in the first two thirds of the twentieth century with Jean Toomer, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright, whom he sees drawing connections between philosophy and fiction in *Cane, Invisible Man,* and *Native Son* respectively. However, Johnson finds that these works constitute more an exception than the rule in African American fiction.

Polkinghorne's idea of a way to avoid having his wife Anna "brain" him with a "milkstool" for going "up to bed at this advanced hour, smelling of spirits" (4). The mix-up is discovered when, at least for Anna Polkinghorne, "harm" has already been done, and Andrew is the result of the infamous episode.

The practical joke is one of those incidents in which Johnson employs humor as a literary strategy to achieve a specific narrative arrangement, just as I argue he does in *Middle Passage* as well. As he recounts in an interview, he was almost ready to give up writing *Oxherding Tale* because, as he recalls, "'the main character, Andrew Hawkins, [wa]s boring to me. He [wa]s just like every other character in every other slave story I've ever read.' So then it hit me—what if he's *mulatto?* Suppose he is of the white world and the black world, on this dividing line where he would experience the stresses of the racial world in the greatest way?" (Blue 129). He achieves this goal by introducing the comic, if somewhat misogynist, mix-up scene at the beginning of the novel. George, needless to say, loses his privileges as a butler working in the Big House, due to Anna's intervention, and finds himself relegated to a "shepherd of oxen and sheep" (*Oxherding* 7). Growing bitter over time, George takes an attitude that Johnson describes as "trying to find some way to make himself feel good," which he does by "denying everything that the white world represents, and by elevating everything he feels the black world represents. "And even that's a joke," Johnson notes, "because [George] says, for example, it means 'emotion and not reason, passion and not thought'" (O'Connell 23). Johnson sums up George's reaction by saying "he becomes a cultural nationalist" (22). George is a fictional character unwittingly driven by the need to elevate himself in ways that in the end reinforce, rather than refute, white stereotypes according to which the black race is regarded as inferior to the white one, and his

attitude shows resemblances to the concept of Negritude, which Johnson criticizes in *Being and Race* for its inversion of the nature/culture dichotomy that structurally maintains the dualistic thought that justified white racial supremacy to begin with.[31]

Concepts of one race as superior to another, whether used to establish supremacy or to assert resistance to it have, according to Johnson, are utltimately ideological and therefore share a set of problems. He writes, "The many elements in the mix of any ideology (for example, the notion of communalism) are often unanalyzed or rest on appeals to faith or authority or one of the several logical fallacies, and the meanings of such crucial terms are seldom defined with precision" (*Being* 26). The notion of communalism is a fitting example, given the extent to which African Americans have been forced into membership of a collective composed of individuals originating from many different African cultures, and by virtue of sharing only one particular trait: that of being the ostracized racial other within American culture. Racial discrimination, even when has been acted out on individuals, has targeted the whole group, a reality that formerly necessitated a defense mechanism that has impeded individual expression. Johnson quotes Ralph Ellison, who expounds on the subject in "Richard Wright's Blues" (1945), "The pre-individualistic black discourages individuality out of self-defense. Having learned through experience that the whole group is punished for the actions of the single member, it has worked out efficient techniques for behavior control" (qtd. in *Being* 29). One form of this behavior control is shown in *Middle Passage*, when Rutherford Calhoun recognizes in the patronizing tone of his wife-to-be echoes of earlier admonitions from the elders in the community: "Ah, there it was, revealed at last, the one thing inside Isadora that made me shudder. It was what you heard all your blessed

[31] See also p. 44 of this study.

life from black elders and church women in flowered gowns: Don't be common. Comb your hair. Be a credit to the Race" (9). One feature of this group attitude is, however, was its reverberation into black literary art as a reaction against racial prejudice. Gates has identified part of this problem as the Enlightenment standard set by such figures as Hume and Jefferson, who viewed writing as "a principal sign of reason" (*Figures* 25).[32] The existence of a writing tradition in white culture, and its absence in black culture, have been perceived as an indication of white supremacy over the black race. Gates comments:

> [so] insistent did these racist allegations prove to be, at least from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, that it is fair to describe the subtext of the history of black letters as this urge to refute the claim that because blacks had no written traditions they were bearers of an inferior culture . . . . Few literary traditions have begun or been sustained by such a complex and ironic relation to their criticism: allegations of an absence led directly to a presence, a literature often inextricably bound in dialogue with its potentially harshest critics. (25-26)

Caught up in the imposed group dynamics of African-Americanness, black American writers have had infinitely more difficulties in finding their own individual aesthetic styles, and allowing themselves to write about any subject matter of interest to them, than American writers of European descent. If they succeeded in breaking free from those constraints, they have nevertheless been pigeonholed by their critics as addressing mainly issues of race, a fact that is evident in scholarly criticism on Johnson's work, as the literature review below demonstrates. Significantly, the editors of *Black Imagination*

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[32]Reference from Rudoph P. Bird, *Charles Johnson's Novels: Writing the American Palimpsest* 195.

and the Middle Passage (Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, and Carl Petersen) refer to the issue of communalism in relation to the "heterogeneity" of contributors to the volume: "We brought together people of very different backgrounds, whose motives for entering the field, whose approaches to and expectations of the discipline, differ dramatically. What we intended in assembling these individuals, interests, and readings was not a sentimental celebration of a 'we' that could only parody community." The pronoun "we," especially when considered with its logical other, "them," is easily applied, yet much harder to define, and the three editors of the volume refuse to import into their delineation of subject matter and discipline the narrow confines of racialist exclusiveness. They add, "We cannot settle for the pretenses of connections, or for the parodies of self-love" (12).[33] Their remarks speak to the myth of homogeneity evoked earlier—the view of Africa as a homogeneous entity, and of African Americans as one tightly connected community. These assumptions are forced and lack reality but their inadequacy points to the question of what precisely one is to hold up against the racism that has in fact constructed such homogeneous views.

Phenomenology and other Philosophical Thought

For Johnson, incorporating philosophical thought into his fiction has been one way of avoiding the influx into his work of unanalyzed assumptions that might keep the

[33]In the context of this citation, the three editors make links between the international aspect of the historical Middle Passage and the diversity that characterizes African American studies: "'Transatlantic Passages,' the title of our conference, pointed to the processual, continuous, international aspect of the experience, which again is mirrored by the international and interdisciplinary quality of the discipline we call African American studies. We editors paid tribute to this challenging heterogeneity and polyphony of the field by inviting scholars from the Old Worlds and the New, junior scholars and experienced colleagues, to join a process of intellectual quest and exchange that was bound to ask and face many questions, that will no doubt suggest a number of interpretations and perhaps even answers, and that we hope will stimulate new ventures of research and investigation, as well as new forms of international and interdisciplinary cooperation" (12). These remarks accept the processual character of African American studies as a discipline that includes new impulses instead of protectively drawing exclusive boundaries.

imagination from exploring its full potential, or inadvertently reinforce racial essentialism, or both. He explains:

> Because all conception—philosophy—is grounded in perception, there is no reason, in principle, that we cannot work through the particulars of Black life from *within* and discover there not only phenomena worthy of philosophical treatment in fiction, but also—and here I will make my wildest claim today—significant new perceptions. Universals are not static, but changing, historical, *evolving* and enriched by particularization; the lived Black world has always promised a fresh slant on structures and themes centuries old. ("*I Call Myself*" 81)

The complexities of experience demand its interrogation into human experience, albeit only if narrow perceptions of racial difference can be put aside, a gesture that Johnson has cultivated in his writing by adopting a phenomenological approach. An important reference point has been Husserl's "Transcendental Phenomenology," which, Johnson notes, "was judged too idealistic by some of his followers, who took, as I have, what they found useful from the master and went their own way" (*Being* viii). One of the notions that Johnson retains from Husserl is the *epoché*, which means in "Phenomenology, the setting aside of all historical and natural assumptions and factual knowledge in order to be able to apprehend more readily the phenomena and the subject's consciousness of them" ("Epoché"). Johnson admits he doubts that he is able to "disclose the atemporal essences of things, as Husserl hoped," but emphasizes that Husserl's method of "bracketing and descriptively reporting what is given in any encounter with mathematical, fantastical, physical, or fictional objects is useful for a first-person determination of what is before us, and for revealing what we, as culturally

conditioned subjects, have brought to each and every encounter with the world" (*Being* ix). Foucault is one of those thinkers who have expressed the kind of reservations about phenomenology to which Johnson alludes. In an interview on the history of ideas and critical theory, Foucault asks the question, "Is the phenomenological, transhistorical subject able to provide an account of the historicity of reason? . . . There is a history of the subject as there is a history of reason; but we can never demand that the history of reason unfold at a first and founding act of the rationalist subject" (*Politics* 23). It should be added that Foucault does not simply dismiss phenomenology in his remarks, but gives an overview of the reasons why, in the history of ideas, phenomenology fell out of favor and was succeeded by existentialism and structuralism. Whereas it almost appears as if Foucault and Johnson voice opposing opinions, what is at stake is a far richer difference in approach. The two argue on different levels; Foucault addresses the level of potency of phenomenology to account for reason; and he claims that such an account cannot be based on a subject from which cultural conditioning is removed to uncover the essentials of subjectivity. For Foucault, phenomenology does not give access to metaphysics. Johnson, however, argues on the level of everyday experience, under the assumption that all actions of subjects *are* actually informed by the concrete cultural conditioning to which they are exposed. The mere insight that this is so does not lead to less biased perceptions in specific everyday situations; only when culturally determined assumptions are suspended can the path to new perceptions be cleared. Foucault's and Johnson's comments together delineate a field of application for phenomenology that allows to view it as one of the tools out of the box of philosophy, rather than as an explanatory model for all phenomena. Johnson recognizes that the promise of "atemporal essences" revealed through bracketing is problematic, yet he still deems it

worth trying to separate that which belongs to our specific culturally-conditioned subjectivity from our direct perception of what is before us, even if such an endeavor can never completely succeed.

The danger that Foucault undoubtedly sees is that of inadvertently retaining some culturally conditioned habits of perception without accounting for them, and to falsely take the resulting perception as liberated from any such interfering factors. Tabbi argues, however, that a totally self-aware and culturally detached perspective is not only impossible to attain, but also undesirable. He observes, "Like the literal blind spot that every sighted person has where the retinal cords attach to the brainstem, the constitutive blindness of autopoietic theory, in recent formulations, in fact guarantees our connection to the real and the necessity of the social" (xxiii). In his view, the total elimination of cultural links means total detachment. On the other hand, to avoid one-sidedness and assure a multifaceted connection to the real, he claims, "we need not one, but many observers, each with his or her own moving blind spot, and each with his or her particular embodiment" (xxiii). It seems that the acknowledged danger implied in Foucault's comment about cultural influences that resist bracketing in affecting perceptions is in Tabbi's view not only blind spots, but also an inevitable connection to reality. What all of this says about phenomenology is simple: that it has its potential to illuminate human experience, yet does not preclude error. For Johnson, who "distrusts all explanatory models, whether they are sociological, political, or economic," phenomenology is "a *method*, not a metaphysics," an echo of Heidegger (Nash, "Conversation" 223). It must be added that it is one method among others. If one cannot eliminate culture from perception, one can at least temper one's perception of culture, and alleviate one-sidedness by admitting multiple perspectives.

Johnson includes such multiple perspectives in his work by drawing on different thinkers and traditions of thought. Heidegger's writing on being, Merleau-Ponty's notion of the lifeworld, and Whitehead's philosophy of organism are all among his reference points, as are the Asian traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism. Rather than incorporating philosophers' statements into his fiction, however, Johnson forges a creative interplay between philosophical thought and the "tools" of literary art. He elaborates on his creative process as follows:

> I count on the creation to lead my thoughts and feelings to places they've never been. I expect to be surprised . . . . See the work of art as being like a laboratory. You enter into it, not with an answer, but instead a hypothesis you want to test. Instead of having test tubes and Bunsen burners, you have other tools—characters, plot, language's possibilities, the forms we inherit from the past—and you use those tools to test your hypothesis. By the end of the process, your initial hypothesis may be confirmed, denied, or significantly modified. Whatever the case, you will have *learned* something about the phenomenon you were investigating and about yourself. I think art must be seen this way—as a truth-seeking process. One that requires an open mind, and open heart, and the courage to face wherever the process of discovery will take you. (224)

This rather long statement reflects best Johnson's artistic project as an open inquiry into the capacity of literary art and philosophy to illuminate the human condition. Tabbi depicts criticism that comes to a work with questions rather than answers as a similarly open-ended process of inquiry:

> But to observe what another writer has been able to hold in thought

> is to begin to know one's own mind and to locate oneself within the field of operations, quotations, blind spots, and occasional correlated perceptions that can be said to produce a living tradition. Such critical activity is experimental and unabashedly formalist; it is mainly concerned with problems of narrative self-reflection and focalization, although, within the cognitive framework, these become not an escape from the world, but a way into it, and not a denial for realism in literature and philosophy, but its reconceptualization. (xxvi)

These two arguments conceive of literary practice and critical practice as a process of inquiry into issues pertaining to the human condition, and into how one's own self relates to those issues. The aim is not to reach a particular destination, but to participate in the process of inquiry. Tabbi's insistence on the blind spot that is necessarily involved in autopoiesis also indicates one weakness in Johnson's argument: his strongly-expressed belief in the capability of literary texts to resist inconsistencies, false paths, and limited views in the process of their creation. For a writer who comes to the task with the open-mindedness Tabbi invokes, many insights will flow from such a creative process, but a residually biased perspective will remain. The question is: what kind of blind spot can be found in Johnson's works? It has to do with issues of gender and sexuality, to which I return below.

The wide variety of intellectual traditions on which Johnson draws reflects his conviction "that all knowledge, all disclosure, all revelation from the past, from our predecessors, black, white, and otherwise, is our inheritance, and most of the time we just don't know it. . . . Any sense that other human beings have made out of the world . . . is what we have inherited as human beings" (Little, "Interview" 230). If all knowledge,

disclosure, and revelation from the past are perceived as directions to think further through what has been investigated previously, allegiances according to race make little, if any, sense. Indeed, as Foucault's examination of race discourse demonstrates, race itself is a concept that emerged and evolved historically as one of the many erring paths of human thought. More than once, Johnson has made the following astute comment, which elucidates his view of genetic and cultural contingencies:

> Anyone knowledgeable about genetics, such as Guy Murchie, can show you that if you go back fifty generations in the life of any person, he or she shares a common ancestor with every other person on this planet. None of us can be less closely related than fiftieth cousins. 'Race' dissolves when we trace the gene back to A.D. 700. Our lives, as blacks and whites, we come to realize, are a tissue of cross-cultural influences. One can say as much about this book, written by a black American (as Murchie might point out) on paper invented by the Chinese and printed with ink evolved out of India and from type developed by Germans using Roman symbols modified from the Greeks, who got their letter concepts from the Phoenicians, who had adapted them partly from Egyptian hieroglyphs. (*Being* 43-44)

Johnson relates his view of the contingencies of "actors and science and history" to the "transcendence of relativism" outlined by Merleau-Ponty: to probe deeply into a "relative perspective, black or white, male or female" will lead to the realization that all of these are in the end "innumerable perspectives on *one* world; . . . the same cultural Lifeworld—a world layered with ancestors, predecessors, and contemporaries" (44).[34]

[34]Merleau-Ponty is of interest to Johnson not only as a phenomenologist, but also as an exemplar of

To write black philosophical fiction, then, is not intended to reinforce racial essentialism, but to follow particular relative perspectives through until the "transcendence of relativism" is reached. "At the heart," Johnson writes, "there will be a philosophical question applicable to all people. But as it takes on the particular form of black American life, we understand something new about it because the universal has to be realized or embodied in the particular" (23). Thus, black philosophical fiction does not segregate black experience from other experience, but draws from the particulars of black American life to engage with philosophical questions that apply to life at large.

Racism and Western Philosophy

One important effect of Johnson's artistic project of writing black philosophical fiction has been, as Byrd notes, "an implicit critique of the tradition of racial reasoning that has stained the discipline of philosophy" (193). The Enlightenment affords crucial examples of such philosophical inconsistency. Generally, the Enlightenment is "characterized by tolerance, belief in social progress through the rational organization of the state, a marked optimism based upon the discoveries and applications of science, and a belief in the goodness of humankind based upon the rejection of the doctrine of original sin" (193). Yet, paradoxically, "the tolerance and faith in the human person celebrated in Europe by philosophers," whom Byrd calls the "modern counterpart of

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a "tradition of philosophers poking fun at themselves [that] goes back to Plato's dialogues." He quotes Merleau-Ponty's inaugural lecture, "In Praise of Philosophy," delivered at the Collège de France on January 15, 1953. Merleau-Ponty said: "It is useless to deny that philosophy limps. . . . [The philosopher] does not take sides like others, and in his assent something massive and carnal is lacking. He is not altogether a real being. . . . One must be able to withdraw and gain distance in order to become truly engaged, which is, also, always an engagement in the truth. . . . The limping of philosophy is its virtue . . . and the very detachment of the philosopher assigns to him a certain kind of action among men" (Nash, "A Conversation with Charles Johnson" 222). Merleau-Ponty's point, although not its humorous style, reminds us of Adorno's "detached observer" who is "as much entangled as the active participant," but whose "only advantage . . . is insight in his own entanglement, and the infinitesimal freedom that lies in knowledge as such" ("Antithesis," *Minima Moralia* 26).

what we now call the public intellectual who is committed to a free, open, and national dialogue involving all parts of the polity[,] did not extend to the person of African descent" (194). Byrd brings to mind Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of European Enlightenment, which they aspired to "release […] from entanglement in blind domination;" in their critique they argued that "myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology" (*Dialectic* xvi). Once man perceives himself as opposed to nature, not as part of it, the means of self-preservation turn into ends in themselves, not serving man, but dominating him (56). This reversal is most dangerously realized with the rise of capitalism, and biological racism is one of its far-reaching excesses, brought about by dynamics of domination undergirded by instrumental reason.

In 1986, the dark stain soiling the discipline of philosophy was for a moment put into the limelight when Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. In his acceptance speech, he pointed out that "the list of European philosophers who devalued systematically the humanity of Africans is 'endless'" (Byrd 194). As the first black African writer to receive the reward, he held up to his audience the uncomfortable truth that many of the thinkers frequently regarded as the bearers of Western intellectual heritage were at least complicit in and sometimes crucial to establishing the white supremacist attitudes that endorsed the cruelties of slavery and repression of the black race. David Hume's reflections on race provide just one example of such irrational prejudice:

> I am apt to suspect the Negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent in either action or

> speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no artists, no sciences. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are Negro slaves dispersed all over Europe, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; tho' low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In Jamaica indeed they talk of one Negro as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishment, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly. (qtd. in Byrd, *Palimpsest* 194)[35]

The embarrassing level of unreflective racism displayed in Hume's words—down to the trope of animalization—does not keep Johnson from acknowledging the importance of other parts of Hume's work. He comments, "One could condemn Hume for his racial stupidities, but we simply have to listen to his discussion of the self in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, because there he does not err" (Whalen-Bridge, "Shoulder" 310).[36] To recognize race as a concept that emerged historically, and not to mistake it for an essential category, open the path to treating all of the philosophical tradition, including its missteps, as relevant for learning about how humans have made sense of their world through the ages, and how our own time might still bear in mind the consequences of false turns taken.

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[35]For a detailed discussion of racism in European philosophy, see Robert Bernasconi and Sybol Cook's *Race and Racism in Continental Philosophy*, which criticizes recent scholarship on race theory for neglecting "the relation of race to culture, to history, and to one's sense of self" (1), and Andrew Valls's *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, which traces the relation between modern philosophy and racism.

[36]In a similar vein, Johnson remarks about Heidegger's initial involvement with Nazism that, although unfortunate, it does not cancel out the relevance of *Being and Time* and other texts (310).

In his fiction, Johnson does not so much refer explicitly to both Western and Eastern philosophy, but comments implicitly on these philosophical traditions through his narratives. The idea is not to agree with, reiterate, or refute explicitly what others have said before, but to expose issues to fictional treatment, and to see how this indirect commentary either confirms or challenges what has been said and thought before. In *Middle Passage*, dualistic thinking is not refuted by means of an argument put into the mouth of the novel's characters, but through the complex human relations that unfold in the novel as a whole. Johnson's is a narrative strategy that shows rather than tells where dualistic thought as a conceptual framework meets its limits in the complexity of lived experience.

In Johnson's short story "The Queen and the Philosopher," however, he expresses explicitly his critique of dualistic thinking in a fictional account of Descartes's stay at the Swedish court shortly before his death. Johnson imagines Descartes in Stockholm, answering as best he can the shrewd questions of the twenty-two-year old ambitious and strong-minded Queen Christina. She has summoned him to help create "an academy of sciences that would rival anything in Paris" (90). In one of their tutorials, she attacks Descartes's most celebrated philosophical ideas: "If you stop doubting everything when you reach your own thoughts of doubt, *you* can't just say, 'I think, therefore I am,' because all you can be truly *certain* of at that moment is that thought is going on. You've assumed and added a self, an *I*, that is not *given*—only presupposed—in that experience" (96). Descartes, used to rising late, but being forced to hold early morning tutorials with the Queen, "looked sacked and empty" (96). As relayed by his valet, who narrates the story, the next tutorial, at which Descartes is to answer to the Queen's reservations, is cancelled, due to the pneumonia that afflicts Descartes and makes him take whatever

reply he had in mind into his grave (96). Earlier, the valet recounts the astounding achievements of his master:

> His *cogito ergo sum*—"I think, therefore I am"—became the most oft-quoted sentence in (and the foundation of) Western philosophy in our time, and from this single brick of rationalism he rebuilt a mechanistic world, dividing it into mind substances (*res cogitans*) and physical substances (*res extentas*), with a benevolent God standing above it all, ensuring that the innate ideas he had implanted within us were true. (88-89)

The left-handed compliment put into the mouth of his narrator—as with the whole story—has nothing overtly to do with black experience. Yet the rationalism it describes, and applauds with backhanded admiration implying its thin foundation, became, once it had turned into the bedrock of Western philosophy, conducive to racism and slavery. Johnson's story ends with a musing valet/narrator who cannot decide "if the queen was a brief footnote in Meister Descartes' history, or if he, poor soul, was simply a footnote in hers" (97). One cannot help inferring a sense of Schadenfreude from the way Johnson's words imagine a Descartes so easily outmaneuvered by a queen barely past twenty. The humor with which he treats his subject matter is Bakhtinian in its demystifying disrespect for an honorable figure belonging in the history of Western thought.

Johnson's humor, his philosophical inquiry, and his Buddhist practice have prevented him from resorting to racist essentialism in reaction to the prevalent racial discrimination he has had to face in his career, and from which he could not shield his own children in the American social context from the 1970s onwards. As he writes in the Foreword to *Passing the Three Gates*, both of his children "encountered the same

atavistic instances of white bigotry" that he remembers from two decades earlier. Many members of the boomer generation, to which Johnson belongs, hoped that the racism of earlier decades "would be consigned to the trash heap of human evolution" by the 1970s. Yet, as Johnson came to witness, "it was precisely the boomers and their children that practiced . . . 'liberal racism' and the glorification of all things produced by those of northern European descent" (XIV). Johnson's defense against racial essentialism has been his artistic and Buddhist practice, which I discuss in the next section from the perspective of critical responses to *Middle Passage*.

Critical Responses

Scholarly work on *Middle Passage* has focused mainly on the traditions—Asian Buddhism and to a lesser degree Hinduism, Taoism, and Western philosophy—that inform the reflections in the novel. Formal elements, however, have been less subject to scholarly investigation, as is demonstrated below. Scholars have also focused on the novel's references to earlier literary texts, such as seafarer tales and slave narratives. Johnson himself has cited the Sinbad stories, Apollonius of Rhodes's *Argonautica*, Homer's *Odyssey*, Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African,* Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*, and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* among the literary texts that inspired *Middle Passage* (Lyke 46). All of these references are crucial elements in Johnson's fiction, and deeply complex ones. The now extensive body of criticism therefore provides valuable insights into the intricate web of intertextuality that Johnson weaves in *Middle Passage*, as well as in his other novels. The approach that I take in my reading of the novel does not exclude these issues from consideration, of course, but rather focuses on what can be

gleaned from Johnson's artistic treatment of them. My discussion therefore relies on but differs from previous approaches to his novel(s) that have been mainly focused on content while saying little about form.

Critics agree that inversion—of the Middle Passage, as former bondman Rutherford Calhoun embarks on a slaver headed for the African West Coast—and transformation—of Rutherford's and other characters' views and attitudes toward the world—are crucial to the trajectory that the novel charts, and registered in Rutherford's gradually changing writing style. Transformation is embedded in a number of dramatic events aboard the *Republic*, starting for Calhoun with the slaves being brought on board, branded, whipped, and horrified at the sight of the ship's hold. Exposure to their culture brings him into contact with one version of the African past that slavery had suppressed. After the slave mutiny, the death of many crew and slaves, and the captain's suicide, the survivors are adrift on a storm-beaten ship following no course and virtually without provisions. They endure hardships such as disease and forced cannibalism, worsened by the division about the proper course of action among the Allmuseri tribespeople, whose success in taking control of the ship has inverted power relations of master and slaves. Conflicts among the Allmuseri culminate in their own Diamelo's attempt to fire a cannon at an approaching ship in the hopes of somehow capturing it and sailing back to Africa. The defective cannon backfires, killing most of the souls on board and damaging the *Republic* beyond repair. As the ship sinks, the approaching *Juno* comes to the rescue of only five survivors: Calhoun, the cook Squib, and three Allmuseri children, among them the girl Baleka. Notably, she makes a short appearance in Johnson's most recent novel *Dreamer* as the great-grandmother of the protagonist Chaym Smith. Calhoun comes away from his experience void of his former self-indulgence, and with a sense of

his own self as connected to the larger life processes around him. He recovers on the *Juno* and acquiesces to a prospective marriage and family life with Isadora, whom he left behind at the beginning of the story, and the adopted Allmuseri girl Baleka.

If critics agree that inversion and transformation are crucial to the novel, they approach their analyses from different perspectives. The most comprehensive review of Johnson criticism is John Whalen-Bridge's review essay "Whole Sight in Review: Reflections on Charles Johnson." Primarily a review of Gary Storhoff's *Understanding Charles Johnson* (2004) and Rudolph P. Byrd's *Charles Johnson's Novels: Writing the American Palimpsest* (2005), Whalen-Bridge's article also gives a detailed overview of previous Johnson criticism and discusses the major arguments that have been advanced over the last twenty-five years. Prior to Storhoff's and Byrd's recent books, two single-author studies had been published, Jonathan Little's *Charles Johnson's Spiritual Imagination* (1997), and William R. Nash's *Charles Johnson's Fiction* (2002). These monographs, together with a now large number of critical essays, have mapped the complex themes that are directly addressed or implicitly referenced in both Johnson's fiction and non-fiction. I focus on the criticism that concerns *Middle Passage*, but include those major arguments that are relevant both to that seafarer novel and his work in general.

Whalen-Bridge's summary of the main claims in Johnson criticism over the last twenty-five years serves as an initial orientation, namely:

> that Johnson is an integrative artist in the school of Ellison; that social, psychological, aesthetic, and political integration resonate with and reinforce one another [sic] in his work, in spite of Johnson's discomfort with being picked up by the 'political' handle; that his parodic

> 'signifying' (Gates is cited in a high percentage of the articles and chapters) and comic world view artistically shake up the perception of readers for the sake of 'liberation,' a liberation that is often compared to the Buddhist regulative ideal of enlightenment; and that Johnson's embodied selfhood as a black, male writer exists in a fine creative tension with his refusal to take refuge in any pigeon-hole. (245)

Among all of these issues, Johnson's fictional treatment of Buddhist notions deserves particular attention for two reasons. First, Buddhism has been an important touchstone for Johnson for much longer than he had acknowledged initially. Second, to the extent that many readers lack intimate knowledge of Buddhism, scholars inevitably face the challenge of "finding the right level of detail" in glossing the rather complex Buddhist notions informing Johnson's work (252). Storhoff dedicates large parts of his book to tracing Johnson's references to Buddhist notions, which he detects as early as Johnson's first published novel, *Faith and the Good Thing* (1974). An avowed Buddhist only since the beginning of the 1980s, Johnson has since confirmed that he had become intensely interested in Buddhism in 1972 while writing *Faith and the Good Thing*, without then publicly admitting to it. Johnson recalls:

> in American academic (and black American) circles to confess to being Buddhist in the early '70s was to endanger oneself (or so I believed) if one was on a career track. It was shrewder to feign no spiritual affiliations or beliefs whatsoever and just listen quietly to others in order to 'get along'—or until I got free of possible retribution: namely: after tenure. (Whalen-Bridge, "Whole Sight" 251)

The fact that Johnson distinguishes between "American academic" and "black

American" circles is a vivid example of the self-consciousness and self-monitoring that were a typical part of the reality of a young black writer in the 1970s. His statement also confirms Storhoff's reading of Johnson's first novel as already under the influence of Buddhism, even if until recently scholars accepted Johnson's official coming out as a Buddhist at the beginning of the 1980s as the approximate beginning of that affiliation.

If Buddhism was not highly esteemed in the 1970s in established academic circles—a condition that has apparently eased since—a continuing problem that both Johnson and his critics face today is that "Buddhist philosophy and religious practices are still unfamiliar to many American readers" (252). Not surprisingly, Whalen-Bridge discerns in Storhoff's book-length study the problem of negotiating between too much and too little detail in outlining basic Buddhist ideas. Whalen-Bridge remarks, "When Storhoff writes that 'Johnson dramatizes the Buddhist theory of human cognition,' the next step should be to say *which* Buddhist theory of human cognition: 'Buddhism' does not designate a monolithic system of thought" (252). While Whalen-Bridges's point is well taken, Storhoff accomplishes more in the sense of making Buddhist thought—as it is relevant to Johnson's work— accessible to uninitiated readers than Whalen-Bridge's article allows. Furthermore, his assessment is in tune with the fact that Johnson does not present himself as advocating one particular tradition. In the preface to *Turning the Wheel*, Johnson writes, "Officially, I'm registered as a member of Daigo-ji Temple, Rinzai sect, in Osaka; but the truth is that I've always been shamelessly non-sectarian" (xviii). Comments that he makes in an interview with John Whalen-Bridge make his preferences among Buddhist traditions more explicit. He explains, "I tend to be more

Theravada[37] than Zen, but the Dharma[38] is the Dharma, so it's about time . . . that I go down on some roster with a specific affiliation, Rinzai Zen in this case" (309). Johnson elaborates:

> I love the bodhisattva[39] ideal. But, damn, I don't want reincarnation, if there's any truth to that. I want off the Wheel after this go-round. Truth to tell, I'd love to 'save all sentient beings,' . . . but I wistfully envy the arhat[40] who finishes his work in the classroom called life and graduates.

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[37]"Theravada Buddhism: Theravada, meaning 'teaching of the elders,' is a term often used synonymously with Hinayana for the early form of Buddhism that accepts only the teachings of Sakyamuni Buddha and stresses the ideal of the arhat—personal salvation through the Buddha—as opposed to the Mahayana ideal of the bodhisattva, who chooses to remain in this world to help others to salvation. Technically, however, Theravada, the form of Buddhism practiced primarily in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, is only one branch of Hinayana—albeit, practically speaking, the only extant branch. The early Hinayanas, or adherents of the ancient Pali Canon, split into two major factions, in one of which the Theravada group was dominant. Given the strict adherence to the teachings of the Buddha, mythology beyond that of the life of the Buddha does not play a major part in Theravada. In Southeast Asia, however, there is a tendency to absorb indigenous earth spirit and ancestor elements as well as a cosmology" ("Theravada Buddhism").

[38]"Dharma (Skt., *dhar,* 'hold', 'uphold'): 1. In Hinduism, dharma is a fundamental concept, referring to the order and custom which make life and a universe possible, and thus to the behaviours appropriate to the maintenance of that order. Initially, dharma applied more to ritual and religious rules (especially sacrifices) than to ethics (e.g. Rg Veda 3. 17. 1), but by the time of the Brahmanas, the term includes also the rules which govern (and enable) society. These were gathered in the Dharmasutras and Dharmasastras, of which the most important are the law-codes of Manu and Yajñavalkya. In the Upanisads, dharma is related more to the ways appropriate for the attainment of Brahman, than to ethics. 2. In Buddhism (Pali, dhamma), the Hindu sense of cosmic law and order is retained, especially as it works out in karma and reappearance according to the law of karma. But it was rapidly applied also to the teaching of the Buddha (pariyatti) who is himself a manifestation of the truth that is dharma. Dharma is then understood as the practice (patipatti) of that truth, and as its realization in stages (pativedha) up to nirvana, of which in this way dharma becomes a synonym" ("Dharma").

[39]"Bodhisattva (bodhista): In Theravada Buddhism, an individual who is about to reach Nirvana. In Mahayana Buddhism, the term is used to denote an individual on the verge of enlightenment who delays his salvation in order to help mankind" ("Bodhisattva").

[40]"Arhat (Skt., worthy one; Pali, *arahant*): One who has attained the goal of enlightenment or awakening . . . . The Arhat is also free of the ten fetters . . . , and on death is not reborn. The difference between an Arhat and a Buddha is that the Buddha attains enlightenment by himself, whereas the Arhat does it by following the teachings of another. It should be noted, however, that the Buddha is also an Arhat and is frequently addressed as such in invocations such as the Pali formula 'Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhassa' (Homage to the Lord, the Worthy One, the Perfectly Awakened One). As taught in early Buddhism, the Arhat attains exactly the same goal as the Buddha. Mahayana Buddhism, however, comes to regard Arhatship as an inferior ideal to that of Buddhahood, and portrays the Arhat (somewhat unfairly) as selfishly concerned with the goal of a 'private nirvana'. In contrast, emphasis is placed on the great compassion (mahakaruna) of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who dedicate themselves

> I'm all for the Mahayana,[41] . . . but the emphasis on the bodhissatva seems to mute the original 'goal' of achieving liberation (oneself) and eliminating suffering caused by thirst and selfish desire. There is a tricky balance to maintain here—realizing egoless peace in one's own life and working to 'save all sentient beings.' (310)

Martin Luther King could never reconcile these two aims: after visiting India in 1959, he had resolved to meditate and fast once a week, a schedule that he was never able to maintain due to his concern for others in his role as a Civil Rights leader (311). The different Buddhist traditions are relevant to Johnson as far as his own attempts to balance his spiritual practice and other activities in life are concerned, but in his writing he seeks to bring a generalized Buddhist worldview to the attention of his readers rather than attending to the fine points of difference between various traditions.

More pertinent to this study is Whalen-Bridge's observation that certain questions arise from the fact that Storhoff bases a Buddhist reading on the same material Byrd uses for a Western philosophical one. Whalen-Bridge puts these questions as follows: "What are the artistic and philosophical consequences of this mixing? How does Johnson's Buddhism challenge Phenomenology, and vice versa?" He suggests, "More attention can be paid to ideological, aesthetic, and spiritual hybridity in Johnson's work" ("Whole Sight" 261). His comment is relevant to this study for recognizing the potential of analyzing aesthetic choices— among others—to illuminate further the intricate processes of "meaningmaking" in Johnson's work. To be sure, such analysis

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to leading all beings to salvation" ("Arhat").

41 "Mahayana (Sanskrit, 'Greater vehicle'): One of the two main schools of Buddhism, the other being the Theravada or Hinayana. Mahayana Buddhism was dominant in India from the 1st to the 12th century and is now prevalent in Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan. Unlike the Hinayana (smaller vehicle) school, it conceives of Buddha as divine, the embodiment of the absolute and eternal truth" ("Mahayana").

relies on work that Storhoff, Byrd, and others have done in their thematically-oriented criticism.

In accordance with Johnson's approach to Buddhist teachings, Storhoff traces the larger connections between crucial notions in Johnson's writing and their articulation in the writings of others. The following detailed review of his commentary on Buddhism in Johnson's work serves both to recognize Storhoff's contribution, and to illuminate the Buddhist dimension in Johnson's work. For this second purpose, I refer to Johnson's volume of essays on Buddhism, *Turning the Wheel* (2003). One crucial notion for understanding of Johnson's work is interrelatedness, and Storhoff points out similarities to the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings, "the Vietnamese [Zen] Buddhist nominated by Martin Luther King Jr. for the Nobel Peace Prize [in 1967]," especially to his term "interbeing," and to Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy of organism (9); Johnson himself refers to both in *Turning the Wheel* (8-11). Storhoff observes, "Johnson's philosophical vision is similar to that of Thich Nhat Hanh . . . . Like Johnson, Nhat Hanh is committed to bringing people together by promoting interreligious dialogue" (9). Nhat Hanh, like Johnson, refrains from dogmatism in favor of a holistic view that allows for the possibility of different paths to enlightenment. He expounds the meaning of "interbeing" by using the example of a flower. Composed of elements that "in no way resemble the flower itself," a flower is not the "stable and ordinary object" for which we take it, but "a manifestation of invisible or microscopic natural processes, a miraculous mutuality of diverse elements. What 'seems to be' a flower is, in fact, 'made entirely of non-flower elements; it has no independent, individual existence'" (9). For Nhat Hanh, we are "'like the flower, like the natural world.' It 'inter-is' with everything else in the universe" (9). This far-reaching sense of interbeing extends also to

humans, not only in their physical makeup but also in their spiritual interconnectedness. Nhat Hanh explains the all-encompassing notion of interbeing by drawing parallels between biodiversity and the existence of separate religions; he believes that separate religions, like the organic world, share crucial elements:

> It is good that an orange is an orange and a mango is a mango. The colors, smells and the tastes are different, but looking deeply, we see that they are both authentic fruits. Looking more deeply, we can see the sunshine, the rain, the minerals, and the earth in both of them. Only their manifestations are different. . . . Buddhism is made of non-Buddhist elements, Buddhism has no separate self. When you are a truly happy Christian, you are also a Buddhist. And vice versa. (qtd. in Storhoff 9-10)

As the elements of which all matter is made pass through the different manifestations of life—including flora, fauna, and the human species—their voyage traces the connectedness of all things. Storhoff observes that for Nhat Hanh, religious notions only enlighten if they "progress beyond an unquestioning acceptance of religion's often dogmatic truths and subjective sense of personal identity. [Nhat] writes, 'When you are able to get out of the shell of your small self, you will see that you are interrelated to everyone and everything, that your every act is linked with the whole of human kind and the whole cosmos'" (10).[42] Such a vision of interconnectedness and mutuality that spans the physical and metaphysical realms is not the habitual outlook of the large world religions; and Storhoff cites Whitehead, who makes this observation about Christianity

[42]Storhoff uses "metaphor" (9) when he refers to the flower as an example, a term that is problematic in the context of Nhat Hanh, whose notion of interbeing extends to all things and denotes a closer relation than the sharing of a quality between the vehicle and tenor of a metaphor as two components that refer to two separate entities; interbeing questions this sense of identity.

and Buddhism:

> The decay of Christianity and Buddhism, as determinative influences in modern thought, is partly due to the fact that each religion has unduly sheltered itself from the other. The self-sufficient pedantry of learning and the confidence of ignorant zealots have combined to shut up each religion in its own forms of thought. Instead of looking to each other for deeper meanings, they have remained self-satisfied and unfertilized. (Whitehead, *Religion* 140)

According to Whitehead, the two religions have lost their foothold by becoming stale and dogmatic, defensive and territorial. Like Thich Nhat Hanh and Whitehead, Johnson advocates a cross-fertilization of thought that informs his fiction writing, as Storhoff amply demonstrates. However, when he claims, "Johnson writes his novels to provide a transcultural experience for the reader, leading to a mutually creative transformation of each religious tradition," he reduces references in Johnson's work unduly to the Christian and Buddhist religions (15).

Nonetheless, Storhoff's study sheds light on a second central Buddhist notion crucial to Johnson's work, closely related to that of interbeing, namely "emptiness," a term that helps one to comprehend Buddhist views of identity or selfhood. "Because everything is made of everything else, nothing can be by itself alone," Johnson explains (*Turning* 12). Since the self participates in this interbeing of all things, it is itself "everything" and "nothing. It is empty . . . , possessing no essence or intrinsic reality; it is, at best, a *process* dependent each and every moment on all other beings. A verb, not a noun" (10). Translated into the terms Whitehead expounded in *Process and Reality*, an individual might be viewed as "an ever-changing 'event' or 'occurrence,'" a mode of

existence that extends to subjects and objects (qtd. in Johnson, *Turning* 10). Suffering, Johnson explains, stems from taking impermanent things as permanent, which is to say that "we cling to our static ideas of things, not the fluid things themselves, which are impermanent and cannot be held on to" (12). Our language easily suggests such permanence through naming, with nouns that seem to have essential meanings; "language is all concepts, but things in the world are devoid of essence, changing as we chase them. Life must always be greater than our ideas about life. For the Buddha, 'Man's sensual desires are only attachments to concepts.'" Johnsons adds parenthetically, "(It is not necessary, I hope, to explain how ugly and devastating are racial concepts when they are projected onto others)" (12-13). The way to enlightenment is the Eightfold Path, a form of spiritual practice that has been reordered and reinterpreted by scholars for more than a thousand years. The eight steps are Perfect View, Perfect Thought, Perfect Speech, Perfect Conduct, Perfect Livelihood, Perfect Effort, Perfect Mindfulness, and Perfect Concentration. Johnson orders the eight steps into "*Views* and *Thoughts* as a 'first philosophy' or the ontological side of the Path; *Speech*, *Action*, and *Livelihood* as a guide for civilized living in the shifting social world; and, lastly, *Effort*, *Concentration*, and *Mindfulness* as *praxis,* . . . or Vipassana 'insight' meditation, that shore up the other five" (7). All steps are interdependent, and the praxis, or meditational last three steps, feed back into better being able to live out the other five, a circular connection between the eight steps that is interminable.

Mindfulness looms large in *Middle Passage*, where developments after the slave revolt and death of many crew and slaves make full attention to the present moment a key to survival. Swami Budhananda writes in *The Mind and Its Control*: "We must clearly see that every moment is only *this moment*. If we have taken care of this

moment, we have taken care of our entire future. . . . The future is nothing but Maya [illusion]. . . . The challenge of the spiritual life is very simple: to be good, truly moral and master of ourselves for only this moment" (qtd. in Johnson, *Turning* 31). As one step in the Eightfold Path, mindfulness directs attention to detail, to the task at hand, detached from scheming for desired results that are—given that all is in flux—hardly predictable.

Storhoff explains that emptiness is not simply equivalent to "negation of existence" or "nihilism," but, on the contrary, that it is "redemptive" and represents "openness and radical indeterminacy, a rejection of an entirely definite or self-enclosed nature" (20). He finds these views expressed in *Middle Passage* when Calhoun, having a vision of his father's death, hears in his last cry "a thousand soft undervoices, . . . a mosaic of voices within voices" that makes it difficult to "isolate him [his father] from the We that swelled each particle and pore of him, as if the (black) self was the greatest of all fictions" (171). Through his vision, he realizes that his father did not just run away, but was chased and shot dead before he could come back for his family. Some critics have found fault with the dismissal of race expressed in these lines, on the basis that "Johnson's 'transcendence' of race is unrealistic and politically implausible" (Storhoff 22).[43] Storhoff rejects such criticism, however, and points out that the concept of emptiness validates Johnson's fictional treatment of race, and that it indicates why he turned so vehemently against essentialism, separatism, and black cultural nationalism (22). Foucault's analysis of racism affirms Johnson's point, when he discovers behind notions of race only the historical discourse of race struggle, no underlying essence.

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[43]Storhoff refers to Molly Abel *Travis, Reading Cultures: The Construction of Readers in the Twentieth Century* 77.

Johnson expresses this absence of essence through the concept of emptiness; and while the notion may not be deeply familiar to his readership, he dramatizes it through his narrative and thereby makes it accessible to his readers.

Storhoff's reading of *Middle Passage* largely traces the transformation of its characters' worldview to a holistic one in line with Buddhist concepts of interbeing and emptiness, or their resistance to it, an analysis that he approaches entirely thematically. His attention to the Christian and Buddhist traditions, however, allows him to identify an important element regarding Johnson's comic style. He relates the notion, common to both religions, of genuine compassion through growing suffering that drives humans to enlightenment to Johnson's the representation of human suffering in comic style: "So it is that Johnson's work, despite its often uproarious comedy, is replete with images of sickness, physical decay, despair, suicide, torture, and murder" (10). This juxtaposition of subject matter and style deserves more attention and is taken up in the discussion of humor as a narrative device below. About *Middle Passage*, Storhoff notes, "Despite Johnson's subject matter, the novel is a comedy. Johnson reconciles the novel's subject with its tone by making the novel an investigation of history, both personal and national" (148), an insight that again suggests the comic element is more than a mere stylistic trademark of Johnson's fiction, though its significance remains unexplored.

Lastly, Storhoff treats Johnson's use of anachronism and claims that it links the past to the present by

> simultaneously criticiz[ing] the social formations of the past that promoted racism and oppression and call[ing] for a transformation of the contemporary legacy of the past's mistakes. [Johnson] condemns contemporary repressive structures without relieving the individual of

> responsibility for creating those same structures. His work promotes a radical contextualization of one's era in relation to a larger, more expansive history—the greater totality of being human. Johnson's literary aim is to place an individual into a greater and more coherent spiritual perspective than contemporary literature usually offers. (8)[44]

This observation, which outlines the temporal links that Johnson constructs, and which Storhoff relates to the novel's Buddhist overtones, is also closely linked to the ostensibly generic properties of a sea voyage's chronicle, properties that the novel first adopts and then subverts and transforms. The log format makes a very short appearance in Storhoff's criticism of *Middle Passage* when he claims, "In the sense that history is always written in the future (just as Rutherford writes the *Republic*'s log when he is safely on the *Juno*) history is intended for the people of the present" (151). Attention to the log amounts to this one remark, which does not even entirely bear scrutiny, as demonstrated below.

Rudolph P. Byrd's frames his investigation of Western philosophical influences on Johnson's work with Bakhtin's dialogics and "heteroglossia" and "double-voicedness" as the preferred explanatory tools. Byrd relates Johnson's work to authors such as Herman Melville, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, discusses the influence of Plato, Hegel, Whitehead, and elaborates on racism among Western philosphers, as discussed in the previous section of this chapter. However, as Whalen-Bridge notes in

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[44]Calhoun's use of the term "useful fiction," when he notices that he is now lying out of compassion to give hope to the surviving children and not out of self-indulgence (162), constitutes such an anachronism. The term was coined by "Han Vaihinger in *The Philosophy of 'As If'* (1913). Vaihinger's argument is that because we can never rest with ultimate truths, we create for practical purposes partial truths (that is, 'useful fictions'), useful constructions of reality that help guide us both in science and day-to-day life. Johnson's anachronism in this case (Rutherford's knowing a term created almost eighty-five years after the novel takes place) subtly proves his point: the past is only truly understood through the evolving discoveries of tomorrow, which we cannot predict" (Storhoff 237n4).

his review, Byrd only partially explores the possibilities of a Bakhtinian approach: "he seems to be saying that Johnson is in an imaginary dialogue with other writers; this claim is unexceptional, as all readers of Johnson have noticed it (and Byrd has not engaged those readings in any detail). This is a missed opportunity" ("Whole Sight" 257). Whalen-Bridge anticipates the capacity of Bakhtin's dialogics to enable more intricate analyses, but he also asserts, "None of the critics writing have pushed this idea far enough. . . . A Bakhtinian approach can discuss the enduring nature of Naturalism in Johnson's work, as Byrd does, while also acknowledging the ideological civil war *within* Johnson's sentences over the implied constraints of naturalism (against which Johnson rebels) and the fidelity to social justice associated with naturalist writing" (258). Several critics' recognition of dialogics as relevant to Johnson's fiction, as well as Whalen-Bridge's point that closer dialogic analysis is yet to be carried out, motivate the close reading below.

Byrd refers to Whitehead's philosophy of organism to illuminate the idea of reality in constant flux, or the process-based way in which all things are. In *Middle Passage*, Johnson implies this mode allegorically when Calhoun observes about the ship:

> The *Republic* was physically unstable. She was perpetually flying apart and re-forming during the voyage, falling to pieces beneath us, the great sails ripping to rags in high winds, the rot, cracks, and parasites in old wood so cancerously swift, springing up where least expected, that Captain Falcon's crew spent most of their time literally rebuilding the *Republic* as we crawled along the waves. In a word, she was, from stem to stern, a process. (35-36)

Byrd quotes Whitehead, who writes that "'each actual entity is itself only describable as an organic process. It repeats in microcosm what the universe is in macrocosm. It is a process proceeding from phase to phase, each phase being the real basis from which its successor proceeds towards the completion of the thing in question'" (113).[45] He explains, "All of human experience and the operations of nature, or what Whitehead terms 'living immediacies,' do not comprise isolated, independent phenomena but rather are organic, integrated, and dynamic operations that, in their changing totality, yield a meaningful, intelligible, and ultimately spiritual order" (113). While Whitehead's theory of organism is not entirely without problems, especially the theological assumptions that have led some to discern in his theory a regressive Platonism, he nevertheless rejects fixed meanings, identities, and essences in favor of a world in constant process. Johnson seeks in Whitehead not the affirmation of the existence of a Christian God, but the articulation of a world in flux. This concept of process, Byrd notes, is not only reflected in the novel's constantly transforming ship, but also "in the interior world of Johnson's protagonist who is himself . . . a process" (113). "Process" in Whitehead's terms, or the Buddhist notion of interbeing is dramatized in the fictional world of *Middle Passage*. It is worth noting that both Storhoff and Byrd consider Whitehead's philosophy of organism pertinent, though they arrive at this conclusion by different paths.

These multiple contexts for philosophical and Buddhist notions discernible in the novel speak volumes about the way in which Johnson interweaves these ideas in his narrative. In water, John McCumber finds a suitable metaphor for Johnson's approach. He begins his argument with Thales, who said that "'all things are water,'" and turns the phrase into the syllogism "all things are water, philosophy is a thing, therefore,

[45]Byrd quotes from Whitehead's *Process and Reality*, 214-15.

philosophy is water" (257).[46] More seriously, he quotes Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* and its description of water, particularly, that it is "'internally indeterminate,' i.e. homogenous throughout," and that it "has merely passive being-for-others" (251). McCumber uses the term "hydrology" to designate the possibility of liquifying philosophical thought, detaching it from its former context and inserting it into new narratives, without, however, losing sight of the meaning it had in its former context. He claims, "Philosophy . . . is for Johnson as a novelist just like any other part of the life-world: something from which he distances himself and about which he tells tales at once untrue and unfalse" (267). This attitude does not show distant veneration for, but engaged if subversive participation in, philosophical thought.

Byrd discerns in *Middle Passage* a moment to which one may apply McCumber's term hydrology. The scene relates to Hegel's "Lordship and Bondage," and Byrd demonstrates that *Middle Passage* explores the master-slave relationship more fully than Hegel does, because in *Middle Passage* master and slaves do not share the same epistemological outlook. The Allmuseri tribespeople, who become Captain Falcon's ill-fated slave cargo, are described as "a tall people, larger even than Watusi; their palms were blank, bearing no lines. No fingerprints. . . . so incapable of abstraction no two instances of 'hot' or 'cold' were the same for them, . . . a [seeming] repository of Egyptian and sub-Saharan eccentricities . . . . they might have been the Ur-tribe of humanity itself" (*Middle Passage* 61). Their slave revolt succeeds, but their victory implies a defeat that is not problematized in Hegel's essay on bondage:

> Ironically, it seemed that Falcon had broken them after all; by their

[46] Johnson mentions Thales in the first pages of *Middle Passage*, when Rutherford describes the beautiful morning sunlight at the pier in New Orleans and muses, "Then you could believe, like the ancient philosopher Thales, that the analogue for life was water, the formless, omnific sea" (4).

> very triumph he had defeated them. From the perspective of the Allmuseri the captain had made Ngonyama [their leader] and his tribesmen as bloodthirsty as himself, thereby placing upon these people a shackle, a breach of virtue, far tighter than any chain of common steel. The problem was how to win *without* defeating the other person. And they had failed. Such things mattered to Ngonyama. Whether he liked it or not, he had fallen; he was now part of the world of multiplicity, of me versus thee. (140)

Whereas in Hegel's account of the master-slave relation, two consciousnesses engage in a life-and-death struggle to gain "real and true independence," the Allmuseri do not rise to self-consciousness through the experience of enslavement and liberation from it; rather, their violent self-liberation enslaves them in a non-virtuous violation of their own maxims that may be correctable only in many generations to come. In Hegel's account, both parties have not yet learned recognition of the other as an independent consciousness like their own selves; yet, in their lack of understanding they share the same assumptions about self and other. Not so Falcon and the tribespeople: his dualistic worldview is juxtaposed with their view of relationality and interconnectedness. Their struggle makes them enter the world of sharp divisions, of self versus other; they become enslaved in dualism. Byrd comments, "In treating the psychic and spiritual costs of the Allmuseri's victory, Johnson explores a reversal within the relations of power between master and slave that goes unaddressed in Hegel's account" (129). Johnson thinks through and beyond Hegel's master-slave relationship and shows one possible outcome that Hegel did not anticipate: that potential enlightenment follows dialectical struggle only if both parties share the same dualistic epistemological assumptions.

In fact, Johnson goes even further in his reversal of Hegel's account of the master-slave relationship than Byrd acknowledges. By already conceiving the Allmuseri as a tribe incapable of abstract thought, Johnson alludes to this reversal, since in Hegel abstract thought is a precondition for recognizing another consciousness without feeling the need to fight that other. A few lines earlier Johnson has his narrator impart, "you felt they had run the full gamut of civilized choices, or played through every political and social possibility, and now had nowhere to *go,*" an indication of their high state of development as a people that had, however, not taken the path outlined by Hegel (*Middle Passage* 61). In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel sees the freedom of self-consciousness ensue after having first passed from a state of self-consciousness that stems from the recognition of an other—and the attendant struggle—to the ability to perceive of the "I" as both "intrinsic being" and "being-for-self of the consciousness for which it is an object" (120). He associates the ability to perceive of the self simultaneously as subject and object with the rise of abstract thought in stoicism, and thereby refers to a Western tradition of thought rooted in ancient Greece. The Allmuseri, incapable of abstract thought, are described, however, as "eating no meat . . . Disliking property . . . They seldom fought. They could not steal. They fell sick, it was said, if they wronged anyone" (*Middle Passage* 78). Seemingly, they have developed all these qualities without abstract thought; thus their experience narrativizes a critique of Hegel's assumption of Western thought as the most advanced and universal, particularly in juxtaposition with Captain Falcon and his adherence to dualism that leads to the utmost destruction. In short, Johnson not only effects a reversal, but also questions the universal applicability of the very terms of Hegel's theory of self-consciousness.

Among other voices in Johnson criticism, Jonathan Little's study, which precedes

Storhoff's and Byrd's, merits notice for having established the spiritual dimension in Johnson's work as an ongoing field of inquiry. Since Storhoff's book covers a lot of ground in this area, though, I focus on a different debate in which Little intervenes. He takes issue with Johnson's reputation in some academic circles as a conservative, a reproach that largely followed his criticism of leftist figures such as Toni Morrison. About *Beloved*, Johnson has said that "it's extremely poetic," and also, "I would say it is the penultimate or final fruit of the Black Arts Movement" (Little, "An Interview" 232). His remarks, including his denial of intellectual inquiry in *Beloved*—"I don't think it's an intellectual achievement, because I'm not sure where the intellectual probing is going on"—have alienated some professional readers (232). Little rejects labeling Johnson as a conservative, though, and argues, "Whereas the neo-conservatives see fixed principles of honor, morality, and a singular American identity defined in part by a standardized, Western-oriented educational curriculum, Johnson, building on Ellison's precedent, sees in America a dynamic, jazzy interplay of cultures and ideas, ever in-process and evolving and open to eclectic global influences" (*Charles Johnson's Spiritual Imagination* 8). Little's defense of Johnson's political position also alerts his readers to his emphasis on Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a precedent to Johnson's *Middle Passage*: "Their novels construct the philosophical foundations that support the politics of integrationism: a system that recognizes King's 'network of mutuality' and interracial cooperation" (158).

Like Storhoff, Little refers only in passing to formal elements in *Middle Passage*, notably the logbook, although he does offer somewhat more detail. He rightly notices that Rutherford is able to access his feelings only once he is aboard the *Juno,* the ship that rescues him and the other survivors after the *Republic* sinks; and he discerns a

transformation in the narrator's aesthetics, a transfiguration from a "realistic account" to something "greater," a "movement from pain-filled realism to a spiritually enriched poeticism." However, Little puts closer investigations of the log's function aside by remarking that "the logic of having Rutherford's log predate [Captain] Falcon's death is never fully explained" (139). Hints in the novel that account for this seeming inconsistency remain unexplored, even though they are central to an understanding of the logbook's function.

William R. Nash relates one of the formal features of Johnson's work, humor, to the Black Aesthetic that became prominent in the 1960s with Black Cultural Nationalism. Johnson was briefly enchanted with the movement, especially following a visit by the Black Art Movement's co-founder Amiri Baraka at Southern Illinois University in 1969, during which Baraka delivered his call for a revolution through black art. One of the major tenets he highlighted was a rejection of "white criticism" and a call for a "Black Aesthetic generated and controlled by the black literary community" (19). He also emphasized the close relation of the Black Art Movement to its political cousin, the Black Power movement, and he stressed the movement's view of art's "'real function' as making 'revolution, using its own medium'" (*Charles Johnson's Fiction* 19).[47] Johnson was initially impressed by the vigor of the movement, but quickly grew uncomfortable with its tenets, especially their ideological rather than aesthetic orientation. Inevitably, the Black Aesthetic involved image control, which, even if arising "out of the noble work of counteracting cultural lies, easily slips toward dogma that ends the process of literary discovery" (*Being* 29). Literary discovery, however, is the ultimate freedom of the writer that Johnson is not willing to surrender to political

[47]Nash quotes Ron Karenga, "Black Cultural Nationalism" 33.

ends.

Nash considers humor in Johnson's work to be partly a response to the Black Art Movement. He refers to Bakhtin's theory of language in relation to Johnson's complaint "that too often black writers accept language without challenging the attached preconceptions" (*Charles Johnson's Fiction* 41).[48] Nash refers to one of Bakhtin's explanations about the social aspect of language, a point that Bakhtin revisits repeatedly. He writes, "Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. . . . As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's" (*Dialogic* 293). For Nash, Johnson inserts his own intention and accent into language by "shifts in register," —in other words, by humor— and he thereby upsets "readers' linguistic expectations" (*Charles Johnson's Fiction* 42). Nash exemplifies his point in *Oxherding Tale*, where the narrator and protagonist Andrew holds a "scholarly monologue on *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*," and suddenly mentions the "'narrative oomph'" of the text; in the same passage, Andrew "talks about fugitive slaves 'haul[ing] hips north'" (43).[49] Nash comments, "This disrupts the linguistic flow of the story. At the same time, it materially contributes to the flow, once again serving Johnson's larger purpose of altering how we view the 'knowledge' the text presents about characters and . . . expanding understandings of what one can expect black literature to contain" (43). Many instances of similar shifts in register can be found in *Middle Passage*, such as when Rutherford

[48]See also Nash's commentary on Henry Louis Gates's use of Bakhtin on p. 52 of this study.

[49]Nash quotes from Johnson, *Oxherding Tale* 118.

relays how every member of the multiethnic crew is praying in his own culturally-specific way after a heavy storm subsides, and he reports, "I was too busy peeking through my fingers and promising God I would be good forever if He would quit playing games like that one" (82). Bakhtin claims about both words and forms that they are populated by intentions, and since humor holds a prominent place in Johnson's formal choices, questions about his intention behind a humorous style in *Middle Passage* arise. Nash explores the formal implications of humor by referring to Johnson's earlier artistic treatment of the Middle Passage in his collection of cartoons, entitled *Black Humor.* One cartoon shows a number of slaves crammed below deck with agonized facial expressions, while one of them light-heartedly suggests having a sing-along. Nash proposes two readings of the cartoon. First, it "might jolt the viewer out of complacency or rigid ideas about the Middle Passage. In an era of militancy [during the 1970s], this suggestion of something besides suffering for the transported Africans might be a needle intended to deflate collective outrage" (141). Secondly, Nash proposes that the image might suggest "how various members of different tribes begin the process of cultural amalgamation that occurred during the Middle Passage, the transformation that made a group of people with diverse tribal identities into African Americans" (141). The second reading assumes a process of "cultural detention," and of "links forged rather than of bonds broken," a notion that contradicts any illusion of an accomplished effacement of African culture before slaves set foot on American ground (141). In all of these instances, Nash sees the application of humor—although he does not explore it further—as a defiance of stereotypical assumptions about the passivity and cultural vacancy of captured Africans bound for the Southern States. He also draws attention to Johnson's initial choice to write the novel from the perspective of Captain Falcon before he

decided on Rutherford Calhoun as the protagonist and narrator. The change enabled Johnson to employ humor more extensively, given Calhoun's characteristics, and to create more proximity between narrator and slaves, as will be discussed below.

Margaret I. Jordan addresses humor in *Middle Passage* most comprehensively, and her analysis develops further what Storhoff identifies and Nash briefly discusses, namely that humor serves as a counterbalance to the hardship and cruelty of slavery.[50] Jordan goes on to discuss humor in *Middle Passage* from two perspectives, Johnson's application of humor as the author, and Rutherford's sense of humor as the protagonist and narrator in relaying his past experiences and present events on board the *Republic*. In both cases, she argues, humor does not amount to a diminishment of the "humiliating and catastrophic consequences for slaves," which are in fact "carefully catalogued" (155). Like Nash, Jordan sees Johnson's humorous style as "designed to challenge and ultimately destroy erroneous assumptions about race" (154). In Rutherford's sense of humor, "often both self-defensive and self-disparaging, biting and ironic," Jordan sees his "wit and considerable powers of observation and understanding of human nature, as well as his growing apprehension of himself" (154). Early in Rutherford's life, humor becomes his defense mechanism. During his childhood, scarcity of food and clothes are constants, and the only items available to wear are provided through charity. The adult Calhoun still remembers how "in their scented waistcoats and smelly boots I whiffed the odor of other men," and the indignation makes Rutherford take to lying, "sometimes just to see the comic result when a listener based his beliefs and behavior on things that were

[50]Other primary texts that her study considers are Robert Penn Warren's *Band Of Angels* (1955), E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977). Selzer's term "retrospective fiction" is useful in grouping together novels that are by standard definition historical novels, and those that rely on the past as a major referent without necessarily being set in the past, as is the case in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (3).

Not. . . . [I]t was one of the few forms of entertainment bondmen had" (*Middle Passage* 90). Through his habit of deceiving people, Rutherford expresses his defiance, which was often the only way for slaves "to have some effect, impact and control over their environment and life, to exercise the human right of volition" (Jordan 157). This last observation is in line with a question that Jordan poses to critics of the novel's humor, namely, "would anyone care to argue that humor didn't exist for slaves?" (154). In short, humor is one of the basic human capacities, and its specific functioning as one of the formal elements in *Middle Passage* merits further examination.

In a new book, *Charles Johnson in Context* (2009), Linda Selzer interrogates the changed African-American context since the nineties, namely the emergence of new African-American intellectuals and their acknowledgment by the larger intellectual community, in contrast to earlier tendencies to ignore intellectuals of that background. More significant for this study, however, is her reading of *Middle Passage* through the concept of cosmopolitanism, a concept, she claims, that has been significantly revised in the past few years. Cosmopolitanism is less and less exclusively understood as a privilege of the "urban, elite sophistication" formerly associated with it; instead, "'cosmopolitanism from below,' one that is the result of exile or slavery rather than of privileged mobility, has come to be understood not as the rare exception but rather as a defining characteristic of modernity" (177). She offers many insights about necessary revisions of the concept of cosmopolitanism, including the fact that the term is not self-evident but needs qualification, if not redefinition. Selzer sees a "predatory" form of cosmopolitanism—personified in Captain Falcon's familiarity with multiple cultures that he employs in the service of reckless appropriation of cultural artifacts and profit-making—juxtaposed with an ethical form of cosmopolitanism that recognizes the

interconnectedness of cultures and their individuals, and toward which Rutherford increasingly strives. She reads *Middle Passage* as "put[ting] into play several varieties of cosmopolitan thought" among the diverse crowd of crew, slaves, and a freed bondsman, in order "to develop an understanding of identity that is based on cosmopolitan competence rather than on birthright" (177). Indeed, Rutherford succeeds in constructing a new sense of identity for himself only when, in a vision, he sees his father connected to a larger "We," a multiplicity of voices to whom Rutherford begins to feel connected, too. Given his alienated upbringing as a slave child, the early death of his mother and absence of his father, he formerly thought of himself as "practically hav[ing] no past" (*Middle Passage* 160). His sense of isolation, however, was based on narrow definitions of inherited family relations. Gradually, Rutherford replaces such narrow definitions with a sense of interconnectedness beyond his own race to those who have suffered, survived, and lived; he himself, he realizes, can and must fill such interconnections with meaning.

There are notable parallels between Selzer's polysemic application of "cosmopolitanism" and Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's use of the term "hydrarchy" in *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (2000). Linebaugh and Rediker employ the term "hydrarchy" to "designate two related developments of the late seventeenth century: the organization of the maritime state from above, and the self-organization of sailors from below" (144).[51] "Hydrarchy" refers to the Hercules-Hydra myth, in which Hercules

[51] Richard Braithwaite, a supporter of Parliament during the English revolution, uses the term in a description of the seventeenth-century mariner to designate the space outside the "walls of the State" in which the mariner lives, in terms of both the vast extension of water that is home to the mariner, and the customs developed among mariners, "their own language, storytelling, and solidarity," the latter of which was feared for its revolutionary potential (Linebaugh and Rediker 143-44).

fights the multi-headed venomous Hydra of Lerna. Each time Hercules chops off a head, two grow in its place, and only with the help of his nephew Iolaus does he finally defeat the monster by severing her central head and cauterizing its stump. Linebaugh and Rediker trace the myth among the "architects of Atlantic economy," who, they claim, identify with Hercules as a symbol of "power and order" and "vast imperial ambition," qualities he represented for the Greeks and Romans respectively (2). In the growing Atlantic trade, Hydra comes to stand for "disorder and resistance, a powerful threat to the building of state, empire, and capitalism" (2). In order to build a powerful maritime state, and in the face of a shortage of labor force, legislation gives increasing power to the merchant shipping industry, and to the Royal Navy, to which the two authors refer as "hydrarchy from above." The result is a legitimization of violence utilized to coerce the labor force into service that is needed for the ambitious imperial transatlantic projects to be carried out. Such laws include the authorization of impressment and severe punishment for desertion and mutiny.

Linebaugh and Rediker emphasize the crucial role of the Levellers in the mid-seventeenth century, who fought for popular sovereignty; they published several pamphlets that denounced impressment and in 1648 made a petition to the English Parliament that demanded the abolition of the practice; Parliament, however, approved impressment as a legal form of recruitment (157).[52] In actual fact, impressment forced lower-class men into involuntary labor, often by means of physical violence. Service at sea led to the early death of many – "three of four pressed men died within two years,

[52]In one of their pamphlets, the Levellers describe and denounce the common practice of "surpriz[ing] a man on the sudden, force him from his Calling . . . from his dear Parents, Wife and Children . . . to fight for a Cause he understands not, and In Company of such as he hath no comfort to be withhall; and if he live, to returne to a lost trade, or beggary" (157).

with only one in five of the dead expiring in battle" – or, if they returned home, they were often disabled and left without being paid (151). Although the Levellers did not succeed in ending impressment, their pamphlets articulated the plight of the unvoluntary sailors and thereby facilitated protest, rebellion, and self-organiziation of an increasingly multiethnic group of seafarers. From their initiative to take fate into their own hands gradually formed the tradition of the Law of the Privateers, which "featured democratic controls of authority and provision for the injured" among other stipulations that empowered the collective and curtailed power exercised by individuals (158).

Selzer's use of "cosmopolitanism from below" and Linebaugh and Rediker's "hydrarchy from below" partly reflect the same, long unrecognized values held up among the many exploited seamen, their capacity to forge intercultural communities beyond race, to develop a common language, and to establish social welfare for those in need, all notions that were not common in society on land. The crew in Johnson's novel live under the same circumstances that led to the self-organization of sailors—a highly dangerous journey for the promise of a minimal wage whose payment was uncertain, and no welfare funds in the case of lasting injury. When Johnson's protagonist Rutherford associates the vacant looks in the eyes of the crew with those he had seen in the faces of his fellow slaves on the fields in Illinois, he recognizes their shared suffering under conditions of enslavement and exploitation.

Linebaugh and Rediker draw attention to the "historic invisibility" of a vast number of individuals throughout modernity, partly due to the violent repression of "the stake, the chopping block, the gallows, and the shackles of a ship's hold." They also point to another kind of violence, which they call the "violence of abstraction in the writing of history, the severity of history that has long been the captive of the nation-

state, which remains in most studies the largely unquestioned framework of analysis" (7). Their book project aims to provide the missing links, the connections, the details that are obscured by romantic accounts of seafaring and piracy, or that have entirely fallen into oblivion in favor of celebratory histories of successful nation-states. *Middle Passage* is set in this atmosphere of repression and rising rebellion, and creates fictional visibility where historical visibility has been denied.

Linebaugh and Rediker's project might also serve as the backdrop for a critical assessment of Foucault's account of the Levellers.[53] He identifies them as one of the first European groups to establish counterhistorical discourse by diverging from monological historical accounts that celebrated sovereign power. During the first half of the seventeenth century, he claims, the Levellers made explicit the bifurcation of English society into two races, those in power and those suppressed. He sees the discourse of the disempowered French aristocracy play a similar role in France fifty years later. While both groups introduced forms of counterhistorical discourse in England and France respectively, their social status and motivations to challenge historical monologism were vastly different. Whereas the Levellers fought for the under-privileged, the French aristocracy opposed Royal policies designed to curtail their power. Foucault's reference to both groups appears incongruously detached from these social and political differences, while he emphasizes structural similarities between processes that lead to the emergence of a new discourse. His critics have variously emphasized the absence of concrete human experience from his analyses, and reading Foucault alongside Linebaugh and Rediker's text validates such criticism. Nevertheless, Foucault's sharp analysis is a decisive contribution to an understanding of discourse and its functioning

[53] See p. 64 of this study.

throughout history. By reading Foucault's work in conjunction with the work of other scholars who address the same issues in different disciplines, one appreciates the importance of his contribution, yet also recognizes its limits.

The fictional visibility that *Middle Passage* grants those who were habitually excluded from official historical accounts is most extensively expounded in Ashraf's H. A. Rushdy's *Neo-Slave Narratives* (1999), which analyses Rutherford Calhoun's account of the ship's voyage as "an autobiography in order to assume and construct a subjectivity which frees him from a former identity of a slave" (216). Rushdy draws attention to the importance that Rutherford gives to the "politics of the literary form he is employing," and to the transformations by which the logbook as a chronicle of the slave trade in the history of transatlantic expansive capitalism "*becomes* a slave narrative" (216). These transformations, Rushdy claims, are an integral part of the narrative critique contained in *Middle Passage*, and aimed at capticalism. "Rutherford's slave narrative," he writes, "does not begin as his or as an autobiographical narrative, and its most radical critique of the order of capital lies in its description of the process by which it becomes both his and a slave narrative" (216). Rushdy's analysis draws on Marxist theory and focuses on a critique of capitalist notions of property, through which slaves are reduced to items listed in trade documents, and he traces how Rutherford's account of the voyage inscribes him and the Allmuseri slaves into the logbook as subjects. His illuminating analysis provides very detailed insights into the economic complexities of the slave trade, yet it also reduces Johnson's *Middle Passage* to a critique of capitalism. That Johnson employs humor in effecting his task of articulating his critique remains outside Rushdy's consideration. He, like other critics, claims that Rutherford "describes how he wrote the document we are reading immediately after he was rescued from the incomplete middle

passage of the *Republic*" (216). But this assertion is puzzling, since more than half of the novel consists of entries that are made while he is still on board the doomed *Republic* (216). As part of the spatiotemporal relations that the novel constructs, these issues are not without importance, and will be addressed below.

Rutherford Calhoun – Narrator and Theorist Despite Himself

Sheldon S. Wolin remarks in *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds* that the term "'theorist' derives from the Greek *theoros*, which was the name for an emissary who traveled on behalf of his city to other cities or societies. A *theoria*, from which 'theory' was derived, meant 'journey.' Traveling is, of course, an encounter with differences," and Wolin remarks that the impressions resulting from such encounters "are never one theoria, because traveling into difference brings surprises" (5). If one utilizes the term "theory" in its etymological sense, Rutherford Calhoun may well be called a theorist, albeit one who comes to theorizing, as to writing, despite himself.

When Rutherford sets out to tell his story, he is an unlikely candidate for both activities, and one wonders how he comes to write in the ship's logbook. His self-description as "a petty thief" and notorious liar, hungering for "life in all its shades and hues" as he has put "the hateful, dull Illinois farm behind" him and "drift[s] about New Orleans," depicts an adventurer rather than a writer and theorizing mind (*Middle Passage* 2-3). This impression is reinforced when he admits that his creditors and would-be bride Isadora have entered into a conspiracy that forces him to choose between prison and marriage, and that to escape both, he stows away on the *Republic* (1). His voyage is thus entirely personally motivated, and the notion of stowing away on a slaver bound for Africa is, one should add, rather ill-conceived. Yet, his brief reference to the

sophisticated education inflicted on him by his master, Reverend Peleg Chandler, gives a first indication that he is most likely capable of more reflection than he cares to show (3). Chandler, "a Biblical scholar," had foreseen for Rutherford a future as a Negro preacher, who in turn remembers that his former master he "endlessly preached Old Testament virtues," and exulted in "tedious disquisitions on Neoplatonism, the evils of nominalism, the genius of Aquinas, and the work of such seers as Jacob Böhme" (3). Rutherford's irreverent tone almost makes one overlook the fact that he is in fact a man of high education. When he acknowledges the exceptionality of his authorship by alluding to the calamities that put the log "in which I now write" in his hands, he confirms that, in fact, he was not supposed to write the log, and if he does, it is only by some terrible accident (27). The momentary disorientation of the reader, who wonders why stowaway Rutherford becomes the chronicler of the *Republic*'s voyage, and how he has gained access to the ship's logbook, evinces the conventional expectations to which Johnson's choice of genre appeals. A few pages into the novel it also becomes clear that Johnson has every intention of frustrating such expectations.

In the following section, I argue that by subverting and transforming the conventions of the logbook, Johnson critiques the epistemological and ideological assumptions on which that genre's conventions rest. Power over authorship and voice, as well as spatiotemporal assumptions underlying the log's structure are shown not to be merely neutral and functional, but to reflect a dualistic worldview based on the exclusion and exploitation of otherness. By creating contexts that dramatize the limitations and ultimately the failure of these views to grasp human experience in its full variety, Johnson's narrative reconceptualizes the relations of space and time, past and present, and self and other. Rutherford Calhoun is in the end a perfectly suitable narrator for this

enterprise, since he combines familiarity with both Western and Eastern traditions of thought and religious learning, with a refusal to commit to any one philosophy or religious dogma. His hedonistic outlook is shaken only when the suffering of the enslaved Africans, then of all on board, and eventually the death of all but a few slaves and crew compel him to rethink the adequacy of his disengaged life philosophy. He becomes, in fact, engaged in philosophy that "limps," to use Merleau-Ponty's humorously self-ironic term, which describes the philosopher as "not tak[ing] sides like others," and as someone who "must be able to withdraw and gain distance in order to become truly engaged, which is, also, always an engagement in the truth."[54] Calhoun's philosophy "limps" because it does not come to rest on two legs, but keeps moving, i.e., is constantly and painfully revised as he lives through turbulent events in his story while narrating earlier ones; he is a writer submerged in his story, not writing from a distant vantage point. But who would care to argue that anybody ever does?

The gravity of unfolding events and Rutherford's frequent feeling of despair is juxtaposed and seems at times at odds with his humorous writing style. Humor is, however, as Merleau-Ponty and before him the Greek philosophers, recognized, an important human capacity that allows to maintain a level of detachment and critical distance. Through humor, Rutherford can, at least imaginatively, take control, if not of the situation, then of his own feelings towards it. It is noteworthy that "laughter was considered in antiquity as a virtue, a divine quality, and writers (including Plutarch) collected jokes and anecdotes often ascribed to famous personages. . . . Christian society, however, rejected laughter; it was replaced by tears of contrition, compunction, and a quiet smile, frequently described as a quality of a saint" ("Humor"). Johnson's style,

[54]See p. 97 of this study.

besides stemming from his ability to see the comical element in the solemn, employs humor partly for pragmatic reasons, but mainly, it restores to Rutherford his humanity of which he has been deprived as a slave. Humor is thoroughly non-hierarchical, and is therefore an appropriate assistant in his endeavor to rethink what seems fixed and immutable, particularly his place in the world as a recently freed bondman. The complexity of spatiotemporal and racial relations in *Middle Passage* force Calhoun to come to terms with the philosophical thought he has been taught by his former master. To the extent that Calhoun's insights flow from the configurations of human experience that the novel constructs, Johnson succeeds in employing the novel as a testing ground for philosophical thought that we have inherited as the many legacies left to us throughout the ages.

The Log: From Floating Quadrant to Literary Device

A look at the use of the former wooden log at sea and the maritime logbook that inherits its name, reveals characteristics that help one to understand the underlying conceptional framework of the genre that Johnson subverts and transforms: its use to measure the passage of time in relation to passage through space, and the question of authorship and voice. The log was formerly an actual wooden board in the shape of a quadrant that formed part of a measuring device for the speed of a ship. The history of the log reflects attempts to refine methods of speed measurement, since it served to determine the actual position of a ship at sea:

> The log-line consisted of a board in the shape of a quadrant, weighted on the curved edge and attached to a line by a bridle fixed to each corner. The line was knotted at specific lengths, depending on the country, and

> was about 275 meters (150 fathoms [1 fathom=6 feet]) in length. The "chip" was thrown overboard, and the number of knots that played out during a thirty-second sandglass were counted—thus the origin of the nautical speed called the "knot." The log-line method remained the standard method of measuring speed until the appearance of mechanical logs at the end of the eighteenth century. ("Navigational Techniques")

To attain utmost accuracy, the log-line was made of "a specially woven line of contra-laid cotton . . . , the reason for the special weaving [being] to prevent twist, so that it would faithfully repeat the number of revolutions made by the patent log as it is towed through the water" ("Log-Line"). Readings were entered into a logbook—formerly the log-board—by the captain of the ship on a daily basis, and entries would in time extend to other details of the ship's voyage, and thus include "navigation, wind and weather, encounters at sea, special orders, damage sustained, and working of the pumps. Also known as the deck log or captain's log to merchants and underwriters, it is commonly referred to in historical contexts as the ship's journal" (Jonkers). The genre suggests chronological, precise, and factual recording, as well as claims to the authority of truth vouched for by the captains's title and responsibility before the law. Since the late nineteenth century, merchant ships under the legislation of the British Merchant Shipping Act were required to keep an official log, "a legal document primarily concerning the crew, covering such matters as qualifications, conduct, wages, marriage, illness, injury, death, convictions, and punishment" (Jonkers). The law requires that the log "be kept by the master and delivered within forty-eight hours in the final port of call to the official before whom the crew is discharged. Falsifying, mutilating, or destroying an entry in an official log is a misdemeanor" (Jonkers). The log is strictly functional and

"can be distinguished from personal diaries and travelogues, as written by passengers and traveling merchants. Contemplation, conjecture, and the romance of the sea have no place in [it]" ("Logs and Ship's Journals"). The logbook is, however, also referred to as "the sanitized version of the scrap log, kept for the same purpose in pencil, in a rough-and-ready style" (Jonkers). The possible existence of a scrap book—which makes its appearance in *Middle Passage* as the "rough log"—suggests at once the distinctly textual, deliberately authored content of the logbook, the editing process involved in transcribing entries from the scrap book to the official logbook, and the inevitable gap between recordings and underlying events that widens further as recordings are drafted and transcribed (64). The author and editor of the log is the captain or master of the ship —further technical logs might be kept by other officers under the captain's command— and the legal weight of the log is thus directly linked to the captain's authority.

Dialogized Genre Conventions in *Middle Passage*

The log allows Johnson to accentuate the existence of a "common view," or "general opinion," as far as authorship and voice, time and space, and the physical presence of the log are concerned. Bakhtin uses both expressions in connection with "'common language'—usually the average norm of spoken and written language for a given social group—" which, he writes, "is taken by the author precisely as the *common view*, as the verbal approach to people and things normal for a given sphere of society, as the *going point of view* and the going *value*. To one degree or another," Bakhtin claims, "the author distances himself from this common language, he steps back and objectifies it, forcing his own intentions to refract and diffuse themselves through the medium of this common view that has become embodied in language" (*Dialogic* 301-2). The

logbook evokes such common language, since its generic structure suggests, first, authorized authorship and therefore a safeguard against unauthorized voices and unsuitable content; second, linear unfolding of temporality in space, which in *Middle Passage* are the supposedly well-defined parameters of the ship and the route along which it navigates; third, its physical presence as a further safeguard for its official content, since access to it is restricted. Johnson first appeals to such common language and then distances himself from it by subverting the conventions of the logbook and transforming it into his protagonist's personal narrative, who claims control over its content. The novel similarly evokes the genre of the slave narrative, from which Johnson departs by inverting Rutherford's voyage from freedom on American ground to the site of capture and enslavement on the African West coast, through which he "recreat[es] the transnational course of enslavement in the Atlantic world system" (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 203). Johnson diverges further from the tradition of the slave narrative by employing humor as a literary device throughout his narrative; and in his novel, humor has pragmatic, as well as sociological implications.

One can easily imagine that if Captain Falcon had actually written the fictional logbook, its content would have been dramatically different from Rutherford's reports. To begin with, Rutherford himself would likely be but a marginal note of a stowaway having been found on board. As Nash points out, Johnson actually encountered exactly this problem of restricted narrative possibilities. Johnson wrote an earlier version of *Middle Passage,* already in the form of a logbook, but he "told it from the white captain's viewpoint and therefore could never get close to the slaves."[55] The perspective of the white captain would have most likely remained at the kind of distance from the

[55]Johnson, e-mail to Nash, 7 Nov. 1996 (qtd. in *Charles Johnson's Fiction* 131).

slaves that homogenizes them as dispensable expedients to his project, and their unique culture would have remained unexplored. They would have remained numbers without names. Through the conception of the character Rutherford Calhoun, Johnson is able to overcome this distance and to bring personal experiences of the slaves into view. Nash elaborates, "Calhoun's dual liminality, figured both in his role as mediator between the crew and cargo of the slave ship and in his racial identity, makes him sympathetic to both groups' perspectives" (131). Calhoun's place on the margins, which has been recognized by a number of critics, lies in his role as a former slave who is a newly accepted crew member on the one hand, and in his African-American, not African, blackness on the other. He thus stands at the margin of crew and slaves alike, although the two groups are, according to the logic of the slave trade, considered entirely separate from each other.

One of the pragmatic functions of humor in the novel is to render Rutherford's embarkment on an inverted Middle Passage credible. It allows Johnson to render his protagonist Calhoun as a jolly fellow who carelessly ventures on an "inverted" Middle Passage out of opportunism. Rutherford stows away on the *Republic* because of the chance to steal the papers of the drunk Josiah Squibb, who, Rutherford learns,

> had signed on as a cook aboard the *Republic*, a ninety-ton square-rigger that would up-anchor and sail eastward against the prevailing winds to the barracoon, or slave factory, at Bangalang on the Guinea coast, take on a cargo of Africans, and then, God willing, return in three months. (*Middle Passage* 20)

To Calhoun's untroubled mind, the prospect of sailing on a slaver presents no obstacle to his plans to take the first best opportunity to get away from his creditors and bride-to-be.

His options in New Orleans, Calhoun realizes, are "prison, a brief stay in the stony oubliette of the Spanish Calabozo (or a long one at the bottom of the Mississippi), or marriage, which was, for a man of my temperament, worse than imprisonment—especially if you knew Isadora" (1). These incentives are enough for him to try his luck on the first best ship, even if that ship turns out to be a slaver. Through the characterization of Calhoun as carefree, lighthearted, and self-indulgent, Johnson sets up the "inverted" Middle Passage of an African-American former slave back to Africa, a narrative turn that would otherwise seem incredible.

Rutherford Calhoun – an Intradiegetic Narrator

While Calhoun's humorous style initially seems merely to indicate ignorance and egotism, it takes on a different meaning as one realizes under what conditions he actually writes. He is, to use Jean Genette's term, an "intradiegetic" narrator who exists within the diegesis of his story as it unfolds, lacking full knowledge of the story or how it ends (228). Some critics, among them Rushdy (216) and Storhoff (151), have claimed that Calhoun writes all of his entries once he is on board the *Juno*, a claim that is surprising, given that the novel indicates otherwise.[56] While starting his writing on the *Juno* would still make him an intradiegetic narrator, he would write from the position of safe delivery after the sinking of the *Republic,* which is actually only the case for the last two entries. Genette's term is helpful insofar as it draws attention to the question of which events in a story a narrator experiences while he or she narrates earlier ones.

A closer look at how narrated time relates to the moments of narration in *Middle Passage* reveals that Calhoun writes the first through seventh entries from two days after

[56]See p. 132 and 115 of this study for Rushdy's and Storhoff's claims.

the slave revolt until roughly two weeks later, just before the *Republic* sinks, which suggests that only entries eight and nine, as well as the very last lines of entry seven, are written from aboard the *Juno* after his rescue. The first entry carries the date June 14, while the seventh entry is written on July 3. Narrated time in the first entry begins with the *Republic* putting to sea on April 14, two months prior to Calhoun's beginning to write. In the following entries, this time lag of two months narrows, since he writes entries every few days until, in the seventh entry, narrated time and the moment of narration virtually overlap. This coincidence of time-lines is crucial, since it creates an experiential space for Calhoun that moves toward a moment of destitution and hopelessness without prospect of delivery, and where his reflections on events lived thus far finally catch up with the point in time in which he himself exists, i.e., the present. With past events relayed, and no coordinates available to allow projections into the future, Calhoun is forced to attend fully to the present moment. Johnson creates, in other words, a narrative space in which Calhoun has an intense experience of the finiteness of being, which is in Heidegger a condition of freedom. In Heidegger's view, "the disclosure of the possibilities of his being sets Da-sein free for different ways of being himself" (King 39). Heightened attention to the moment is created out of the novel's configurations and reaches its apex at a point of utter loss and hopelessness of the narrator. Such a reading contrasts with previous claims. I ask my readers to bear with me as I establish the asserted time-line in some detail below, in order to discuss the insights afforded through such an experiential space.

That the slave revolt occurs on June 12, two days prior to Calhoun's writing of the first entry, dated June 14, 1830, can be reconstructed through the account of a storm that occurs on the eve of the revolt: "Thus we were at five bells in the forenoon of June

11 . . . when gusts of strong, skirling wind galed and swung the *Republic* broadside to windward, pointing her *back* the way we had come" (*Middle Passage* 79). The slave revolt unfolds the following morning, just as some members of the crew set out to put their planned mutiny into action. Calhoun has a first apprehension of the slave revolt when he finds himself face to face with "the mate named Fletcher. One side of his head was battered in" (127). He records, "Backing away, I sensed then that not Falcon's loyalists but the Africans had overcome Fletcher and Daniels, though how in God's name I could not guess" (129). In the course of the insurrection, the slaves take control of the ship, most of the crew are killed, and the captain is first severely injured and subsequently commits suicide, after having passed the log on to Calhoun. He describes the destitution that reigns on board the ship as it drifts on high seas without a course:

> Without much water, without good canvas, and almost without an experienced crew, we were buffeted about by contrary winds, thrown off course frequently, so that often we flew in circles, retracing our path, or fell into a trance of sea and wind too frail to propel us, drifting aimlessly like men lost in the desert, our sails mere rags and ropes in ill repair. (152)

When Calhoun takes up writing two days later, it is thus under the impression of chaos, fright, and death, and in the following two weeks, the situation deteriorates. The gradual closing of the gap between narrated time and time of narration is indicated when Calhoun relays in the seventh entry that the *Republic* has been drifting for two weeks after the slave revolt and death of the captain: "As runaway slaves follow the North Star, having no guide to their homeland but a single light overhead, so the *Republic* steered by the stars for a fortnight" (152). A fortnight is also approximately the time that lies

between his first and seventh entry (June 14 to July 3), and his remark at the end of entry seven—"As I struggled to describe every detail of our passage in the captain's log, I longed for the crewmen lost to fill the ship's room again"—indicates that he is writing while still on the *Republic*, since it would make no sense to write such a remark on the *Juno* (164). Immediately afterwards, his narrative reaches a point where relayed experience and the moment of narration virtually overlap. This moment comes in the form of a mystical encounter: his descent into the hold, to take his turn in the strangest duty of all on the ship, feeding the Allmuseri God down in the crate. This task is mystified in the novel, since the Africans, who have taken turns in "feeding" the god daily, have each been down in the hold for fifteen minutes, but without taking food with them. Now it is Calhoun's turn, and he asks himself, "But on what did he feed?", and he dreads yet feels "compelled to see what sort of cargo Falcon had believed would make his fortune shoreside and, just maybe, hasten the millennium" (166). Calhoun literally ends the seventh entry with his realization that "the shape-shifting god of the Allmuseri . . . had chosen to present himself to me in the form of the one man with whom I had bloody, unfinished business: the runaway slave from Reverend Chandler's farm—my father, the fugitive Riley Calhoun" (167). Since he comes away from this encounter unconscious, subsequently drifting in and out of awareness for three days, after which the ship sinks, it must be assumed that he actually writes the last few lines of entry seven, in which he reports having seen his father's apparition, only once he is saved. The one-month gap before the following eighth entry, written on August 1, suggests that the transition from writing on the doomed *Republic* to writing on the *Juno* a month later actually occurs during the month of July. Once on board the *Juno,* Rutherford relays not only that the log gets fished out of the sea along with the skipper's sea chest, but also

stipulates, “once its pages dried I *returned to recording* (italics mine) all I could remember” (189). This last remark confirms that he had written in the log before, and that he resumes rather than begins the task on the *Juno.* Evidence in the novel overwhelmingly indicates that Rutherford writes up to the end of the seventh entry on the *Republic*, and against this evidence the claim that he begins writing on the *Juno* is unsustainable. Significantly, he writes on the doomed ship until just before the moment of his encounter with his father.

This form of precarious open-endedness through most of the novel is distinctly different the account of an “extradiegetic” narrator. The difference becomes apparent when one compares Calhoun’s logbook entries with the account of an “extradiegetic narrator,” such as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s character Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* (Genette 228). Like Johnson’s Calhoun, Carraway has been implicated in the story that he sets out to tell. Yet, unlike Calhoun, he exists outside the diegesis of his story, and he distances himself from his narrative at the outset by saying, “When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart” (Fitzgerald 49). The remark distances Nick of both space and time from his experience in the East. His position gives his story a sense of pastness and closure. By contrast, Johnson’s narrator Calhoun exists in the midst of the diegesis of his story as he sets out to tell it. The time and space in which the story unfolds are and remain continuous with Rutherford’s own existence in space and time. By conceiving a precariously living intra-diegetic narrator, Johnson sets up a double perspective from which all accounts are to be viewed: what is being narrated, and how what is being narrated reflects Calhoun’s experience while narrating. This continuity is, of course,

always in play, even for a Nick Carraway who tries to put a barrier of spatiotemporal coordinates between him and his story. Words that denote pastness do not constitute a clear break between past and present, but rather the illusion of such a break, and *Middle Passage* invites reflection about the complex relations that connects these two temporal coordinates.

Narrative Knowledge in *Middle Passage*

As soon as the logbook changes hands between the captain and Calhoun, their very different notions of how the log should be kept become evident, and Calhoun's viewpoint is one acquired in the course of the sea journey. The injured captain, who is lying under timbers, his legs crushed after the revolting slaves have taken the ship's stern under fire, wants "others to know the truth of what happened on this voyage" (*Middle Passage* 146). Rutherford reluctantly accepts the task of logbook keeping; however, he silently promises himself, "Even though I'd tell the story (I knew he wanted to be remembered), it would be, first and foremost, as I saw it since my escape from New Orleans" (146). By assuming the role of authorship, he not only modifies the mandate received from the captain to write down "things I told you when we met alone in secret,"—in other words, he rejects functioning as a mere extension of the captain's voice—but also transforms the monological character of the log into a multivoiced account of events. Significantly, the voices of the Allmuseri tribespeople, who figured in Captain Falcon's "rough" log only as a listed entry of "40 slaves," enter the log because of Rutherford's authorship; and as Rutherford writes on, he continuously revises his view of them, and concurrently, of himself (64). Furthermore, the narrated material he records surpasses the log's spatiotemporal parameters: in the logic of the logbook, every

entry is one day and traces the progression of the voyaging ship. The narrative that usually unfolds in a ship's log is thus supposed to register a clear beginning and end—departure and arrival of a ship—and to relate to the ship's spatial confines and course; time and space appear as normative, given, and stable. Rutherford first surpasses these parameters when he reports the circumstances of his escape from New Orleans, and in the course of his narrative, spatiotemporal coordinates encompass ever larger contexts, which are in fact the multiple contexts of the transatlantic slave trade that are absent from the traditional log.

As Rutherford begins his recording, he is no longer the same man who thoughtlessly stowed away on the slaver, but a man whose "hair [has] started going white" after witnessing the cruel handling of the slaves back in the African trading post at Bangalang; he is now a writer who asks himself how he "can go on after this," or "tell his children of it without placing a curse on them forever," and who finds himself feeling a cold distance from the somewhat gloomy first mate Cringle, "who would never in his life see himself, his own blighted history, in the slaves we intended to sell" (66-67). A first encounter with the Allmuseri tribespeople and their plight has physically marked Calhoun, and he finds his own sense of connectedness to their suffering at odds with the reactions of other crew. Immediately after telling his readers that his hair is going white, and that he is "unable to watch" the handling of the slaves, he withdraws to the cooking room, leaning his "back against an oven of such antiquity it was usually hotter on one side than the other, so that Squibb's tipsycakes (so called since he laced them with rum) rose crooked and once they were frosted the top layer would gradually slide off" (66). At the beginning of his report of events on the West African Coast, Calhoun observes that the trading post is run by Owen Bogha, "the halfbreed son of a brutal slave trader from

Liverpool and the black princess of a small tribe on the Rio Pongo," a man Calhoun describes as a "powdered fop and Anglophile who dyed his chest and pubic hair blond and, as did other men of the day plagued by head lice big as beans, shaved his pate and wore perfumed wigs" (44). The two rather humorous descriptions bracket but are kept separate from the suffering of the Allmuseri, delineated in a juxtaposed paragraph of comical style, a narrative devise addressed below. As his hair grows white, Calhoun sees violence breed violence, and when he takes up writing, the fate of the survivors on board a storm-beaten, damaged, and now drifting ship is hopeless and aggravates as provisions shrink and diseases spread.

With the illegal slave cargo of Allmuseri tribespeople coming onboard, Calhoun becomes acquainted with their history, which reaches beyond the African continent and back to the time of antiquity. Calhoun hears of their culture first by learning their language from the Allmuseri character Ngonyama, to whom he teaches English in turn. Ngonyama's accounts of the history of his tribe open to Calhoun a window onto Africans' history that has previously been inaccessible to him as an African American. The Allmuseri, it turns out, were a seafaring people who long ago sailed to India, where some of them settled and blended with the Dravidians; and "between 1000 B.C. and 500 they sailed to Central America on North Equatorial currents that made the voyage from the west coast of Africa to the Caribbean only thirty days, bringing their skills in agriculture and metallurgy to the Olmec," who built shrines to honor them (76). They practice an old martial- arts technique that resembles Brazilian *capoeira*, whose moves allow fighting with hands bound, and through which they eventually overpower the crew with "knee-shattering kicks thrown after they'd fallen. Ankle-breaking footsweeps. Chokes designed to use their chains until one of them found the key to their shackles,

and those freed swung the ship's cannon back toward her bridge" (77, 130). Through Ngonyama's stories, an ancient time period enters Rutherford's recordings during which Europeans are still barbarians, whereas Allmuseri history shows signs of a highly developed culture.

Given the mentality of the Allmuseri described earlier, namely that they "dislik[ed] property," "seldom fought," "could not steal," and "fell sick . . . if they wronged anyone," the Allmuseri's long history of a highly developed culture belies Captain Falcon's firm belief in the essential dualism of the mind and its proneness to conflict and repression of otherness:

> 'Conflict,' says he, 'is what it means to be conscious. 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.' (97-98)

How the relationship between Captain Falcon and the Allmuseri diverges significantly from Hegel's account of the master-slave relation, especially in that the Allmuseri enter slavery without perceiving their world in dualisms, has been discussed above.[57] For Calhoun, dualism as a worldview is first undermined when space and time as the fixed coordinates of such a view have been dismantled, so to speak before his eyes, as exemplified by the ship itself, which he realizes has a being as process rather than as a

[57] See p. 128-29 of this chapter.

perfectly self-contained space in time that could be easily delineated from its surroundings; the ship is not a perfect dualism of inside and outside, nor is its journey clearly delineated by a before and after. Instead, the ship is "perpetually flying apart and re-forming during the voyage,"[58] and the extent of voyage becomes uncertain as it is "buffeted about by contrary winds, thrown off course frequently, so that often [it flies] in circles, retracing [its] path"[59]. With his own story, and subsequently the history of the tribespeople, Calhoun expands his narrative from the ship's immediate dimensions and travel coordinates to the larger contexts that intersect in its voyage, and in the institution of slavery; dualistic distinctions give way to interconnectedness.

Subsequently, other dichotomies and fixed concepts come into flux; everything is non-identical with itself. On the African shore, although a freed bondsman, Calhoun runs the risk of being taken as a slave again simply because he is black, and the cook Squibb tells him, "Better yuh keep your noodle down, Illinois, . . . these blokes don't know you're a sailor. And they don't care" (60). Once back on board he finds that the Allmuseri tribespeople "saw whites as Raw Barbarians and me (being a colored mate) as a cooked one" (65). In their eyes, at least initially, he belongs to their tormentors. The Allmuseri's past as highly cultured seafarers, and their consideration of others, make him ashamed of himself: "they so shamed me I wanted their ageless culture to be my own," Calhoun admits, but he painfully feels (switching to the third person) that "Rutherford Calhoun . . . could never claim something he had no hand in creating" (78). Their highest value, "to experience the unity of Being everywhere" (65), impresses Calhoun to the point that for a while he idealizes them. However, already looking at his

[58]See p. 116 of this study for full quotation.

[59]See p. 142 of this study for full quotation.

idealizing admiration in retrospect, in the aftermath of the slave revolt, he writes with self-criticism, "Stupidly, I had seen their lives and culture as timeless product, as a finished thing, pure essence or Parmenidean meaning" (124). Changes in the tribespeople occur, as they feel the strain of being "leagues from home—indeed, without a home," after years of drought and famine have made them an easy target for the slave hunter Ahman-de Bellah (124, 62). Calhoun sees "in Ngonyama's eyes . . . a displacement, an emptiness like maybe all of his brethren as he once knew them were dead" (124). Being severed from their past, the Allmuseri lose their firm grip on values by which they have formerly lived their communal life. The death toll and destruction after the slave revolt lead them to doubt "whether it had all been worth it, this costly victory in exchange for their souls," and they try to atone for their deeds by cleansing rituals, "begging [their god] to wash the blood of the *Republic's* crew off their hands" (140). These changes force the realization onto Calhoun that "they were process and Heraclitean change, like any men, not fixed but evolving and . . . vulnerable to metamorphosis," finally, without a fixed identity to be envied or emulated (124).

It turns out that their self-appointed new leader, Diamelo, used to be, back in their homeland, "a soger who drank palm wine . . . ; the bully who proved himself on smaller boys; the hunter who hung back until the prey was dead or declawed; the sleepy student bored by muscle-banging field work, contemptuous of the doddering elders," in short, a "wastrel previously cool toward his tribe's culture" (154). Even Allmuseri culture brings forth opportunism and self-seeking attitudes, as every culture probably does. Diamelo's nascent leadership needs the hatred for Captain Falcon as its catalyst, so that his tribespeople gloss over his former shortcomings, and Calhoun starts to see Diamelo's enslavement "as the most significant, the most memorable, even the finest

hour of his life," i.e., one that allows him to reinvent himself as a leader (153). Meanwhile, when Calhoun is drawn into the plot for mutiny against the careless and irresponsibly drinking captain, he sees in the eyes of the assembled sailors a detachment familiar to him from his former life as a slave. These were

> eyes I had seen before, I realized, under the sun-blackened brows of slaves: men and women who had no more stakes in the fields they worked than these men in the profits of a ship owned by financiers as far away from the dangers at sea as masters from the rows of cotton their bondmen picked. No less than the blacks in the hold these sea-toughened killbucks were chattel. (87)

Chattel slavery is finally not equivalent with the dichotomy of black slave and white master. Some sailors settle on him as the one to kill the captain to prove his allegiance, and they interrogate, "You ever cut a man's throat, Calhoun?", to which he retorts, "Oh, all the time," and thus once again breaks up the solemn tone of the scene (89). He resolves to side with the slaves, though, by passing a key supposedly fitting the padlocks of their chains, which his theft-accustomed hands have easily snatched from the captain's table while serving his meal.

Even Captain Falcon, it turns out, is not the free man he seems to be: he reports to the outfitters of the ship who expect their investment to be tripled, and who do not accept failure. The dying captain relays to Calhoun that in a meeting, one of them "was just smiling and studying me. Not as one man studies his equal—and I was *more'n* his equal on water or in the wilderness—but the way I've seen Ahman-de-Bellah appraise blacks fresh from the bush" (149). The captain's sentiment of being treated like a slave is obviously a stretch, but says much about his self-perception on this mission. One of

the outfitters, Calhoun learns, is the New Orleans Creole named Papa Zerengue, Calhoun's principal creditor, who was involved in the initial plot against him designed to coerce him into marriage (149). Papa Zerengue has partially financed the ship's voyage with full knowledge and thus endorsement of its illegal slave trade; three slaves are to be sold on his behalf. Papa Zerengue exemplifies the uncomfortable truth that not only blacks on the African continent were agents in the slave trade, but also those who themselves had a past of bondage. Johnson's narrative thus leaves no room for racial essentialism.

Firm distinctions between categories of people do not hold, and the basic connection between them becomes evident, although just in a brief moment, when crew and slaves go to rest after the storm that has almost sunk the *Republic.* Tired bodies are spread across the deck in almost fraternal embrace. Although mutiny and slave revolt are pending, Calhoun observes,

> Brief as this moment might be, no stations were evident among the ship's company. Could these people slay one another after sunrise, as some planned? It hardly seemed possible. . . . On the water, leagues from culture or civilization, I saw no point in our perpetuating the lunacies of life on land. Just for a spell the sea had swept some of that away. (106)

On the morning after the storm, all things are reduced to the physical demands of tired bodies and exhausted minds, a state that is shared by all. The quiet scene does not last, however, but gives way to crisis when the slaves' revolt overtakes the crew's mutiny.

Calhoun makes all of these observations in the two-week period between slave revolt and the ship's sinking, when the desperate situation on board aggravates to a level that he is forced to pay attention only to the present moment: there is no assured future,

and most on board are sick and injured and need the full attention of those who are still able to move around. As disease runs rampant, and Calhoun knows that the ship is taking on water, he tells the children that all will be well, because "the 'useful fiction' of this lie got the injured through the night and gave the children reason not to hurl themselves overboard" (162). His longstanding habit of telling lies becomes in this setting an act of compassion, and even of constructing a reality to live in, for lack of a better one in which to dwell. Whereas he formerly felt an "urge to steal things that others were 'experiencing,'" now, "to comfort the wary . . . I peered deep into memory and called forth all that had ever given me solace, . . . , for in myself I found nothing I could rightly call Rutherford Calhoun, only pieces and fragments of all the people who had touched me, all the places I had seen, all the homes I had broken into" (162). His former life as a thief now takes on a different meaning; all the objects he has ever stolen, all the homes he has ever entered, all the stories he has ever heard from others, form "the 'I' that I was, . . . a mosaic of many countries, a patchwork of others and objects stretching backward to perhaps the beginning of time" (162-63). A feeling of "indebtedness" arises in Calhoun, "a transmission to those on deck of all I had pilfered, as though I was but a conduit or window through which my pillage and booty of 'experience' passed" (163). He learns from Ngonyama that in the Allmuseri world view "each man outpictured his world from deep within his own heart," and that "what came *out* of us, not what went in, made us clean or unclean" (164). These notions reflect a deep sense of the responsibility of everyone for "his own happiness or sorrow, for the emptiness of his world or its abundance, even for his dreams and his entire way of seeing," a complete reinterpretation of wealth and poverty that might make the pauper rich and the king a

poor man (164).[60] Such notions are also contrary to Calhoun's previous sense of his self as poor because of his virtually absent past or cultural legacy. It is amidst these reflections that Calhoun writes how he "struggled to describe every detail of our passage in the captain's log" (164).

Humor and its Functions in *Middle Passage*

One of the functions of humor in *Middle Passage*, as already suggested, is to provide the rationale, in the lighthearted protagonist's attitude toward life, for why a freed slave voluntarily embarks on an inverted Middle Passage. Humor, however, is, present throughout the novel. Calhoun himself observes that he used to have a cunning sense of humor and to enjoy lying to people "sometimes just to see the comic result when a listener based his beliefs and behavior on things" that were not true or simply did not exist (*Middle Passage* 90). Calhoun has retained his early capacity to see the comic element in the solemnity of life, and his sharp associations are operative throughout the novel. When he describes Owen Bogha's hair lice as "big as beans" (44), or observes of the short captain that "his legs measured less than those of his chart table" (29), he draws comparisons between different objects whose incongruence creates humor, and by doing so, he ridicules the two men who are among the most powerful in Calhoun's immediate surroundings.

When after the slave revolt the Allmuseri demand of Calhoun to kill the first mate Cringle to show his allegiance them, he tells himself, "Why in heaven's name had I not kept my mouth shut, or choked my luff, as sailors say" (135). His attempt to save Cringle has drawn unwanted attention to him, and if he does not comply, he might be

[60]This sense of responsibility is also a teaching of Jesus (Matt. 15:10-20).

next; but the humorous remark diverts from the precarious situation at hand, as if Calhoun retreats into an inner chuckle, a space not accessible to anyone else. Even at the end of his adventures, when he recovers from his strenuous journey on the *Juno*, he gives a humorously exaggerated description of his condition. He confesses that he "wept easily," and adds that he "found this involuntary exercise so refreshing I promised to empty myself and wet my handkerchief this way every week, say, at elevenish on Sunday evenings, so don't bother to call on me then" (187). The information that he weeps easily borders on self-pity, but through his exaggeration to an imaginary self-induced regular weeping session, irony takes over.

Humor plays a similarly counterbalancing role when Johnson employs naturalism in *Middle Passage*. As John Whalen-Bridge has pointed out, "a Bakhtinian approach can discuss the enduring nature of Naturalism in Johnson's work, . . . , while also acknowledging the ideological civil war *within* Johnson's sentences over the implied constraints of naturalism (against which Johnson rebels) and the fidelity to social justice associated with naturalist writing" ("Whole Sight" 258). As a young writer, Johnson wrote several novels in the naturalist mode, because he felt the necessity to render his depictions of things as objectively as possible, and without mitigating the impact of atrocities and cruelties. He wrote six novels in total, none of which were ever published because he was ultimately unsatisfied with the results of his writing efforts. What he overlooked, as he recounts in *Being and Race*, was his mistaken assumption about naturalism, that it must be neutral and objective. Johnson recalls an important insight that the experience of his "failed writing projects" yielded about naturalism: it "conceal[s] profound prejudices about Being, what a person is, the nature of society, causation, and a worm can of metaphysical questions about what could and could not

logically occur in our 'experience' and conscious life" (6). As becomes clear from reading *Middle Passage*, the novel is opposed to the social determinism that naturalism implies, and the limits rather than possibilities of being that it presumes. On the other hand, descriptions of hardships inflicted on the black slaves take on a naturalist tone. There is, however, a significant difference between the descriptions of experiences lived by the Africans, and those that Calhoun inhabits. For instance, when the slaves are being brought on board, Calhoun witnesses a heart-wrenching scene: "A woman pitched her baby overboard into the waters below us," and as two men strain against their chains in their impulse to jump after the baby, "this sudden flurry brought the worst out in Falcon . . . . He beat them until blood came" (*Middle Passage* 66). No humor permeates Calhoun's account, and his wording is decidedly factual and non-poetic. The diction in passages like this one bears no suggestion whatsoever of a comical element and therefore carefully avoids diminishing the suffering of slaves. However, when Calhoun himself is the one who experiences hardship, humor enters his accounts. A scene in which the captain demands Calhoun help in throwing a dead young African boy overboard exemplifies this difference. The descriptions of the body, and how it is being disposed of, are utterly naturalistic, as when Falcon "order[s] his ears sliced off and preserved below in oil" to prove the boy had been purchased in Bangalang. "Rigor mortis" makes it difficult to cut off his ears, and "though he was semistiff, blood giving way to the pull of gravity, motionless in his veins, was settling into his lower limbs, purplish in color as he entered the first stages of stench and putrefaction" (122). The graphic description continues, turning to his face that was "hard as wood on one side and melting into worm-eaten pulp on the other as rigor mortis began to reverse," and Calhoun realizes, "he was close to my own age, perhaps had been torn from a lass as

lovely as, lately, I now saw Isadora to be" (122). The passage has comical undertones, such as the term "semistiff" for the incipient rigor mortis. Descriptions such as "the underside of his body had a squishy, fluid-squirting feel of soft, overripe fruit," and "a handful of rotten leg dropped into my hand . . . , a clump from the butcher's block," are wordy and full of guttural and plosive sounds that are onomatopoetic and serve to make the putrefaction audible as a sequence of gurgling sounds. The imagery used reminds the reader of a slapstick sequence of mishaps befalling Calhoun, who fights the devil in the detail of things. He thinks but in food metaphors while he is already at the point of vomiting, which must have an effect similar to a feather tickling the back of his throat (123). The scene ends, however, on a serious note, with Calhoun feeling an impulse to cut off the hand that had held the loose flesh of the dead boy, an act of self-mutilation from which Ngonyama prevents him by "placing his fingers on my forearm. . . . His hands steadied and guided me to the rail, where I gasped for wind, wanting to retch but unable to" (123). Through Calhoun's sense of humor, Johnson prevents tragic scenes like this one from giving in to the limiting determinism associated with naturalism, even if he uses a naturalist style to depict them. Calhoun's associations lead away from viewing his experience only as suffering, and instead consistently open a mind-space that prevents Calhoun from being entirely caught up in the plight lived, without however shielding him from the harshness of the experience, as the ending of this scene exemplifies.

New research suggests that humor is a capacity that helped in the evolution of the human species. This research emphasizes that humor constitutes a basic human capacity common to all cultures, regardless of the culture-specific differences of its content value. More specifically, Alistair Clarke argues that humor as a human capacity is directly

related to the human ability of recognizing patterns. “Our recognition of patterns,” he claims, “exists to make sense of a world in which everything is ultimately bewilderingly unique” (*The Pattern* 54). He writes that humor is an “analytical tool, the ability to apprehend entities and recognize them when recontextualized. As a locomotive, conscious explorer this has obvious benefits, but on a wider scale it affords a problem-solving capacity with a level of flexibility not present in other animals” (54). One reason why humor is supposed to have helped develop the ability to recognize patterns is that it immediately rewards the individual: laughing feels good. Clarke points out that the patterns in his pattern recognition theory of humor do not “equate to categories of humour” (*Faculty* 18). He is looking at “patterns . . . in the brain, not on the page,” given that “possible permutations of these instances of apprehension produce a potentially limitless range of effects, and since they rely on relationships of information rather than content for their construction, their recognition forms a faculty identical in all members of the species regardless of cultural influences” (18). Clarke points out that the range of humorous moments goes far beyond the “light-hearted world of comedy,” and the effectiveness of a humorous moment does not depend on the level of sophistication of its content (18). In other words, humor is profoundly non-hierarchical. By employing humor in a neo-slave narrative, Johnson counterbalances the deterministic conditions under which the only freedom left to slaves was to opt for suicide, the ultimate act of human freedom, from which they were often prevented as well. Since humor is a cross-cultural human capacity, and one that man acquired very early in his development, its employment emphasizes common humanity over racial difference. Johnson restores thus to slaves their basic humanness that the institution of slavery denied. His protagonist, in being extremely adept at detecting comic relations, shows his intelligence and ability to

detach himself sufficiently from the moment at hand to discern the patterns constituting the scene, as the philosopher must in search of truth.

Reconceptualizations through Narrative Knowledge

Circumstances lead Calhoun to entertain thoughts that have been conceptualized —often in complex theories and systems—by various philosophers and traditions of thought, except that in his report of the ship's voyage, they stem from the lived experience he shares with others. Because he succeeds in "bracketing" the crew's whiteness and complicity in the slave trade, in the way that Husserl proposes, he comes to see that they are, among other things, also chattel slaves. The history of the slaves and their skills in martial arts become accessible because of Rutherford's authorship and revise any view of "the slave" as passively bound in chains, and as void of a past. Calhoun's own risk of renewed enslavement, initial identification by the Allmuseri as crew, and eventual realization that in the end he has to "outpicture" his world, make him rethink the meaning of freedom. It is not bestowed through manumission papers, but earned through "self-knowledge, freed of self-deception," which leads the character Amantha in *Band of Angels* to say "Nobody can set you free . . . except yourself" (qtd. in Clark 180). By working through these changing perceptions, Calhoun comes to practice what Adorno's calls non-identity thinking. In the moment of acute crisis, without any prospect of deliverance, Calhoun is exposed to the large question of "being," and he recognizes in the very moment that is most reduced to the present its profound connectedness to the past and the future, which is reminiscent of Heidegger's notions of thrownness, fallenness, and existence. In the Allmuseri idea of "outpicturing" the world, Calhoun begins to see the freedom of Da-Sein as Heidegger describes it, which is never

entirely determined, even under severe circumstances: “It is . . . not *a priori* determined by the structure of existence how a Da-Sein’s being is to be his” (King 39). Responsibility for his way of being rests, even in the most precarious of situations, with him, not others. The “indebtedness” that Calhoun feels points to the interbeing conceptualized by Thich Nhat Hanh, in which all things are connected, a notion that is also at the base of Whitehead’s philosophy of organism. When Calhoun revises his view of Allmuseri identity from Parmenidian meaning to Heraclitean change, he recognizes the Africans’ participation in the state of emptiness, a Buddhist term indicating that no thing has its own essence, but partakes in the ongoing exchange of elements between all things. The notion of emptiness allows him to see the fullness of his life; he is not a freed bondman on the margin of groups beyond his grasp, but assumes agency in the midst of human interrelations. Calhoun reacts to the utter despair on board, including his own, with an attitude of mindfulness, one step in the Buddhist Eightfold Path to Enlightenment, in which one pays full attention to the moment in an effort to alleviate suffering. In this attitude, he finds the richestc sense of self he has ever felt, and the experience prepares him for the encounter with his father, whom he had formerly despised for having withheld from him a sense of origin from which to construct his own identity.

Despite the novel’s impressive configuration of human interaction and experience that at once allows and forces Calhoun to rethink many of his former views, no serious reader of *Middle Passage* can gloss over the fact that there are moments in the novel when insights cease to flow from experience. There are occasions when Johnson falls into a pattern of lecturing rather than showing. One such instance occurs in a speech that Calhoun’s brother delivers at the deathbed of Master Chandler, who is

willing to pass on his entire estate to Jackson and Rutherford Calhoun. The brother refuses and asks instead to have the property and its profits divided between all Chandler's slaves, and the fixed capital to be "spread among bondmen throughout the country" (*Middle Passage* 117). To explain his refusal to accept the ownership of the land, Calhoun's brother asks "how can any man, even you, sir, *own* something like those trees outside?" (117). He lectures about how "nothing can stand by itself," how long it took for "copper and tin in that pitcher to come together as pewter," how so many people are involved in all of the processes through which things are made, and before them the sun, the seasons, "and the whole of Creation," which is why Jackson asks, "How can I say I *own* something like that?" (117). His reasoning seems permeated by the Buddhist notion of interbeing, but since Jackson is a minor character whose experiences are not shown, his insights seem imported into, rather than flowing from, the novel. An even more striking example is the relationship between Calhoun and Isadora: Calhoun's changing perception of Isadora and his desire to marry her, might be explained by homesickness, but Isadora is shown to want him as a husband as simply as at the beginning of the novel. She does not undergo any real change or development, but remains a stable entity within the plot. Their happy reunion seems imposed, slightly masked by some reasoning on Isadora's part at their reunion on board the *Juno*. One of the few females in the novel, her character remains underdeveloped—we do not learn her fate until Calhoun is rescued—and she stands for values such as marriage and family life, which are, unlike others, not examined in the novel at all. The conclusion of the novel thus flows least from the human experience created in it. Nevertheless, the novel provides a broad range of examinations based on human experience, and its insights are most striking and convincing when they flow from that experience.

Bakhtin's "chronotope," which denotes "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature," and which posits the inseparability of space and time," helps one to envision how *Middle Passage* relates to philosophical thought (*Dialogic* 84). Of particular interest is the separateness of the world of the novel from the outside world that creates it. Bakhtin writes, "there is a sharp and categorical boundary line between the actual world as source of representation and the world represented in the work," and he continues, "nor must we confuse the author-creator of a work with the author as a human being (naïve biographism)" (*Dialogics* 253). First, the world that comes to life in the novel exists in words, not as a material world. It is a world qualitatively distinct from the real world of either the past or the present. Second, the author-creator is distinct from the real-life person since both the mode of expression and the range of possible expression explicitly occur in the realm of writing, and the particular existence of the author-creator ends with the termination of the work, whereas the real-life author continues to exist in his "unresolved and still evolving contemporaneity" (255). Yet, as Bakhtin points out, the categorical boundary line between fictional and real worlds is not "impermeable." The two worlds are "indissolubly tied up with each other and find themselves in continual mutual interaction; uninterrupted exchange goes on between them, similar to the uninterrupted exchange of matter between living organisms and the environment that surrounds them" (254). The relationship between these entities is complex and comparable to the diffuse flux of interchanging matter as between living organisms. He envisions this exchange as follows, "The work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers" (254). While previous

scholarship on Johnson's work has illuminated connections between his work and Buddhism, phenomenology, and other traditions of thought, the distinction between real-life Buddhism, phenomenology, and other thought, and their involvement in the world of Johnson's fictions remains blurred. Bakhtin's distinction between the fictional worlds and the real one, or between the author-creator and the author in real life, helps us grasp these differences in Johnson's novel, and avoid reducing it to an attempt on Johnson's part to convince his readers of any particular spiritual or philosophical idea. Seen from a Bakhtinian perspective, "novelness" actually arises from the writer's exploration of the novel as an art form, rather than from using it as a vehicle to instruct his readers about history or philosophy. Criticism of the work of writers of non-white ethnicities has often glossed over its aesthetic qualities too quickly, and focused instead on thematic analysis, most often of course on race. Charles Johnson and Maxine Hong Kingston, interviewed together at the ALA conference in 2004, both raise this point when they express "vexation at the way reviewers and critics so often fail to get beyond race when apprehending the various phenomena that constitute a work of art" (Whalen-Bridge, "Conversation" 69-70). For Johnson, however, literariness is the very focus of his artistic work as a novelist. He insists that what "literary artists" do is to "give readers the opportunity to undergo an experience with language" (73).

By creating an intricate web of spatiotemporal relations, Johnson opens in his novel a conceptual space that finally encompasses all experience, "maybe backwards to the beginning of time" (163). His narrator, in his efforts to make sense of his experience, encounters the same questions that philosophers and thinkers have encountered in their time, and that we continue to grapple with today. Assorted philosophical and spiritual traditions of thought are touchstones, tools with the help of which humans have at

different times made sense of their world as they knew it. *Middle Passage* creates one of those worlds through words, and Calhoun's reconceptualizations flow from the lived experience in that world. Different conceptions, theories, and philosophies, rather than encompassing or exhaustively explaining Johnson's novel—in other words, rather than being the meta-language through which its meaning can be unlocked—are examined by partaking in its dialogic space. Their possibilities and limits are tested and related to each other and to the level to which diverse conceptions and notions are apt to grasp lived experience, as well as the way in which humans can assume agency. Cartesian dualism figures virtually as a declared failure in *Middle Passage*, and Hegel's dialectic of the spirit is shown to be firmly grounded in merely Western thought, not universality. But more importantly, the similar preoccupations of thinkers in different periods and cultures are made palpable in the dialogic space of the novel. While some philosophical thought is more apt to analyze what is, others bring into focus what can be. Active readership is required to discern the examination in which Johnson engages, and while some philosophical references are readily recognizable, others are less evident, and readers make connections that might not have been Johnson's in creating his novel, but are part of its life throughout different moments of reception. The process of examination, in other words, is open-ended, and therefore closely relates to the most definite reconceptualization that the novel offers: space and time are not fixed, but have as many modes as human experience itself, and in founding categories and concepts on fixed notions of both, one severs entities from the larger interrelatedness of all things and constitutes them as otherness that can subsequently be excluded. As Calhoun exclaims at the end of the novel, "The voyage had irreversibly changed my seeing, made of me a cultural mongrel, and transformed the world into a fleeting shadow play I felt no

need to possess or dominate, only appreciate in the ever extended present" (*Middle Passage* 187). Readers are invited to live a related experience, namely to review their own assumptions as they accompany Calhoun on his fantastical journey, and to look hard at the extent to which commonplace perceptions rest on the fixed notions of spatiotemporal coordinates that the novel undermines.

In the process of Calhoun's recording, the logbook undergoes important physical changes and is simultaneously liberated from the spatial constraints of the ship whose voyage it was originally supposed to record. The soaked log takes its new form as the sea water dries from its pages, and one can imagine that its pages have undergone swelling and distortion of their edges, so that the new form of the log has lost its angular shape. The physical changes in the logbook may well be read as an allegory for the changes that the Euro-American imagination needs to undergo. The narrow definitions of space and time on which the traditional log relies support the possibilities of historical and territorial delineations that constituted the nation-state; exterior delineations combined with exclusions on various levels within its boundaries. In the fictional world of *Middle Passage*, Calhoun recovers a sense of self that is enriched by his experience and has evolved from taking the fixed data of his past as the coordinates of his identity to a recognition of the interrelations in which he lives and that he fills with meaning. Richard Powers's *The Time of Our Singing* shows, however, that to maintain such a sense of self, blacks in America had to be extremely strong. His novel exemplifies how far distanced Calhoun is still from a world of racial equality and mutuality.

Chapter Three

Time without Space and Multiple Spacetimes in Richard Powers's *The Time of Our Singing*

I don't think the Negro Problem is insoluble because I don't think there is any Negro Problem. . . . There are no distinctive colored persons. The mad, picture-puzzle idiocy of the whole theory of races is beautifully betrayed when you get down to the question of "Negroes" who are white enough to pass as Caucasians. . . . There was a time in our history, and ever so short a time ago, when the Scotch-English in New England thought all the Irish were fundamentally different and fundamentally inferior. And then those same conceited Yanks (my own people) moved on to the Middle West and went through the same psychological monkeyshines with the Scandinavians and the Bohemians and the Poles. None of the profound and convincing nonsense of race difference can be made into sense.

— Sinclair Lewis

"A widening in the day had opened up in front of her, pulling her and her German stranger into it. They'd traveled together down into long time, along a hall without dimension, to a place so far off, it couldn't even really be called the future, yet" (Powers, *Time* 135). Delia Daley, in Richard Powers's *The Time of Our Singing* (2003), is trying to make sense of her encounter with a Jewish-German stranger, David Strom. She has just met him during Marian Anderson's 1939 free open-air concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial—famously organized by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. "Now, in her mother's kitchen, it shamed her to think how she must have invented the whole trip" (135). Delia Daley is a young woman falling in love, but what she sees is not

opportunity, but impossibility—of the connection between an African American woman and a white man. She reasons, "Nothing had happened. She'd traveled nowhere. And yet, the man had traveled to that nowhere with her. She couldn't have invented that. His eyes, as they said good-bye, already remembered the place in detail" (135). The two connect over their love for music, but in the segregated America of 1939, their special moment has no spacial coordinates into which to expand.

The want of place is a problem that the young couple-to-be share with their admired singer Marian Anderson, a phenomenal contralto and one of the most celebrated twentieth-century opera singers, who performed throughout the United States and Europe. Returning from a "triumphal tour of Europe," Anderson cannot sing from the "capital's best stage," Constitution Hall, from which she is banned by its owners, the Daughters of the American Revolution (31). Asked by the press about their reasons, "the DAR answers that, by tradition, certain of the city's concert halls are reserved for performances by Miss Anderson's people. Constitution Hall is not one. It's not DAR policy to defy community standards. Should sentiment change, Miss Anderson might sing there. Sometime in the future. Or shortly thereafter" (32). The passage, a beautiful example of Powers's use of Bakhtinian double-voicing, begins with free indirect speech and then changes to the voice of Powers's narrator, the transition from "sometime in the future" to "or shortly thereafter" being an ironic commentary on the hollowness of the DAR's statement. Powers weaves into his novel the historical circumstances of the Anderson concert, chiefly the fact that upon this racially-motivated rebuff, Eleanor Roosevelt cancels her membership in the DAR and works with NAACP President Walter White to organize the Easter 1939 concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, drawing a mixed crowd of more than seventy-five thousand to the site and millions of

listeners to their radios.

The concert is remembered as an overwhelming success, but politically, it is only one mosaic piece among the many efforts that will lead to America's (at least official) desegregation. Delia Daley and David Strom marry against the resistance of Delia's family, and against the social constraints of segregation, which leads to multiple frictions that Powers explores artfully. The initial reaction of Delia's father, "What ever possessed you to side with those who've done your own—," is only the prelude to more complications (217). Once their two boys have been born—and their daughter is expected—the question the Strom couple face is how to raise their children, what to teach them. Delia and David Strom decide to "raise the children beyond race" (424). They do not want to impose the warped concept of race on their sons and daughter. Delia explains to her father William Daley, "'We don't name them. They'll do that for themselves.' Anything they want. 'We're going to raise them for when everybody will be past color'" (424). William Daley counters his daughter's proposition by exclaiming, "You mean you're going to raise them white" (425). "Past color" and "beyond race" are terms that send William Daley on a diatribe during a visit at his daughter's house. "*Beyond color? You know what beyond color means? We're already there. Beyond color means hide the black man. Wipe him out. Means everybody play the one annihilating game white's been playing since*—" (425). To his daughter's dream that at some point in America's near future "*everybody's going to be mixed*" he retorts, "*There is no mixed. . . . Never will be. It's one thing or the other. And they can't be the one, not in this world. It's the other, girl. You know that. What's your problem*?" (426). Their ideas are for him but illusions, disconnected from the facts of real-world America.

The reaction of the medical doctor father is aggravated by his own latest

experience of racism. Planning to combine a visit to his daughter's house with his attendance at "the big post-war conference on the latest development in sulfa drugs and antibiotics hosted by Mount Sinai and Columbia," he gets to the hotel only to be denied admission (417). After coming from Philadelphia to New York for the professional event and private visit, he has to restrict his trip to the private purpose only. At the end of dinner at the Stroms', he finally tells his daughter and son-in-law about the hostile reception:

> You wanted to know how the conference went? . . . I wish I could tell you. You see, I missed the better part of it. Detained downstairs in the lobby, first by the hotel dick, and later by a small but efficient police escort. A slight misunderstanding. You see, I couldn't, in fact, be Dr. William Daley of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, because Dr. Daley is a real medical doctor with genuine credentials, while I'm just a nigger busting his woolly head into a civilized meeting of medical professionals. (419)

The insult of having been rejected weighs heavily on Dr. Daley and is not the best prologue to a discussion of his daughter's and son-in-law's decision to bring up the grandchildren beyond race. He even forgets that this attitude stems in part from how he raised her, that he taught her to "be anything. Do anything. Dare them to stop you" (36). Both Delia and her father want what is best for the children, yet despite using the same language, the referents on which they draw are no longer the same. Delia tries to break free from imposed meanings, hushing her father for using the word "negro," whereas her father insists that to avoid terms that denote the social implications of racial discrimination amounts to denying its firm grip on the lives of African Americans and finally to choose white over black. This conflict that is not theirs will divide them,

despite their love and appreciation for each other—the visit and heated discussion leads to an enduring fallout. Jonah, Joseph, and Ruth will grow up bereft of grandparents, without maternal grandparents because of the conflict over racial issues and without paternal ones because they have gone missing during the Nazi regime, and are most likely dead. A note that David Strom receives from his father's old headmaster in Germany shortly before his marriage to Delia all but confirms the certainty of their death. After the fall of Holland, where David's parents had gone into hiding, "an NSB neighbor in Schiedam . . . turned them in for *Arbeitseinsatz*," an indication that they were returned to Germany, and no further trace of them is to be found (288). Powers centers the young Strom family in racial and ethnic hostilities, where the exclusion of otherness proceeds all the way to its conclusion, death.

Music is the only mode of existence in which the weight of racial discrimination and resistance against their union is suspended. The alternate measure of time in music becomes a space in itself. As long as the family inhabits that space in their evenings of domestic music, they are safe. Their eldest son Jonah plays the piano at four, and his brother Joseph, one year younger, soon follows suit. The two fast acquire an astounding repertoire of classical music, playfully taught by their mother, who has studied to become a professional singer for years. Her career as a soprano is curbed when, as a young woman, she gets invited to an audition at Philadelphia's great conservatory, but upon her arrival, the secretary calls the Dean to take care of the "confusion" allegedly surrounding her application. "Please forgive us. A letter should have gone out to you. All the positions in your range have already been offered. It looks, also, as if we're probably about to lose one of our soprano faculty. You're . . . You . . .," the dean stammers, embarrassed by his own ludicrous excuses that seek to conceal the fact that the school

will simply not accept a black student (86). Delia is shattered by the experience; with the assistance of her father she finds a school that is willing to take her in, "but both father and daughter knew, without ever admitting as much to each other, that she would never, now, be schooled at the upper level of her skills, let alone the lower reaches of her dreams" (88). No wonder then that Marian Anderson is her idol, the one African American singer who has broken into the field, and who, as David Strom muses at the concert in 1939, is able to "tear[] open the fabric of space-time" (41). Through music, the Stroms create their own space-time, the domestic sphere in which only their shared interest in music counts. They sing Rossini, W. C. Hardy, Bach, or Gilbert and Sullivan, "crawl[ing] through loopy timelike holes in the evening, five lines braiding in space, each one curling back on the other, spinning in place" (11). Their favorite game, "Crazed Quotations," entails an exchange of musical phrases on the piano in an exuberant competition between David and Delia to see who can keep the musical conversation going longer, a game that makes of different genres of music the "wildest mixed marriages, [and] love matches," very much like their own (29).

The idea of raising their children beyond race, and instead with the help of the unifying force of music, reflects the consolation that the Strom parents draw from their shared musical passion. But their strategy to accomplish the task through the isolation caused by home schooling and avoidance of a definite vocabulary for race works only as long as their children are not confronted with questions of racial belonging. The eldest son is the first for whom the tonal gap between his parents grows "too wide . . . to call it chance" (17). To his question, "Mama. [. . .] You are a Negro, right? And Da's . . . some kind of Jewish guy. What exactly does that make me, Joey, and Root?", (terms he has picked up on the street), his parents have no definitive answer. Joseph recalls, "'You

must run your own race,' our father pronounced. I felt he was casting us out into the coldest space" (29). Whereas the annulment of race represents for Delia and David the hope for liberation from unwanted constraints, it entails for their children the denial of any sense of belonging, even if to the many mixed-raced people in American society, for whom the color line is not a metaphorical abstraction, but a division that people see running directly through their bodies. First neighborhood kids—and then, once Jonah becomes a professional tenor with his brother as his accompanist, members of audiences —confront them with the question, "What exactly *are* you boys?" (6). The two Strom sons are, in fact, not easily gauged by those who need to categorize everybody as either white or black—given that their mother "was light for her family, and my father, the palest Eurosemitic" (16). About Jonah we learn that he "f[alls] right between them," that his hair is "more wavy than curly, and just too dark for carrot. His eyes are hazel. . . . His nose is narrow, his cheeks the width of a paperback book" (16-7). Joseph is a shade darker—he "darkens up a little" after birth, "but stops right around cream with a little coffee" (335). Given, however, that the phenotypical features of blackness are not very pronounced in either of the boys, they are not easy to categorize for those who firmly inhabit post-war American racism as if it were one of the country's universal coordinates, and for whom there cannot be excellence without whitemess.

The Stroms painfully experience, though, that the dichotomy of black and white is not the only one that keeps catching up with them. Jonah's first application to a music school, "one of the city's two top conservatory prep programs," is turned down although "the judges were sold" after only "twenty bars into [Jonah's] a cappella rendition of 'Down by the Salley Gardens'" (19). David Strom inquires and learns that this time, not blackness, but Jewishness is the problem: "A music program without Jews! Madman!

How can you have classical music without Jews?" he bursts out to his wife (20). The Stroms will have to send their son all the way from New York to Boston, and have him join a boarding pre-conservatory, to which his brother Joseph will follow shortly, signaling the end of their blissful domestic musical evenings of five.

David Strom's profession as a quantum physicist brings into the novel a whole different perspective on time and space, and his own experience of things is constantly informed by mathematical theories that are part of his research. He has escaped Nazism in a series of close calls, the latest in the form of asylum granted by the United States "on the strength of a single theoretical paper" (42). Confirmation of his asylum comes "a decade before it might have, hastened by a cosmological confluence that happens once every other lifetime" (42). The confluence in question has much to do with the American demand for gifted physicists who will be able to move the development of the atomic bomb along fast enough for its deployment at the end of the Second World War. David Strom will be drawn into this work as a consultant, for his mathematical skill rather than his research. Several of David's colleagues have a similar history and are Jewish, and seeing them together on occasion strikes Delia Strom as if they were "a big self-knit international nation of the dispossessed . . . . Where else could this hapless group live except where her David does—in the borderless state that recognizes no passports, the country of particles and numbers" (330). He revels in stories that suggest all racial discrimination to be mathematically false.

The "borderless state" of quantum physics comforts David, since it allows him to entertain ideas of different time modes and of how they might affect the lives of people, that it might be possible to catch up with one another after the commonly-accepted spatiotemporal coordinates close off that possibility. On a Sunday walk, he announces to

his seven- and eight-year-old boys, "*Now* is nothing but a very clever lie," and he elaborates his point by telling the imaginary story of a pair of twins being separated for forty years; one twin stays on earth, the other travels in a rocket "near the speed of light" (151). When the space-traveler comes back, "the twin brothers aren't the same age anymore! . . . the boy who stays home, he is old enough to be his brother's grandfather." The other one "has jumped into his brother's future, without ever leaving his own present" (151). The boys understand little of this, and, looking back at the afternoon as a middle-aged man, Joseph muses, "he doesn't really need us. . . . He doesn't need any audience at all. He's with Bubbie and Zadie, with his sister and her husband, working on a way to bring them back" (153). David Strom finds consolation in entertaining the possibility of alternative temporal modes in which family members whom he has lost might actually not be dead, but live on and will be found again. However, his aloofness strikes his children as abandonment, and they feel left alone when facing the effects of racial discrimination in their very real, contemporary America. Joseph remembers, "He's never once wrapped his head around what time is doing to us, to our family. He struggles, in his study, to do away with time. But the world will do away with all five of us before then, if it can. Da's score of scribbles distresses him more than any slur ever leveled at him" (92). David's preoccupation with time modes that might give his German family a second chance to live prevents him from perceiving the need of his own children for his support and empathy. He embodies the scientific mind capable of entertaining thoughts far too complex for most, yet also motivated by the emotional distress that life under the brutal conditions of the Nazi regime has inflicted on his family, a distress to which his married life has added the hardships of racial discrimination against African Americans. His professional preoccupation is as much

with his personal need to prove the existence of alternate spatiotemporal modes as with his desire to advance science. In the novel, quantum theory is also more than a device to characterize an aloof and self-absorbed family father. David Strom participates in the revolutionary scientific research of the twentieth century that leaves nothing unquestioned; in the realm of literature, monologism and linearity are among the concepts that become questionable, a fact that asks for revisions of traditional narrative.

To the extent that *The Time of Our Singing* offers a traditional story, it is the story of a mixed-race family that tries to create a space to live which is destroyed by segregation, the turmoil of the civil rights era, and its aftermath. The Strom children live to witness the race riots in 1992, at which Jonah, the eldest son, dies from being hit on his ear by a piece of paving stone while trying to get involved in the struggle of "his" race, which he feels he has neglected throughout his musical career. As a middle-aged man, Joseph helps his sister Ruth found a primary school in Oakland, and thus realize a dream she and her husband Robert had entertained for years. Robert will not be part of the project: like Ruth, a one-time Black Panther, he is stopped by a police patrol, and as he reaches into his front pocket for his wallet, one policeman fires a projectile of rubber at his knee cap. Robert dies in hospital from anesthesia complications during knee surgery. Chronologically, the last public event narrated will be Louis Farrakhan's Million Man March of 1995 at the Washington Mall, which Joseph will attend with his two nephews, Ruth's sons Kwane and young Robert, also called Ode. The event brings them back to the very location where Delia Daley and David Strom first met at Marian Anderson's open-air concert in 1939, a coincidence of consequence: the novel suggests that for a moment, young Robert is meeting his grandparents there, while they were having their first encounter in the past.

The coincidence is the most striking among three similar events, occurrences that are not plausible in a universe of linearity and causality where time and space are definite and universally observable. In 1995 at the Washington Mall, little Robert gets lost in the crowd for a moment, only to reemerge and report that he has been "just out talking. Meeting people" (625). The moment connects to several allusions made throughout the novel. In 1939, at the Anderson concert, Delia Daley and David Strom are ready to part after a short conversation, when they see a little boy, obviously lost, and they stay around to help him find his people. The boy has lost his brother and uncle, with whom he is at the Mall, his mother is originally from New York, and they all now live in California. David Strom involves him in a conversation about music, the stars, and the universe; and the boy shows astounding interest and comprehension (223-24). Later, Delia muses that "she'd never have married [David] but for the lost boy, the hidden future they fell into together at the stray boy's words, that day in Washington" (331). In the last chapter, following the 1995 Washington event, these previous allusions are clarified: young Robert, also called Ode, has met his grandparents, an impossibility within linear time, but a suggestion that applies to narrative the principles of quantum mechanics in "the dynamic of the multiple-moment" (Dewey, "Little Knots" 207). Earlier in the novel, another incident of the same kind occurs. At the age of eighteen, Joseph follows a woman on the street who wears "a navy blue midcalf-length dress with wide, pointed shoulders, decades out of date" (195). After losing track of the woman, he believes he has fallen in love with her, but he never encounters her again until decades later his grandfather shows him a photograph of his mother Delia, in which she wears "a dress of midcalf length with wide, pointed shoulders, the height of fashion in the years before my birth" (582). Joseph asks his grandfather the color of the dress, but answers

his own question with “Navy blue,” which his grandfather confirms (582). Joseph, the novel suggests, has seen his mother in 1960, in an outfit of the late 1930s, and a few years after her death. The third incident involves both Joseph and Jonah in Los Angeles during the Watts Riots in 1965. After a day in a recording studio, while violence rages outside, Jonah wants to get closer to the action and see. He gets beaten up by two black youths who take him for a white man, and while Joseph hunches over him, “a middle aged man walked past and brushed our backs” (325). The “gray-haired man” carries “a can of house paint and a brush” (325). More than thirty years later, Jonah calls Joseph from Los Angeles, where he has gone for a concert. The Rodney King Riots erupt during his stay, he once again mingles with the crowd, and he tells his brother on the phone how one young man has come out of a looted hardware store and handed him a “can of paint and a handful of brushes” (618). Jonah goes about and marks people with a paint streak on their backs, in a gesture like “the Passover angel of his father’s faith” (Dewey, “Little Knots” 206). Jonah, the scene suggests, has marked himself and his brother when they were at the same place three decades earlier. All of these incidents test not only the reader’s credulity, but also our willingness to accept a much less secured place in the universe than we might care to inhabit. “After all,” Joseph Dewey writes, “the bold legacy of Einstein and his generation of theoretical physicists, among them David Strom, is the incautious speculation that the universe is not only more than we imagine but in fact more than we can imagine” (“Little Knots” 206).

The unsettling incidents woven into the story disrupt its linearity, as does the novel’s thoroughly nonlinear structure and use of two narrative voices. The thirty-three chapters of Powers’s sprawling 631-page text lead readers back and forth between the many times and places in which the lives of the Strom family members unfold. The

account of Delia's and David's courtship follows their eldest son's first concert at the age of twenty; Delia's first conversation with her mother about the white man she has met appears after Delia's and David's eldest son has moved to boarding school. Delia's death in a domestic fire is narrated immediately after she has revealed to her mother that the man she has met is "not . . . entirely one of us" (138). Even within many of the novel's chapters, flashbacks and leaps into the future upset any expectation of a chronologically-narrated story. Furthermore, the novel has two narrators, Joseph, the younger of the Strom sons, and a third-person narrator whose point of focus is often Joseph's mother Delia Strom.[61] The two narrators alternate in irregular intervals, and on two occasions in mid-chapter, so that transitions between the two voices become fluid to the point that some of them easily escape a first reading. Through his use of two narrators Powers achieves both racial and gender cross-representation, while also avoiding narration from a single point of view; and the effects of his choices have significant effects. Racism, the importance of music, and the principles of quantum theory as the novel's major themes raise the questions: "How does time unfold in space?" "Is there more than one spatiotemporal mode in which life exists?", and "How do such possibilities relate to racism?" At the same time, the novel's formal structure offers the experience of space-

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[61] Other novelists who have employed racial and gender cross-representation in their narratives include Sinclair Lewis in *Kingsblood Royal* (1947) and Robert Penn Warren in *Band of Angels* (1955). Both writers published their novels in the aftermath of World War II and the defeat of racist German Nazism, just to remind the American public that racial issues at home also needed to be addressed. Lewis's protagonist Neil is a white man who learns that he has 1/32 of blood lineage to a black ancestor, a discovery that leads him to reevaluate his view of race, and which will cause many of his friends to reject him as black. Warren's protagonist Amantha is a mulatto woman who grows up free in the years before the Civil War, but is sold into slavery by her white father's creditors literally from her father's grave side. Warren thus engages in both racial and gender cross-representation, and it is not surprising that he has been criticized for attempting to write from the perspective of a female protagonist. However, while "Warren has often been faulted for a failure to understand the feminine psyche, . . . Lucy Ferris, Aimee Berger, and other critics of a feminist bent have argued to the contrary" (Clark 177). Cross-representation of race and gender remains a contested issue in literature, and Powers's effort at it has received both appraisal and criticism.

time beyond linearity and causality, and the singular perspective.

In tone, length, and setting, Powers's novel could not be more different from Johnson's *Middle Passage*. Johnson's humorous tone sharply contrasts with the somber narration of the younger Strom son and the equally drab third-person narrator. The more than six hundred pages of Powers's novel make it virtually three times the length of Johnson's. The latter's seafarer novel situates Calhoun's adventures for the most part on the open sea, away from civilization. Powers's novel, on the other hand, focuses alternately on the domestic sphere of the Strom family and a series of landmark political events of twentieth-century America. These events include Rosa Parks's act of civil disobedience that led to the Montgomery bus boycott, and the murder of Emmett Till in 1955—Powers provides a detailed fictionalization of the gruesome last hours in Emmett's life. Both novels, however, explore multiple spatiotemporal relations and their implications through narrative style. Johnson links the voyage of the *Republic*, and metaphorically of America, to African history with which both are ultimately connected. Through the influx of diverse voices into the increasingly expansive narrative that his protagonist records, he creates a space for philosophical and conceptual reflection in which racism is merely a late aberration of history. Points of origin give way to intersections, a term that is of great importance in Powers's work, as well. *The Time of Our Singing* juxtaposes the narrow definitions of race before, during, and after the civil rights era with the scientific advances in relativity and quantum theory that emerged simultaneously, and that belied the very notions of fixed space, the universal flow of time, and the separation of subject and object on which racism rests. The novel celebrates music with its diverse temporal modes—a human practice in which such differences are embraced—while also depicting how in everyday life dualisms are

upheld and continue to undergird racial discrimination.

“The Last Generalist” and the Complexity of Field Theories

Ten years ago, Powers talked in an interview about his early professional hopes “to arrive somewhere where I could be the last generalist and do that in good faith. I thought for a long time that physics might be that place” (Williams, Jeffrey). Back in 1975, he started his university education as a physics major, but switched to English Literature during his first semester. Physics, it turned out, would require specialization in ever so small a field, and would not afford the “aerial view” that Powers was seeking (Williams, Jeffrey). Literature promised to provide that unlimited space of investigation he wanted. “Since literature seemed to be about everything that there is—about the human condition—I figured that a good literary critic would have to make himself expert at that big picture” (Williams, Jeffrey). But Powers found this notion to be an illusion as well: from his experience during his years as a Masters student, he concluded that “the professionalization of literary criticism has taken reductionism as its model, and that it too can lead to learning more and more about less and less until you're in danger of knowing everything there is to know about nothing” (Williams, Jeffrey). It is in creating literature that he finally found his vocation.

Since Powers’s decision to become a novelist was motivated by his desire to be a generalist, it is not surprising that he has shown an abiding interest in the increasing relevance of systems theory, or more specifically, in the analogous attempts in literary criticism to identify a paradigm shift similar to the one in science. Systems theory, first articulated by Ludwig von Bertalanffy in the 1950s, “insisted that real world phenomena, far from being understandable in isolation, are always open to and in

constant interaction with an endless extensible network of contexts and enveloping environments" (Powers, "Making the Rounds" 305). The paradigm shift concerns mainly the relation between part and whole. Previously, science had empirically studied parts to infer information about the whole, but from the mid-twentieth century a growing scientific consensus posited the need for actually studying the whole itself in order to gain insights about it. Katherine Hayles uses the term "field concept" to denote those common features of different field models that "are characteristic of twentieth-century thought in general," and she identifies interconnectedness as the most important feature among them (*Cosmic Web* 9). She explains the paradigm shift that occurred during the twentieth century as follows:

> In marked contrast to the atomistic Newtonian idea of reality, in which physical objects are discrete and events are capable of occurring independently of one another and the observer, a field view of reality pictures objects, events, and observer as belonging inextricably to the same field; the disposition of each, in this view, is influenced,—sometimes dramatically, sometimes subtly, but in every instance—by the disposition of the others. (10)

Hayles's statement incorporates insights drawn from relativity theory and quantum theory, namely, that the observer does not inhabit a neutral vantage point from which to investigate phenomena, but is an active part of them.

Developments in literary criticism analogous to systems theory have interrogated the degree to which different forms of "mimetic realist fiction" are in step with a reality whose dynamic complexity has become increasingly evident. Powers refers to Tom LeClair's *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (1987), in which LeClair

proposes the term "systems novel." Powers underlines LeClair's major claims about fictional characterization, namely that "the individual human cannot be adequately understood solely as an autonomous, self-expressing, self-reflecting entity, but must be seen as a node on an immensely complex network of economic, cultural, historical, and technological forces" ("Making the Rounds" 305-6). Selfhood, in other words, is interaction, or relationality, and the components involved are always changing and transforming. Thus, far from providing static description, in LeClair's view the "systems novel" captures "complex processes of reciprocity in which selves and environments come to bring about and shape each other" (306). It follows from Hayles's definition, though, that the novel, as one entity among many, forms part of the field, a point not lost on Powers. Accordingly, he envisions the function of the novel not as situated on the two-dimensional page that represents some form of worldview or other, but as unfolding "in the cubic space between the page and the reader" (307-8). More than twenty years after LeClair's remarks about the "systems novel," Powers suggests that a novelistic form in the "systems" tradition would be "generating new terrain by passing 'realism' and 'metafiction' through relational processes," in which the exclusive employment of one or the other mode is replaced by mutual reflection of both; such a form would be "inviting identification at one gauge while complicating it at others, refracting the private through the public, story through form, forcing the reading self into constant reciprocal renegotiations by always insisting that no level of human experience means anything without all the others" (308). Admittedly, many novels blend realism with metafiction, but the form that Powers describes would be what he calls "bastard hybrid," which I take to mean unpredictable in the proportions of previous modes from which its hybridity derives, and therefore absolutely challenging and disorienting with regard to

conventional expectations. If metafiction's former message was to say that all there is left to write about is writing itself, Powers's employment of metafiction situates it as a necessary and vital part of our reflection in a world that is largely the result of human construction. The realist element in this novelistic form, on the other hand, prevents any easy escape into the notion of a fantastic fictional world that is entirely different from our own.

If Powers's proposed novelistic form is promising with regard to its level of engagement with field concepts, a fundamental problematic that literature and science both face complicates such a view. How can the functioning of the all-encompassing field be adequately expressed in language? The Newtonian world view of "objects situated in an empty, rectilinear space and moving through time in one direction" cohered with "the deep structure of Indo-European languages" to the point that it attained "intuitive obviousness" (Hayles, *Cosmic Web* 16). Newtonian mechanics is in line with "the separation between subject and object, the duration of objects through time, and the uniform, unidirectional flow of time" that are basic structural features embedded in Indo-European languages (16). As Hayles points out, this argument, proposed by Benjamin Whorf, is not without its problems, since other worldviews emerged in European cultures and were expressed in the same family of languages; hence, rather than language alone, additional cultural phenomena must have contributed to the predominance of the Newtonian worldview than language alone (16n1). However, when considering how to express dynamics in which entities constantly influence each other, as in quantum mechanics, we run up against the limits of language to adequately describe such processes. Hayles writes, "According to Bohr, we define matter and energy through the terms of classical physics as either particle or wave," which falsifies

the actual processes described. What is needed, Bohr argued, is "a new mode of description designated as *complementary . . . "* (52). Another problem is that language "implies a viewpoint, a specific place at which the subject-object split is made" (53). The prioritizing of the subject in such linguistic constructs is not in tune with the reality described, since the subject is also an object on which other entities act. Every concept is thus only valid from a specific perspective, and needs re-articulating from different viewpoints. The observer is at all times in the field, not looking at it from the outside, so that observation depends on perspective, and the observer can never see the point at which he stands. What we can do is learn from the limitations of our linguistic possibilities, develop them further where possible, and be aware of one-sided perspectives where viewpoint cannot be eliminated (Hayles 54-5). In *The Time of Our Singing*, Powers encounters the problem of representation of field concepts in language, and the close reading below addresses how he approaches such linguistic constraints.

If one understands the interconnectedness about which Hayles speaks—and which Powers seeks to capture in his fiction—as all-encompassing, one deep-seated dichotomy dissolves, and the novel makes this dissolution apparent. A worldview of connectedness cannot be reconciled with the habitual separation of fact and emotion, or of idea and desire. Powers explains, "A new discovery in, say, a stem-cell laboratory has enormous repercussions for every domain of human affairs: biological, economic, legal, psychological, social, spiritual. . . . There truly are no independent disciplines that operate exclusive of any other—just people, acting out of very human hopes, fears, and desires" (Burn 171). His statement might be taken as a perfect description of his fictional character David Strom, committed as he is to scientific research, steeped in mathematical calculation, yet also driven in his work by his emotional impulses. As

Powers points out, “fiction is uniquely privileged to place its camera at those imaginary boundaries between disciplines, to show the ways in which the turbulent currents generated by any mode of apprehending the world necessarily cascade into all other streams of thought” (171). However, the novelistic form that he strives to create does more than merely observe. It has “the potential to be the most complex set of experimental networks ever built, one that can model feedback passed among all other gauges of speculation and inhabitation, fact and concern, idea and feeling” (“Making the Rounds” 309). *The Time of Our Singing* creates such a network of connections and explores their implications.

A look at the issues Powers has engaged in his novels over time shows that he has stayed true to his initial aim to become a generalist. Powers has steeped himself in novelistic explorations of different technologies and professions—photography in *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985), nuclear warfare juxtaposed with Disney in *Prisoner's Dilemma* (1988), genetics in *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991), pediatrics in *Operation Wandering Soul* (1993), computer science in *Galatea 2.2* (1995), the impact of a chemical company on the health of close-living residents in *Gain (*1998), virtual reality and the experience of an American teacher held hostage in Beirut in *Plowing the Dark* (2000), and neurology in his most recent novel, *The Echo Maker* (2006). While on one level, *The Time of Our Singing* (2003) continues such projects with its references to quantum mechanics and music, it also diverges from Powers's other novels by employing racially cross-referential writing. As Joseph Dewey points out, *The Time of Our Singing* resembles Powers's other novels in that it “braids multiple narrative lines that at first read appear to have little to do with each other but that come to compel, to complement each other, offering each unsuspected depth” (“Little Knots” 200).

However, *The Time of Our Singing* "appears to foreground the socio-political" to a point that his other novels have not (202). In his other novels, Dewey writes, "Hot-button Issues . . . have always been defined against a narrative context ultimately more interested in the implications of the aesthetic impulse" (202). It would be false to say, though, that in *The Time of Our Singing*, the socio-political takes precedence over aesthetics. Rather, the novel draws connections between the socio-political and aesthetics that show both to be part of the same context in which humans apprehend their life-world through concepts, theories, systems of thought, ideologies, and artistic form. In this respect, the novel does more than reflect Powers's aim to be a generalist; it engages with the question of how one can tell a story, which by definition requires to draw boundaries, while capturing the notion of the interconnectedness of all things posited by field theories.

Critical responses

Although *The Time of Our Singing* was published in 2003, only two critical essays on the novel have appeared so far, both of them very recently. Joseph Dewey's "Little Knots, Tied in the Clothing of Time: *The Time of Our Singing* as a Dual-Time Narrative," was published in *Intersections* (2008), an anthology of essays on Powers's novels, and is the only one in the volume that discusses *The Time of Our Singing*. Sabine Sielke's "Translation and Transdisciplinarity: Mapping Contact Zones between Literary and Scientific Practice Cultures of Translation," is part of *Cultures of Translation* (2008), a volume on cultural translations in world literature. Besides the usual book reviews that appeared upon the novel's publication, for now only these two scholars have contributed to a conversation that is still unfolding. Why this hesitation? one is

tempted to ask, especially given that Powers's other novels have not lacked critical attention, including his latest publication, *The Echo Maker* (2006). The answer may lie at least partly in the fact that *The Time of Our Singing* employs racial cross-representation makes it fit less clearly into any category with which Powers's previous work has been aligned. Critics have yet to come to terms with how to situate Powers's novel in the landscape of contemporary American literature.

Dewey addresses the divided reception with which Powers's novel has met due to its cross-referentiality. He points out that Powers has been both commended and criticized for his mixed-race family saga; applauded for "daring to encompass within a sweeping generational saga the entire breadth of the civil rights era from Marian Anderson's 1939 concert to Louis Farrakhan's Million Man March," and censured for the

> staggering presumptiveness of a university-educated white from DeKalb, Illinois, who was not even born when Rosa Parks took her stand and who spent the most dramatic years of the civil-rights movement in Thailand, speaking from the privileged perspective of first-person intimacy about how it felt to be black in racist America during the defining decades of the civil-rights movement: the slow smolder of sanctioned humiliation, the grind of small-minded intolerance, the frustration of opportunities routinely denied, of lives routinely diminished. (202)

Powers's experience of living in Thailand as part of an ethnic minority between the age of ten and fifteen "disabused him of at least one assumption of privilege. 'Only white men . . . have the luxury of ignoring race,'" is a notion that did not coincide with his experience in Bangkok, where his father, a high school teacher, was posted at the end of

the 1960s, at the height of the Vietnam War (Brockes). About his experience of being part of a white minority in Bangkok he says,

> I can't pretend that anything I've ever experienced can compare to what black or mixed-race people confront on a daily basis in this country. But I can say that I drew on weak analogies in my own past, most specifically being an American child in Asia. I would be visually identified on the street. When I opened my mouth and started speaking Thai, in the way that children are capable of when they pick up a language, I delighted in the sense of imbalance—and category-breaking—that I could instantly see in the faces of people that I met. (Brockes)

Powers's experience is reflected in many moments in the novel, but as he implies, his belonging to an ethnic minority was crucially different from the experience of African Americans. Most importantly, for African Americans, America has been at once the only place to call home, yet also the place of their alienation, whereas for Powers and his family, their stay in Thailand had a return ticket attached to it. Powers's take on racism indicates how he views the possibility of literature influencing common place perceptions about race: "We will live with racism forever. . . . But senses of self, senses of belonging, senses of us and of others? Those are up for grabs" (Brockes). Even if exclusions cannot be entirely eliminated, the lines along which they occur are malleable. "He does not doubt that, over time, the slow arts have power to change perception, in the way that running water cuts into rock over generations" (Brockes). Both Dewey's and Sielke's critical essays analyze what the novel accomplishes in the way of challenging common perceptions, a direction which the close reading below pursues as well.

Dewey suggests that *The Time of Our Singing* basically intertwines two

competing narratives, one that follows the traditional mode of linearity, causality, closure, and the like, and another narrative that challenges such assumptions in favor of more complex, fluid notions of space, time, and event. My reading of Powers's novel diverts from Dewey's insofar as Joseph's and the third-person narrator's narrative do not seem to fit into a dynamic of narrative and counter-narrative. Instead, I argue, Powers rearranges their narratives into a sequence of irregular alteration between the two and thereby constitutes a new narrative, under which he, however, does not subsume the two narrative voices. First-person narrator, third-person narrator, and authorial voice remain separate, and their relationship is not one of counter-narrative, but of polyphony.

With this claim, Dewey captures, however, a crucial concern of Powers's sprawling novel, namely, to challenge traditional narrative modes, albeit (as Dewey points out) not always easily detectable among the eventful accounts of over sixty years of a family saga and American history. As a paradigm for the two narratives that Dewey finds juxtaposed in Powers's novel, he identifies a scene in which David Strom takes his seven- and eight-year-old sons to the Cloisters, "a museum complex overlooking the Hudson River near New York City" ("Little Knots", 198). The complex consists of parts of "five different French abbeys, reassembled stone by stone" (198). A century-old tapestry, massively hanging from one wall, "shows a beautiful white unicorn, . . . repeatedly stabbed, chained to a tree, and then fenced in" (198). Little seven-year-old Joseph is moved to tears. The scene, Dewey claims, is rife with symbolism, and he reads Joseph's account of it fifty years later as "the manipulation of foreshadowing and symbolism by a savvy narrative authority" (199).[62] According to Dewey, the scene

[62] I return to the question whether Joseph writes his narrative when he is over fifty below, since the question bears on important structural features of the novel.

foreshadows the choreographed causality with which Joseph's narrative will move towards its conclusion (199). In Joseph's narrative, his brother, Jonah, the "singularly gifted classical vocalist with an astonishing 3 ½ octave range," will be ruined by the culturally-ingrained racism with which the Stroms are confronted throughout their lives. In Joseph's account, Dewey writes, Jonah becomes "the unicorn, magically, sumptuously different; cruelly, tragically destroyed" (199).[63] The otherworldliness of the unicorn—it has never been seen, yet has been present in Eastern and Western cultures for ages—its benign reputation, and its supposed healing powers make it the perfect image to represent Jonah's ethereal voice and astounding physical features, all to be destroyed—like the unicorn tricked into captivity—by racism's blindness to the beauty of difference.

Through David Strom another viewpoint enters the novel, although, in Dewey's reading, one that remains unrevealed to Joseph. At the Cloisters, David Strom wants his sons to see beyond the unicorn image; his question, "What is this picture of?" is not directed toward its immediate content but something else that he sees as he "stares at a point through the unicorn, behind the tapestry, beyond the wall it hangs on" (Powers, *Time* 158). Frustrated little Joseph is ready to cry, not able to give his father a satisfactory answer. "Knots, boychik. The picture is of knots, no less than every picture we live in. Little knots, tied in the clothing of time" (158). As Dewey points out, in Joseph's rendering of his father with "his thick spectacles aglint," a strong accent, and his often erroneous word choice, "David Strom at first reading can appear to be a self-

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63 "Unicorn: a mythical animal typically represented as a horse with a single straight horn projecting from its forehead; a heraldic representation of such an animal, with a twisted horn, a deer's feet, a goat's beard, and a lion's tail. . . . The horn of this animal was reputed to possess medicinal or magical properties, especially as an antidote to or preventive of poison. It was also said that it could only be captured by a virgin. . . . In heraldry, the unicorn is a supporter of the Royal Arms of the United Kingdom. Unicorn's horn: a horn regarded as or alleged to be obtained from the legendary unicorn, but in reality that of the rhinoceros, narwhal, or other animal, frequently mounted or made into a drinking cup and employed as a preventive of or charm against poison" ("Unicorn").

absorbed egg-head, emotionally clumsy, unresponsive to the simple beauty of the image or . . . to the tears of his own sensitive son" ("Little Knots" 199). The son's discontent shows, even after decades, as he describes his father in retrospect as a "backroom doodler lost amid dense . . . conjectures," concerned with the cosmos "while unable to engage the immediate world with any sensitivity" (199). This rendering, Dewey argues, is a "serious misreading of the father—one in a series of telling gestures that reveal Joseph Strom as a problematic narrative-authority" (200). What David Strom proposes to his sons at the Cloisters, and Powers to his readers, is "a revolutionary re-envisioning of time, one that dismisses the notion of the moment and thus by extension upends the very foundation of traditional narrative itself," a form of narrative, Dewey adds, "which his son fifty years later will so earnestly write" (200). *The Time of Our Singing*, like the unicorn tapestry, offers a surface story, one indeed that evokes empathy and easily absorbs the reader, while Powers suggests simultaneously "a much larger (and far more difficult) wisdom: look closely at those narrative moments, interrogate the story, . . . and fixity will yield to fluidity, the moment to infinities, surface to depths, reality to realities, purpose to patterns, and ultimately, heartache to awe" (200).

In Dewey's reading, Joseph's narrative follows a traditional and familiar pattern: "select revealing moments . . . render such recollections of beauty, mayhem, treachery, triumph, and joy within the translucent amber of language; and then choreograph the moments with elegant causality and with a relentless momentum move toward an unearned epiphany" (200). Dewey sees a sharp distinction between Joseph's narrative, thematically driven by race, and the "thirteen randomly set, apparently distracting chapters that radically alter the narrative voice from narrow first-person to sweeping omniscience and," as he claims, "in the process sustain a reach far deeper than Joseph's"

(203). These chapters are, for Dewey, Powers's means of investigating to what point his readers are committed to story, "whether we are penned into (pun intented) stultifying narratives that endlessly replay with self-justifying inevitability the faux-dramatics of identity, that unimaginatively define 'reality' as the unfolding of discrete events moved by the unconvincing propulsion of manipulated suspense toward the inevitable dreary reward of insight . . ." (203). Against Joseph's "Newtonian narrative," Dewey claims, "bursts with unseemly audacity, uninvited (and unacknowledged), a slender quantum narrative that defies . . . linearity, causality, direction, resolution, the packaging of event into convenient moments, and the unavoidable epiphany that generates unexpected generosity" (203). Dewey's admirable depiction of the "qualities" of traditional narratives that tend toward the kind of closure that life actually withholds, efficaciously delineates the shortcomings of such narrative modes, at least from a contemporary perspective, which might be summed up as follows: they are based on classical (Newtonian) mechanics, which "views the world as composed of objects situated in an empty, rectilinear space and moving through time in one direction" (Hayles 16).[64] And yet, those sequences in the novel that defy Newtonian mechanics are not carefully contained in the thirteen chapters that interlace with Joseph's.[65] On the contrary, they occur almost invariably amidst his narrative and toy with the implications of the

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[64] See also p. 181 of this study.

[65] Quantum theory's insight that "electrons . . . sometimes act like waves, while light sometimes acts like particles" was complemented by Heisenberg's "'thought-experiment' with a gamma-ray microscope. By closely analyzing how a very small particle—for example an electron—is 'seen', Heisenberg showed that the quantum of light used to observe the electron is sufficient to change the particle's momentum. Therefore, by the time the image is reflected back to the microscope lens, the particle is no longer following the same path it was because observing it has also disturbed it. . . . Heisenberg's analysis had a revolutionary impact because it made clear that the indeterminacy set forth by the Uncertainty Relation is not just a result of limitations in the measuring instruments, but fundamental to the process of measurement itself. It implies that there is no way to measure a system without interacting with it, and no way to interact with it without disturbing it" (Hayles 51).

scientific insight that location is not fixed but interrelated with observation. Although Dewey acknowledges the occurrence of those moments in Joseph's narrative, he claims that incidents like the meeting between Delia, David, and the young boy in whom they see their future grandson, Joseph's pursuit of the woman in a blue dress who becomes associated with his mother as her younger self, and Jonah's possible marking of his thirty-year younger self and brother with paint on the streets of Los Angeles, are "smuggled into Joseph's narrative" without him ever making the connections ("Little Knots" 207). That these incidents seem to slip into Joseph's narrative rather than forming part of his deliberate account of past events has, however, not so much to do with his ignorance of their signification, but with the strongly felt presence of a third voice in the novel that constructs a narrative distinct from both Joseph's and the third-person narrator's account: Powers's own. In *The Time of Our Singing*, the presence of the author does not blend with narrative voice, but is clearly distinct from it. The structure that Powers gives his novel does not coincide with the intention of a first-person narrator who sets out to tell the story of his family. Neither do the interspersed third-person sections merely fill in the parts of the Stroms' story that Joseph cannot know from his own experience. Both narrators' parts are aligned in such an erratic fashion that connections form only on the condition that the reader works hard to keep track of events and their relations, to the point of realizing that the novel renders such connections possible as much as questionable. Powers's structural choices do not suggest counter-narrative, but instead multiple voices, not unlike a Medieval piece of polyphonic music.

The many temporal rifts in *The Time of Our Singing* are also important to Sabine Sielke, who comments that "in Powers's novel, arts and sciences are not so much

synchronized or analogous, but folded around one another just as past, present, and future fold into, curve back, and loop around each other in a narrative replete with flashbacks and foreshadowing" (161). Starting in 1961, and "end[ing] in a return to the chance meeting" of Delia Daley and David Strom in 1939, the novel takes the reader back and forth between the 1930s and 1990s, with a digression to the 1840s to reveal the origin of the Daley family name. The time-traveling novel, Sielke argues, "not only calls into question both traditional and revisionary notions of American history and cultural memory. Like the cognitive sciences Powers's novel acknowledges the significance of forgetting which enables memory's primary function: to deal with the tasks in the present that may enable the future" (161). The point is well worth stating, and merits further attention. For instance, how does Powers effect such questioning? At which aspects of American history and cultural memory does he direct his critique?

Time shifts, however, do not merely move between different time periods, but are leaps between different points in spacetime.[66] Furthermore, Delia and David Strom painfully experience that spacetime is hardly neutral, but comes in combinations that are

[66]The term "spacetime" denotes the inseparability of space and time, contrary to earlier views that considered space and time as separate. Einstein first formulated the point in his Special Theory. Hayles describes how he arrived at his theory. She writes that at the age of sixteen, Einstein "tried to imagine how a light wave would look to someone traveling at the speed of light. He decided that to such an observer, the light beam would appear as a standing wave, oscillating back and forth without forward movement. This result puzzled Einstein not only because it was contradicted by Maxwell's equations, which implied that nonpropagating light was impossible, but more fundamentally because it implied that phenomena can appear different from different vantage points" (*Cosmic Web* 46). What he imagined is comparable to the experience of driving in a car while looking at a person who travels at the same speed in a train beside the road. Both travelers will have the impression of standing still in relation to each other. At the same time, to stand still is an illusion of the human brain, since even if we do not move for a moment, we change position in the universe, due to the movement of the earth. "In the Special theory, Einstein begins by assuming that the laws of physics should not depend on whether one is at rest or in uniform motion. He also assumes that the velocity of light in a vacuum is constant, regardless of the motion of its source" (46). These two assumptions represent the invariant laws of physics on which Einstein founded his theories. Einstein's Special Theory posits that "measurements of time, mass, and length are not absolute quantities but subject to change, depending on the reference frame from which they are made" (46). The Polish mathematician Hermann Minkowski interpreted the relation of time and space in the Special Theory as "a more sweeping absolute." He posited that "time and space are combined into the four-dimensional matrix of 'spacetime'" (46).

imbued with cultural and socio-political values. With their experiment to raise their children "beyond race," Sielke argues, they are "taking a leap of faith not so much into the future, but into utopia," which they try to reach through the "loops in time-space that both music and theoretical physics create" (162).[67] Neither the Daley family nor American society is ready for their experiment, and dwelling in music or in theory is not sufficient to make their experiment succeed.

The experiment demonstrates another of Sielke's claims: Powers does not "move science 'from the laboratory into life.' Instead his novels underline that such distinctions do not hold, that life is the lab and vice versa" (163). David Strom is convinced that his asylum in the States was "hastened by a cosmological confluence that happens once every other lifetime" (Powers, *Time* 42). "Likewise," Sielke writes, "he meets his future wife in what appears [to be] an inescapable pull of gravity that forces the unlikely proximity"—during the Anderson concert—"of two people who are not meant to mix, yet who share the passion for sounds of music that transgress lines of segregation" (163). In David Strom's mind, science and life mingle when he beholds the crowd at the Anderson concert. "This eye-level wall of flesh knocks the wind from him. The shimmer of tens of thousands of bodies, humanity broken down to atoms, an electrostatic n-body problem beyond any mathematics' ability to solve, panics him with its groundless physics, and he turns to run" (Powers, *Time* 42). The scene is an instance of Powers's "rephras[ing] the atrocities of history in terms of bad science" (Sielke 163). Powers's phrasing is indeed fraught with ambiguity: computer simulation of particle movement, when associated with real-life human bodies, seems powerless and lacking control in

[67] Sielke uses both "space-time," the conventional term, although usually not hyphenated, and "time-space," without, however, defining differences between the two.

facing the unpredictable movement of the crowd. Darker connotations suggest the "bad science" that practically reduced human bodies to anonymous swarms of particles in the mass extermination program of the Holocaust. Another association, the Middle Passage, brings an earlier aberration of human agency to mind. Strom, on the point of fleeing the scene, overcomes his panic attack when Marian Anderson's first notes hit his ear. He enters another spacetime, the one in which he will meet his future wife.

Powers's demonstration that the lab is not contained in the space of some university quarters—it must be added—is possible only through the capacity of literary narrative to encapsulate those moments in life during which an exceptional level of energy is generated, moments that might last only seconds or span entire decades. In Sielke's reading of *The Time of Our Singing*, narrativity is one of the commonalities between the sciences and the humanities that Powers foregrounds, "while at the same time exposing both the limits of this analogy and the arts' particular strengths" (161). Sielke's point coincides both with Powers's belief in the potential of the novel to create this broad sense of interconnectedness through narrative, and with Hayles's remarks about the difficulty of expressing field concepts adequately in scientific discourse. Sielke writes that in Powers's novel, "neither characters nor readers need work out the exact physics, though. It suffices to see that physics happens everywhere, in the passing of time as in the emotions we live" (164). Powers effectively dismantles the dichotomy between scientific fact and the emotion of everyday life.

The Spacetime Mode of "Our" Singing

The title of Powers's novel, appropriate as it seems to its overall subject matter, has one peculiarity worth noting. The personal pronoun "our" has no antecedent. It thus

becomes a question of interpretation whom Powers's readers will include in the first-person plural used in the title. A first, intuitive understanding of it might associate the pronoun with the five members of the Strom family who, until their domestic union dissolves, enjoy daily musical evenings at their residence. As one reads on, however, one realizes that other associations are possible, and ultimately more compelling. In fact, the novel's title is invested with increasing ambiguity as the theme of music comes to stand as a metaphor for the complex spacetime relations that Powers's novel proposes.

In the following, I argue that music is not merely a major theme in the novel, but also forms an integral part of its narrative structure. Bakhtin notes that we "meet [the author] (that is, we sense his activity) most of all in the composition of the work" (*Dialogic* 254). Powers chooses to make his authorial activity, which some critics call "the authorial presence or 'voice' that he or she projects," strongly felt in *The Time of Our Singing* (Abrams 313). He thereby emphasizes the artifice of his narrative, rather than creating the effect of a "fictional dream" associated with narratives from which authorial presence virtually effaces itself. The authorial presence becomes a third distinct voice that interacts with the two explicitly narrative voices. Powers, however, does not subsume the two voices under his own, but leaves their relative autonomy intact. The functioning of the three voices is therefore comparable to a polyphonic piece of medieval music—joined by various characters in addition to Joseph—in which several independent voices sing in counterpoint to form the whole.

The novel suggests that music does not know time, and yet also states that music carries the stamp of its own time. Music's performative dimension only knows the present moment, whereas the generation of music—its composition—is always informed by the past; it either integrates earlier forms, or rejects them, but is in one sense or

another engaged with musical history. This ambiguous relation of music to time serves as a metaphor that helps us grasp how we are always living in the present moment, but suggests that the present is also always informed by the past; in the case of the Strom family, a past of alienation prevents them from living freely in the present. Bakhtin's notion of the artistic chronotope is a suitable explanatory model to account for how different spacetime modes relate to each other. Powers's novel, though, suggests artistic chronotopes beyond the linearity of story and thereby adds to the possibilities of chronotopic imagining.

Powers rejects not only monologism, but also commonly accepted dichotomies that he sets out to dissolve: collective vs. private history; remote science vs. everyday life; scientific rationality vs. emotion; ideas vs. desire; scientific discourse vs. literary narrative; and white vs. black. By showing how all of these phenomena are interconnected, Powers exemplifies what relativity theory and quantum theory have in common: nothing can be separated out from the whole as essentially different. The novel's title thus indicates a mingling of authorial, narrative, and character voices, while gesturing toward field concepts whose implications for the revision of commonly accepted worldviews have been far from exhaustively explored. In rereading the title, one might hear Powers ask which "song" we, each member of the Western world, "sing" at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Do we still "sing" in the mode of the Newtonian past?

Nonlinearity in *The Time of Our Singing*

The reader of Powers's novel continually lacks information needed to fill gaps in the Strom family history, yet also begins each chapter knowing more than the characters

do. The novel oscillates continuously between the fictional future and the past. Its beginning, in the year 1961, with a concert at the final of a national competition at Duke University, shows the two Strom brothers at ages nineteen and twenty. Accompanied on the piano by his brother Joseph—the narrator of the first chapter—Jonah wins the first prize, which launches his career as a tenor. Without explaining the brothers' background, the chapter not only begins in medias res but also keeps the reader in suspense about the circumstances of their participation in the prestigious event, including the complexities of their racial background. The racial import of the event emerges when their triumph is overshadowed by the attitude of an audience member in the reception line, who moves closer with an air that fills Joseph with anxious anticipation. "A few well-wishers behind . . . a ramrod retired colonel twitches. His face is a hostile muddle, duped in a way he can't dope out. I feel the man's righteousness, well before he reaches us, the rage we repeatedly provoke in his people simply by appearing in public" (6). The man will ask, "What exactly *are* you boys?" and Jonah's response, "I am my mammy's ae bairn, Wi' unco folk I weary, Sir . . ., " will enrage the colonel (6). Jonah intends the "Burns couplet" as "eight bars of good-natured cheek," but is almost wrestled down by the man, a potentially nasty ending to a glorious evening, prevented only by the "eager line of admirers [that] moves him along" (7). The incident shows that racism does not care about the excellency of Jonah's performance; the brothers' careers will unfold amid such ambivalent reactions; they are both celebrated and treated as intruders into a world that is supposed to be exclusively white. The terms "African American," "black," and "white" have not been used once, and yet the reader concludes that the Strom sons must have at least one parent of color. Joseph mentions race and blackness "earlier" in his narrative, but these sections appear later in the novel. The reader's historical and cultural

memory fills in such terms before Joseph employs them.

After this first glimpse into the Strom brothers' nascent careers as professional tenor and pianist, Joseph's narrative breaks off, and the next chapter—narrated in the third person—leads into the year 1950, to the Stroms' domestic sphere of home-schooling and musical evenings. David's reluctance to "own anything that wouldn't fit into a waiting suitcase" accounts for their renting rather than buying a house. "Even his appointment in the Physics Department at Columbia seemed a thing so fine, it would certainly be taken away by anti-Semitism, anti-intellectualism, rising randomness, or the inevitable return of the Nazis" (9). Delia Strom shares her husband's anxieties, knowing that "the world's relentless purifiers would come after their happiness through any open chink. So she propped up her refugee husband and turned their rented half of the freestone into a fortress. And for pure safety, nothing beat music" (9). These lines, combined with the incident at the concert related in the novel's preceding chapter—although the concert actually occurs eleven years later—suggest that multifaceted racism is an everyday reality that haunts all of the Strom family's attempts to lead a normal life. Everything that will now be relayed as having happened in the fictional past is already, in the mind of the reader, darkened by the shadow of hostility, lack of opportunity, and the fear of violence that a racist environment entails.

In the second chapter—where all three children have already been born, although the circumstances of the parents' courtship have not been revealed—the outside world intrudes on the sheltered space that the Stroms are trying to create. David's colleagues come to the house to join the family's musical evenings, and we learn that on one occasion, Albert Einstein comes over to play the violin and hears Jonah's voice for the first time. In a well-intended effort to support the boy, he scolds the parents, "This child

has a gift. You don't hear how big. You are too close. It's unforgivable that you do nothing for him" (15). The idea of a pre-conservatory is born, out of the Strom parents' guilt that the musical instruction that Delia can offer Jonah is insufficient and might prevent a great future for the child. In the previous chapter, the reader has already seen the ambivalent space into which the parents' well-meaning decision to give Jonah excellent musical training will place the two brothers.

Delia Strom's death is relayed one quarter of the way into the novel in a chapter narrated by Joseph (139), yet she reappears in following chapters, getting married and giving birth to her children. The reader cannot reconstruct from memory, in the usual kind of reasoning about the plot's timeline, the point in the novel at which the house fire that kills Delia Strom must have occurred. Indeed, the realization that she could have died at nay point in the narrative is significant for an overall understanding of the Strom's living conditions, and of their whole era in American history. The novel strongly suggests arson as the cause of the fire that made the furnace explode. The police report that Delia's daughter Ruth later recovers reads, "Presence of trace accelerants throughout the foundation level," but officials shied away from using the term "arson" (369). Who wants a cumbersome investigation only for the sake of a black woman's death? Years later, Jonah thinks about his mother's death and concludes that it does not even matter whether it was arson or not:

> Or say it was the furnace, all by itself. Nobody helping it along, nobody's historical mission. Why that furnace? Why were we living in that house, and not some other? Don't they inspect those things, in the good neighborhoods? How would she have died if she'd been living over on some burned-out block between Seventh and Lenox? They're dying of

> tetanus up there. They're dying of flu. Illiteracy. Dying in the backseats of cars when the hospital won't take them. A woman like Mama dies in this country, at her age—it's somebody's fault. (385)

African Americans at the time do not benefit from society's care to the extent that others do; their lives are not valued as much as others' lives; they are targeted as a people by race crimes; they live in a condition of constant uncertainty. "All you know for sure," Jonah tells his brother, "is that everyone hates you, hates you for catching them in a lie about everything they've ever thought of themselves" (385). Jonah's remarks recall Foucault's analysis of racism as an expression of the modern state preserving the right to kill in that racism is part of a greater pattern of exclusions that discriminates between those who belong to the race and are to be protected, and those who "threaten" or are a burden to the well-being of that race and are neglected.[68] Knowledge of Delia's death one quarter of the way into the *The Time of Our Singing* forecloses all hopes the reader might have for the entire family's living to see a brighter future of lessening racist attitudes. For the reader, the shadow of racism overcasting all that follows has darkened, and one reads subsequent passages that show Delia's hopes, joys, and doubts with the knowledge of her untimely death. Throughout the novel, the reader remains one step ahead of the novel's characters, while also being one step behind.

Joseph: A Narrator Unaware of his Telling a Story

While the novel still allows the reader to follow along, despite the difficulties caused by its extreme level of nonlinearity, its structure also guides us away from reading it merely as Joseph Strom's account of his family history, interlaced with a third-

[68] See Foucault on race on p. 68 of this study.

person narration that who fills in the parts that Joseph cannot know. Joseph's narrative lacks self-references of the kind that we find, for example, in Johnson's *Middle Passage*, as when Calhoun alludes to extraordinary circumstances that have put into his hands "the log in which I now write (but this months later after mutiny and death, the reporting of which I must put off for a while)" (27). Joseph never displays any awareness that at different points in his narrative his audience lacks the details required to grasp fully the implications of his words. In fact, he is a narrator unaware of telling a story, or of speaking to an audience. When he initially mentions the "rage we repeatedly provoke in . . . people simply by appearing in public" in the initial chapter, he offers no suggestion that he will fill in the details of his family background later (Powers, *Time* 6). Thus, the fragmentation of his narrative into nonsequential chapters does not coincide with the intention of his fictional character to tell the story in this manner to an audience; the structure does not seem to be part of his agenda, as it is of Calhoun's, to "tell the story . . . first and foremost . . . as I saw it since my escape from New Orleans" (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 146).

There is, however, a subtext permeating Joseph's narrative that alludes to the nature of his writing project. This subtext is subtly folded into his accounts and not easily detectable due to the long intervals between instances of it and the nonlinear sequence of its manifestations. The suggestion is that he is actually writing in fragments, trying to revise them to bring out a composition that he feels he has inside of him, and that is trying to emerge. This intimation comes, however, in the form of an analogy to his attempts to compose a piece of music, and therefore demands that the reader meticulously decode the significance of music's many-layered metaphorical functions in the novel.

In the reception of *The Time of Our Singing*, critics and reviewers have so far read Joseph as a narrator who sets out to relate the history of his family once he is past the age of fifty, after the Million Man March in 1995. The subtext that I am going to explore suggests, however, that he actually writes fragments of narratives at different, unspecified times in his adulthood. At the end of the novel, at the March in October 1995, he finally feels ready to write the song, or tell the story, he has long been trying to create. Such a reading has consequences for the way one understands the relationship between the author and the first-person narrator. Powers lets Joseph pursue his own writing project, while also rearranging Joseph's fragments in unordered sequence and mingling them with the accounts of a third-person narrator. In this compound narrative, Powers's authorial voice manifests itself as the arranging hand apart from Joseph's and the third-person narrator's voice. The narrative that ensues from this rearranging is separate from Joseph's writing project, and from the accounts of the third-person narrator. The result is a kind of polyphony of author, narrators—and at times characters besides Joseph when their voices become prominent in the novel—similar to the polyphonic medieval music that Jonah has discovered, and in which disparate voices contribute to the whole.

A pivotal moment occurs after his father's death, when Joseph looks through the papers the physicist has left behind. Joseph asks one of David Strom's former colleagues, Jens Erichson, for assistance in reviewing the notes, and Erichson asks, "Did your father ever mention to you the concept of preferred rotation?" (Powers, *Time* 475). Joseph confirms, "Many times" (476). David Strom had been working, until pancreatic cancer stopped him, on the question of whether galaxies show a preferred direction of rotation. David died without finding an answer to his question. Erichson remarks that "as

far as General Relativity is concerned, these equations would indeed apply, given a universe where the galaxies had a favored rotation. If this is the case, General Relativity needs repairing" (476). Joseph inquires about the implications if David had actually found proof that galaxies have a preferred direction of rotation (477). "Well, the equations exist. Time would close back upon itself. We could live our lives always. Folding onto ourselves, forever" (477). However, the physicist qualifies, "Even with a closed time-like loop . . ." He hesitates, but then offers, "Even then, you could travel back into a given past only if you'd been there already" (477). "But," Joseph asks, "it's possible to change what hasn't happened yet?" To this question, Erichson has no immediate answer. "He thought for a long time. Then: 'I'm not even sure what such a question means'" (477). Joseph is left with a vague possibility, one that a reputable physicist does not outright deem implausible. The thought will work on Joseph's thinking, and he will begin to associate his own memories with the possibility that there is some way to alter the future.[69]

To facilitate understanding the concepts that David Strom's research seeks to improve, we must consider the major changes that Einstein's General Theory proposes. His earlier Special Theory posits the following: "Instead of seeing time as a series of

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[69]Katherine Hayles explains the significance of Einstein's General Theory as follows: "In General Theory, Einstein extended his conclusions by postulating that the laws of physics are invariant not only for bodies in uniform motion but also for bodies in accelerating motion, so that the long-recognized equivalence of gravitational mass and inertial mass (the 'weight' that an accelerating object will assume in space, as a result of inertial resistance to the acceleration) is established theoretically" (*Cosmic Web* 47) (for invariant laws of physics, see p. 29n5 in this chapter). "Thus not only the choice of reference frame became arbitrary, but also the type of motion, for accelerating systems are treated in the General Theory with the same equations as nonaccelerating or stationary systems. As a result, a radically different view of spacetime emerged. In the General Theory, gravitation is seen not as some mysterious force that mass exerts over distance, but as a result of the nature of spacetime itself. Einstein suggested that we should think of spacetime as being curved around large masses, and that it is this curvature which accounts for gravitational phenomena. Spacetime, in this view, is not an empty container for mass. Rather it exists, and is given its characteristic structure, because of the distribution of mass. Indeed it cannot, properly speaking, be considered apart from mass" (*Cosmic Web* 47).

independent and omnipresent moments, Einstein conceived of it as inextricably linked with space to form the four dimensions of spacetime" (Hayles, *Cosmic Web* 47). His General Theory, however, goes a step further:

> Instead of thinking of space as a rigid container, Einstein postulated that it took its structure from matter; instead of seeing energy and matter as fundamentally separate and inconvertible, Einstein showed that they are essentially equivalent and potentially interconvertible. In all these results, relativity theory had the effect of transforming isolated parts into an interconnected whole. (47-48)

Einstein's General Theory thus proposes that there are no essential differences between matter and energy, which fundamentally contradicts Newtonian mechanics, based as it was on an essential dichotomy of the two. David Strom is working to quantize—or by means of the rules of quantum mechanics, limit the possible values of—galactic rotation and thereby to connect quantum theory and Einstein's General Theory; but he does not reach any conclusion. The implication is that if spacetime configurations repeated themselves, time would "close back upon itself," a notion before which the human mind falters (Powers, *Time* 477).

Joseph is most interested in the inverse effect of his father's hypothesis: if the past can come back, then the future might also be reachable, and he views that hypothetical possibility as his father's legacy. When he recounts his visit to The Cloisters with his brother and father—looking back at himself as a seven-year-old—his memory suddenly leaps ahead more than thirty years to a day on which he happens to be at the train station in Frankfurt, Germany, with his brother. They are touring with *Voces Antiquae*, an ensemble founded by Jonah that performs medieval and Renaissance

music. Jonah wanted Joseph to be part of the group, so he called him up one day in Atlantic City, then Joseph's place of residence, and asked him to come over to Europe to complete the group. "Joey, this is about blending. Merging. Giving up the self. Breathing as a group. All the things we used to think music was, when we were kids. Making five voices sound as if they're a single vibrating soul" (515). Jonah wanted his brother to join because of their long-standing musical bond, their ability to communicate through music.

At the Frankfurt train station, Jonah asks Joseph "to buy him some nuts at the snack stand. . . . Almonds," the same nuts that were in the almond bread, "Mandelbrot," which their father had made them taste thirty years earlier on the way to The Cloisters in his one-time Jewish neighborhood (164). Joseph muses, "It surprises me that, half-German, I've never learned so common a word. Then it surprises me worse: I have. I've known the magic substance all my life. The stuff is everywhere, as common and cheap as years" (164). The moment in Frankfurt unlocks his memory of the "Mandelbrot" he ate years earlier with his father, and Joseph needs to revise his notion that he did not know the German word "Mandeln." "If there is no single now, then there can't have ever been a single then," he concludes, an allusion to his changing notion of spacetime (164). For the reader, the moment at the Frankfurt train station is hard to connect to the scene after his father's death, when Joseph becomes interested in his father's research results, because the incident occurs more than three hundred pages earlier in the novel. In the fictional time frame of the novel, however, Joseph goes to Germany after his father's death, and therefore definitely has the flashback to The Cloisters after he has taken care of his father's estate and conversed with the physicist Erichson. Once one gets to the chapter on Jonah's musical ensemble *Voces Antiquae*, the name seems vaguely familiar,

but the passage about the almonds, placed more than three hundred pages earlier, seems trivial; it does not strike the reader's memory sufficiently to make the connection that the name of the medieval group was first mentioned in the context of the visit to The Cloisters. The reader thus has an experience, not unlike Joseph's, of being surprised and uncertain about the traces of memories of events that have already occurred. Joseph is increasingly able to make such connections; that he identifies the color of his mother's dress as blue in a black and white photograph at his grandfather's house is a further allusion to the fact that he is by now alert to the possible occurrence of phenomena beyond our mental reach. His mind immediately makes the connections with the young woman in a blue dress he saw as an eighteen-year-old (582, 195).

These incidents gradually change Joseph's self-perception, a transformation that becomes manifest while he is still with his brother's a cappella group. Joseph has been trying to compose music for years, but every time he writes a score, he finds that it merely echoes existing motifs; he cannot come up with an original musical idea. In Europe, as he experiences the wonder of medieval music, he tries once again to compose. He still finds echoes of earlier forms and styles in his composition, but that fact is much less upsetting. "If I studied what I wrote long enough, I could always find a source hiding in it, evading and yet craving detection. Only now, instead of the misery that this discovery caused me in Atlantic City, I felt an excruciating release in watching these hostages escape" (544). He connects with his composition in new ways, accepting that there is an inevitable interference of the past. "But the scribbling was mine, and had to be enough. My notebook filled up with floating, disconnected fragments, each of them pointing to some urgent revision they couldn't get to" (544). Earlier, in Atlantic City, Joseph wrote his compositional fragments on loose sheets, a further, material

indication of their fragmentation. Joseph now senses that the intrusions from the past into his compositions are unavoidable; in fact, by referring to the fragments through personification, he makes them appear almost animate, voices that try to speak to him. "The tunes spelt out the story of my life, half as it had happened to me, and half as I'd failed to make it happen" (544). In this remark, he equates the intrusion of past musical forms in new compositions with such interferences from the past that have imposed themselves on his life; his life story is by analogy a new composition yet to be written. If one accepts this analogy, then his way of composing music alludes to the way in which he writes about his life: in "floating, disconnected fragments." Joseph writes for himself, waiting for the fragments to point him the way to richer insights.

Finally, at the Million Man March in Washington, when young Robert gets lost, Joseph suddenly feels a strong sense of reassurance that the boy is not in danger. He tries to calm Robert's older brother, who rushes in all directions to find him:

> I try at first to keep up with him. But then I stop short, a sense of peace coming over me, so great that I think it will be fatal. I know where Robert has gone. I could tell Kwame. I have the whole piece, the whole song cycle there, intact, in front of my sight-singing eyes. The piece I've been writing, the one that's been writing me since before my own beginning. The anthem for this country in me, fighting to be born. I try to tell my nephew, but I can't. "Don't panic," I say. "Let's stay close by. He's around here somewhere." In fact, I know exactly how close the lost boy is. As close as a promise to a long-forgotten friend. As close as the trace of tune turning up in me at last, begging to be composed. (625)

The moment at the National Mall triggers a sense of recognition in Joseph, which makes

him feel confident that the child is out of harm's way. The novel implies that he perceives the presence of his father and mother on the same ground half a century earlier, and also that they are fully present, fully there, as they meet their future grandson. Joseph is now convinced that his father felt his way into the future years ago and sensed that a message he wanted delivered to his estranged daughter Ruth would find its way to the right moment to become significant. On his deathbed, he said to Joseph, "Tell her there is another wavelength everyplace you point your telescope" (470). At the time when she and Joseph reunited at their grandfather's house, and Joseph delivered the message, she could not make any sense of her father's words and dismissed them as clouded thoughts. Now, memory of them comes to her just in time to answer her son's question. In an environment of street slang and peer pressure to act cool, Ruth fears that Robert, like his brother Kwame, who was imprisoned once for stealing CDs with his friends, will fall in with the wrong people and ruin his future before it has even started. Since she and her father became estranged in life, memory of his message feels as if "someone [is] walking toward her who she thought was buried" (627). It comes in time to strengthen the bond between Ruth and her son, who participates in this significant moment of interconnectedness that suddenly includes the father and grandfather. Joseph is now ready to revise his fragmented notes, and to write his long-awaited tune, but his composition does not occur in the space of the novel.

Polyphony as Narrative Strategy

The novel's strictly nonlinear structure, which is not owned by either of the two principal narrators, suggests a strong third presence, that of Powers's authorial voice. It is tempting to read his authorial voice as a counter-narrative to Joseph's telling of his

family's history. However, the main problem with such a view, apart from Joseph's unawareness of his telling, lies in the dichotomous character of the very term. "Counter-narrative" implies struggle against a prevalent view and a desire to assert the contrary. It means an either/or, one or the other, a dualistic dynamic that Powers in fact proceeds to dismantle in every phase of the novel. Furthermore, reading Powers's authorial voice as a counter-narrative suggests that his voice uses the third-person narrator as a vehicle. This third-person voice is, however, a fairly traditional omniscient narrator's voice in the realistic mode. It is hard to imagine what Powers would possibly want to assert through such a voice. In this third-person voice, we learn of historical events throughout the twentieth century; and we move freely into and out of the consciousnesses of various characters, including such brief appearances as Marian Anderson and Dr. William Daley's great-grandfather; but the voice does not project an innovative approach to narrative. The only exception is the encounter between Delia and David, and their future grandson, but the event is treated in Joseph's fragments as well, and with far more notable innovation. Powers does not interfere with Joseph's project of writing his fragments to appropriate his past and eventually break free from it. By rearranging these fragments in strictly nonlinear sequence, and mingling them with third-person narrations, Powers exposes the reader to eelings of disorientation that are similar to Joseph's sentiments as he writes to understand his past. The third-person narrations supplement historical contexts, as well as those details of the family's history that Joseph did not experience directly; however, since these sequences occur in the same nonlinear fashion as Joseph's, they do not alleviate the frequent sense of disorientation that the novel provokes. Powers offers both narrators' parts in a restructured form that requires active reading and reflection about the validity of traditional spatiotemporal

assumptions.

A more productive way of assessing *The Time of Our Singing* is to compare it to the dynamic of polyphonic music, which became common during the period from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries. The novel evokes the form when Jonah founds the musical group *Voces Antiquae* and sings pieces by Perotin, a composer of early polyphonic music from the thirteenth century (529). At their debut at the Flanders Festival in Brugge, the group makes their "initial beachhead in the fifteenth century—Ockeghem, Agricola, Mouton, Binchois, a motley mix of regional styles" (537). Polyphony "is associated with counterpoint, the combination of distinct melodic lines. In polyphonic music, two or more simultaneous melodic lines are perceived as independent even though they are related" ("Polyphony"). The analogy suggests that the whole emerges only from these joined but independent voices. The contrapuntal voices do not compete, but create a dialogue; monologism, so common in the traditional realistic novel, is thus precluded. The repertoire of Jonah's group reflects the different styles of the multifaceted form. "In Western music polyphony typically includes a contrapuntal separation of melody and bass. A texture is more purely polyphonic, and thus more contrapuntal, when the musical lines are rhythmically differentiated" (Polyphony). In the context of literature, the term implies not only the presence of several voices, narrators, and characters, but also their relative autonomy from the authorial voice. As in music, the relations between these several voices can take on different dynamics.

Through Powers's restructuring of the two narrative voices, new meanings emerge that are not contained in either of them alone. The account of the Emmett Till murder, a gruelingly-detailed depiction of the young boy's ordeal, is narrated initially in the third-person, but in mid-chapter the narrator gives way to Joseph's voice (*Time* 105).

A conversation with his brother unfolds about the event that by then lies fourteen years in the past, which was also Emmett Till's age at the time of the murder. The two brothers, initially talking about their emotional response to the murder, almost get into a fight over which of their parents did not want them to see the image of the dead body at the time. A photo of Emmett lying in his coffin had been printed in the papers after his mother had decided to expose the body to let the world see the degree of brutality with which the two white men had disfigured her son`s body. Joseph recalls having had nightmares for weeks back then, while Jonah remembers, "I was seeing him for years. Fourteen, you see. That's what was going to happen. They were coming for me. I was going to be next" (108). Joseph is convinced that his mother wanted to keep the photo from her sons to protect them, while their father denied that they were too young. "If it's a physical fact, they have to know." (107). Jonah, however, recalls that their mother explicitly wanted them to see the photo: "We had to get ready. Had to know what they wanted to do to us" (107). In his story, their father dismissed the event as "just the South, a couple of death-deserving animals. He's the one who said it would only fuck us up to look at it" (108). The two brothers are incapable of clarifying the matter, and at the end of the day, as they walk off the stage from another concert, Joseph notes, "we join hands on stage and walk off to wild applause, two brothers, split at the fork in what, until today, was our identical past" (109).

The fluid transition from the third-person narrator to Joseph's voice renders the demarcation between historical event and individual emotional response eminently permeable. Powers seems to ask: "What are the boundaries of an historical event?" "What pertains to it, and who decides where to draw the lines?" The brothers have both been traumatized by the murder of Emmett Till, and their emotional response has

significance beyond their personal experience. Jonah's fear to be next is not unfounded, since the murder of Emmett Till was a crime in the long history of Southern lynching. Someone could in fact come after Jonah next. Historical discourse excludes such responses, and thereby glosses over the far-reaching reverberations of such an event, but Powers's combination of the two voices makes these effects explicit. He dissolves the dichotomy between historical memory and personal memory, and shows the two to be continuous. The fact that the dispute between the two brothers remains unresolved gives Jonah's point of view as much weight as Joseph's. While the two brothers fight over their parents' reactions, the voices in the novel are left to stand equally beside each other. Jonah's voice is not subsumed under his brother's. Joseph does not assert his authority by concluding that Jonah got it all wrong, but recognizes that the difference of perception throws both men into the lonely space of their individual memories. As on other occasions, Jonah enters the polyphony of the novel's voices.

The consciousness that is most readily revealed, besides Joseph's, however, is Delia Strom's. She is the character on whom the third-person narrator most often concentrates. We experience her inner struggle to bear the burden of her father's expectations that she will "make something worthy of [her] future," which, for Dr. Daley, does not include becoming a singer of classical music (84). She also struggles with her fear of telling her parents about having met a white man, her feelings of being torn between her family and her husband (135, 216-38), her doubts about her marriage to David, and her misgiving: "what if they're right? Right to look on her as on a trout sprouting wings," trying to build a nest instead of living in water (331, 630). Delia's untimely death in a fire in her early forties is a tragic experience for the Strom family in the diegesis of the story, and after her death the family slowly disintegrates. However,

her death also has an extra-diegetic significance: it serves structurally to invert the difference of age with her son Joseph, who approaches and passes her age in the course of the novel. Through the non-chronological sequence of narrated events, Joseph's and his mother Delia's consciousnesses acquire an apparent simultaneity.

Their simultaneous and yet subsequent existence is reflected in music's relation to time. Delia remarks, "*Of course there is no time. Of course there's nothing but standing change. Music knows that, every time out. Every time you lift your voice to sing*" (629). Her words describe the performative character of music; in performance, music exists always in the present (629). On the other hand, Jonah realizes during one of his private lessons that "music itself, like its own rhythms, played out in time. A piece was what it was because of all the pieces that had been written before and after it. Every song sang the moment that had brought it into being. Music talked endlessly to itself" (58). Delia and Joseph, mother and son, are still caught in the moment of the same song, although it is a sad one. Furthermore, they sing the song with different voices. Delia struggles to explain to her father why she wants to raise her children "beyond race," yet Joseph and his brother and sister need to know what they are. She feels guilty about not doing enough for the musical training of her son Jonah, so Delia and David decide to send the boy to boarding school. Joseph laments that blackness means "a world of whites, declaring your efforts never enough, your sounds insufficient. Telling you to send the boy off," so that he might have a better chance in life, "lift him over that river any way you can. Never telling you what land you send him to, there on the far side" (522). His mother intends nothing but the most tender care, but Joseph feels abandoned. They sing the same song in different voices, a song that is not their own, but firmly grounded in history, like Joseph's compositional fragments. "Every song sang the

moment that had brought it into being" (58). The historical moment from which their sad polyphonic song springs began with the first Middle Passage; given the riots and racial conflict persisting into the last decade of the century, the same song still continues. A new composition is needed. The beginning of such a new song is signaled by David Strom's at times quirky stories with which he bombards his children, and which begin to upset them the more they perceive the distance of his world of scientific research from their own reality. At other times new possible worldviews shine through in his more serious scientific contemplations, even when masked by his air of egocentricity. Only after his father's death does Joseph begin to see that what he was offering is part of the new song that struggles to emerge.

The several voices in *The Time of Our Singing*, although often conflicting, retain their autonomy. Bakhtin explains, "the essence of polyphony lies precisely in the fact that the voices remain independent and, as such, are combined in a unity of a higher order than that of homophony. . . . The artistic will to polyphony is a will to combine many wills, a will to the event" (*Problems* 21). The artist is not the mastermind, but a mere participant in the event. Bakhtin observes that, in the twentieth century, "the scientific consciousness of contemporary man has learned to orient itself among the complex circumstances of 'the probability of the universe' [and] . . . 'indefinite quantities' . . . But in the realm of *artistic* cognition people sometimes continue to demand a very crude and very primitive definitiveness, one that quite obviously could not be true" (272). The monologic novel that subsumes all voices under the authorial presence of the creator sets up such a crude definitiveness. Polyphony in the novel, on the other hand, permits open-endedness; its "representation of consciousness" consists of "turbulent processes unleashed in the cubic space between the page and the reader"

(Powers, "Making the Rounds" 307-8). It demands that the reader engage with these turbulences.

Bakhtin's concept of the literary chronotope represents the first attempt in the twentieth century to apply relativity theory to the reading of literature. In *The Time of Our Singing*, Powers creates a literary chronotope that takes Bakhtin's notion one step further with regard to the implied values. When Bakhtin introduces his concept of the chronotope as an expression of "space-time," he explicitly refers to "Einstein's Theory of Relativity" (*Dialogics* 84). The term "chronotope," he writes, "expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space), . . . , a formally constitutive category of literature" (84). A crucial characteristic of literary chronotopes is that they are not neutral delineations of spacetime. Bakhtin claims that since the chronotope defines "a literary work's artistic unity in relationship to an actual reality," it contains "an evaluating aspect. . . . In literature and art itself, temporal and spatial determinations are inseparable from one another, and always colored by emotions and values" (243). The artist, in creating the chronotopic realm of his work, expresses a set of values held about the actual world. In Bakhtin's writing, though, no matter where the boundaries of the chronotope are drawn, they follow the principle of chronology. Nonlinearity is caused by "the author-creator [who] moves freely in his own time: he can begin his story at the end, in the middle, or at any moment of the events represented without violating the objective course of time in the event described. Here we get a sharp distinction between representing and represented time" (255). While Bakhtin recognizes that the "boundary line between the actual world as source of representation and the world represented in the work" is permeable, nonlinearity remains firmly

confined to the interior world of the novel.[70] Powers's novel, however, dissolves this distinction. He develops the possibility of anachronisms to the point of moving outside of all commonly-accepted parameters of reality, namely, the chronological subsequence of events, a series of which leads Joseph to consider the validity of his father's hypothesis. The value implied in such chronotopic imagining lies not so much in asserting that such things really exist. Rather, Powers demonstrates in his narrative argument that we know very little about the vast space of the universe and its laws, which influence our existence. What science has proven is a level of interconnectedness that dissolves, in the final instance, all boundaries. Powers pushes the capacity of the novel to capture such profound interconnectedness to the utmost degree, to the point that his reader's ability to follow and trace such connections is deeply tested. One of the questions that arises from reading *The Time of Our Singing* is where we draw boundaries, or accept them, and on which grounds. In offering a polyphonic outlook on the world, Powers does not impose answers, but invites participation in revising former perceptions.

Music, Color, and Spacetime

The level to which Powers is concerned with the interconnectedness of all things is exemplified in associations that the novel draws between music and color. At first seemingly two discrete phenomena, their subtle links to each other and indeed to all things become evident as one analyzes their constitution. With regard to music, pitch is commonly referred to as high or low, terms that are in fact spatial expressions. If we consider how musical instruments produce sounds, though, we realize that our

[70] See also p. 162 in this study.

descriptions do not cohere with the way in which sounds actually occur. Wolfgang Bottenberg points out that spatial terms for musical pitch are in fact metaphorical. He writes,

> In an organ, the highest pipes produce the lowest sounds, and vice versa. This shows that the spatial connotation 'high' and 'low,' applied to sound, is arbitrary, while a description of sound as being fast or slow would be more accurate, and a description saying that a tone consists of so and so many vibrations per second would be precise. (6)

Music is not only unfolding in time because of its performative character, like a theatrical play; its sounds consist of vibrations that occur at different speeds. Thus, music is inherently temporal. However, in order to become manifest, it requires space. "Sounds . . . are produced in a specific place by an agent using instruments which exist in space; they are transmitted to the listener by the spatial element air [through which the sound waves travel], and are received and processed by ear and brain, again objects in space" (7). These spatial elements are not identical with sounds, but rather are necessary conditions for sounds to occur. We use spatial metaphors to refer to sounds due to the incapacity of our senses to perceive their vibratory speeds. To our ear, sounds seem continuous; we only perceive the pitch, not its underlying vibrations.

The inherent temporality of music, however, is not unique to it. "Different vibratory speeds," Bottenberg writes, "are also the reason for the differences of colors. So, even a painting is to a certain extent a shaping of temporal events" (6). Both music and color are major themes in *The Time of Our Singing*, and their similarities in temporal properties are critical to the novel. These similarities are addressed in the penultimate chapter and lead us back to the conversation between young Robert and his mother

about wavelengths. They sit together in an airplane that is to take them back from Washington to California, accompanied by Joseph Strom and Ruth's elder son Kwame. Robert's conversation with "the physicist" after the Million Man March at the National Mall is still on his mind, and he asks his mother, "Mama, wavelength's like color, right?" Ruth agrees, and he continues, "But pitch is wavelength, too?" (Powers, *Time* 627). Hesitating, she confirms again, but young Robert has not finished questioning his mother. "What wavelength do you think they are—on other planets?" Robert's question seems to be concerned with "what colors" exist on other planets, but the vague referent of "they" also allows the association that he speaks of the color of extraterrestrial inhabitants. Reminded of her father's message delivered to her after his death by Joseph, she answers, "More wavelengths than there are planets. . . . A different one everywhere you point your telescope" (627). The dichotomy of black and white that has dominated Robert's family's life gives way to an abundance of colors. Scientifically, David Strom's enigmatic message concerns electromagnetic waves, of which the human eye can only perceive a very small range as light waves. Likewise, the human ear can only perceive a very small range of vibrations as sound, "less than a millionth of the complete spectrum" (Bottenberg 10). When light waves are refracted, colors become visible. Given that color is a phenomenon whose perceptibility is proportional to the limited sensory capacities of the human eye, the importance that has been historically ascribed to skin color seems dubious. Other wavelengths mean more variety—even if not perceptible by the human eye—instead of a reduction to the dichotomy of black and white. Accordingly, Powers presses language to yield an increasing number of shades to refer to skin color. The most expansive cluster of terms in the novel occurs on the occasion of Delia's funeral:

> But in the spectrum's bulging middle, all imaginable traces and tinges of

> brown packed onto folding chairs against one another in the crowded room. They gave themselves up by contrast, taupe turning evidence on amber, tan showing up tawny, pinks and gingers and teaks giving the lie to every available name ever laid on them. All ratios of honey to tea, coffee to cream—fawn, fox, ebony, buff, beige, bay: I couldn't begin to tell brown from brown. Brown like pine needles. Brown like cured tobacco. Tones that might have been indistinguishable by daylight—chestnut, sorrel, roan—pulled away from the tones they sat next to under the low lamps of those close quarters. (141)

Color, caused by the refraction of light, is singled out by the reflective property of pigments, and depends on the intensity of light. It is not a fixed category, but a fluid process of different phenomena coming together. Powers's cluster of terms shows the capacity of language to express this variety. Whether such terms become conventional depends on the consensus of the language community to accept and use them. That we are still applying black and white as skin colors, which are actually the only ones that do not exist, begs the question of whether our references to skin color seel to express variety or exclusivity. By correlating the wavelength of color with music, Powers suggests that while we have long accepted all shades and tones of music, resistance to acknowledging the same variety in skin colors still prevails.

Powers does not propose a worldview according to which people actually travel in time and leap back and forth between past and future. By invoking the possibility that David Strom had some way of "seeing" or "meeting" his grandson, and of knowing that his message would in a future moment be a meaningful answer to his grandson's question, Powers challenges those who would consider such a phenomenon impossible

to explain why they are sure of this. The point of raising such a question is not to confirm time-travel, but to demonstrate that we know very little about the processes that happen immediately around us and throughout the universe. If Newtonian mechanics affirmed a certain status quo, field concepts allow different viewpoints, probabilities, and open-endedness. While science has formulated new theories that undermine previous worldviews, the task of examining what these theories imply for our everyday reality is far from complete. Powers uses the novel as the testing ground for such an inquiry, and demonstrates that literature itself expresses worldviews, either traditional ones, or those that challenge established assumptions.

Chapter Four

Cosmic Waves and Narrative Convergences in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*

Narrative as analogue for the actual experience, which no longer exists; a mosaic of memory and imagination.

An experience termed past may actually return if the influences have the same balances or proportions as before. Details may vary, but the essence does not change. The day would have the same feeling, the same character, as that day has been described having had before. The image of a memory exists in the present moment.

— Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*

Lecha, in *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), comes home to the ranch in the Tucson Mountains that she and her twin sister Zeta inherited from their father a long time ago. She is ill with cancer, or so she claims, and most of the time on Demerol and countless other medications. The two sisters have recently turned sixty. After years away, Lecha has returned home to "transcribe the notebooks," which "have drawings of parrot-beaked snakes and jaguar-headed men" that uncannily resemble the "Mexican tiles patterned with blue, parrot-beaked birds trailing serpent tails of yellow flowers" that cover the kitchen counter at the ranch (Silko, *Almanac* 21). Zeta has just had the counter redone two weeks before her sister's unannounced arrival (21). Lecha has brought her

new assistant, Seese, whom she calls her nurse or her secretary—depending on the occasion—who will help her work on the notebooks. Zeta is brewing some dye to color all her clothes brown: "No reason, Zeta claims, just a whim" (21). But Lecha has warned her assistant Seese "not to be fooled. Nothing happens by accident here," a hint that is as much addressed to the reader as to Seese (21). Indeed, the novel brims with unlikely coincidences, implied associations, and interrelations through which everything seems to be connected.

Apparently, the twin sisters are keepers of the almanac that is evoked in the novel's title, but the circumstances of their association with the ancient book are only gradually revealed. Although Lecha and Zeta are important characters in *Almanac,* they are not protagonists. Over sixty-five characters of varying importance populate the novel's pages, and their stories are told in short, interlaced episodes that frequently alternate between different groups of characters. Nonlinearity combined with the absence of temporal specifications makes it impossible to tell in exactly which year(s) Silko sets the novel. From references to historical figures such as the Apache leader Geronimo, who lived from 1829 to 1909, and political events involving the CIA, one can only infer that the novel must be set at the end of the twentieth century. Time is important in the novel, but in *Almanac*, it is often ambiguously personified and encompasses periods of differing or unindicated lengths: "A human being was born into the days she or he must live with until eventually the days themselves would travel on" (251). By personifying time, Silko shows it to be dissociated from the notion of universal flow, and instead to be imagined as heterogeneous.

The term "dead," evoked in the novel's title, similarly has several referents. There are those who have passed on the almanac throughout previous centuries and

thereby contributed to its preservation. There are the spirits that talk to and care for people, evoked in the poem that the Lakota tribesman Wilson Weasel Tail performs at the International Holistic Healers Convention toward the end of *Almanac*: "We dance because the dead love us, / they continue to speak to us, / they tell our hearts what must be done to survive" (722). But there are also all those who die in Silko's novel, often as a result of heinous crimes or intrigue. The story of Seese, Lecha's assistant, acquaints the reader with the abject behavior that Silko repeatedly describes, and that causes the high death rate in *Almanac.* Seese is working for Lecha because when she realized that her little baby son Monte was missing, she tracked down the psychic she knew from a daytime TV show to ask her for help. Lecha hired her, and in the course of their work on the almanac notebooks, Seese realizes that her baby boy must be dead. Seese is a recovering cocaine addict and has been previously drawn into triangular relationships with varying participants pivoting around Beaufrey, who trades in pornography of particular cruelty, including snuff movies with dissection of victims. But Beaufrey's own warped pleasure lies elsewhere: he likes to destroy people who become attached to him, and he uses sex as an expedient to get to know his victims' psyches. He has used Seese to get close to David, an artistic photographer who is the father of her child; indeed, "artists [are] the most fascinating to Beaufrey because they [are] often shattered and easily manipulated emotionally" (537). The triangular scheme that Beaufrey conceives ends with the suicide of his sensitive lover Eric, David's death after he has become unstrung and takes careless risks while racing on horseback, and the disappearance and death of Seese's baby son Monte brought about by Beaufrey, who could not tolerate the infant in his surroundings. Beaufrey reigns over his admirers, and as soon as they begin to bore him, he disposes of them at will. Other characters in Silko's novel include hit

men, ruthless real estate developers, and traders who reap organs and plasma from the homeless whom nobody will miss; still others are involved in selective human cloning to upgrade human genetic material, and the development of Alternative Earth modules, meant to be accessible only for the rich once "the earth [will] be uninhabitable" (542).

Gradually, more details about the almanac are filled in. The twin sisters Lecha and Zeta are half European, a quarter Mexican, and a quarter Indian; their mother was the daughter of a Mexican named Guzman, and of Yoeme, an Indian woman from the Yaqui tribe. "Why do you think I was married to him," she asks Lecha and Zeta when they are still in their early teens, "For fun? For love? Hah! To watch, to make sure he kept the agreement" (116). Guzman made an agreement with the Yaqui tribe at a time when more and more white people were coming with papers to file land claims because Yaqui land was rich in ore. Yoeme left when her children were little to escape the fate that many of her tribespeople suffered in this climate of growing hostilities: to be hanged from cottonwood trees, to be left and shrivel beyond recognition. But Yoeme has come back secretly several times to see "if any of you grandchildren might have turned out human" (118). She never thought much of her own children; she found they took take after their father, who she thought was weak and unwilling to protect her. So when her eyes fall on Lecha and Zeta, as she approaches the family home again after a long time, she exclaims, "*You* are Indians!" (114). She has outlived her husband and moves into the "old cook-shed behind the big house" to educate her two granddaughters (115). Their mother, furious at the sudden return of the old woman, can do nothing to prevent it.

Yoeme has been carefully watching her grandchildren from a distance because she needs to find someone she can entrust with "the notebooks and the old book" she has kept since they were passed on to her years ago:

> A section of one of the notebooks had accidentally been lost right before they were given to me. The woman who had been keeping them explained what the lost section had said, although of course it was all in a code, so that the true meaning would not be immediately clear. She requested that, if possible, at some time in my life I should write down a replacement section. (128)

At the time of the invaders, the people from the South had decided to carry the almanac north to protect it. The story circulates that they chose four children, three girls and one boy, and divided the almanac into four parts, so that every child carried a number of pages. "This way, if at least one of the children reached safety in the North, at least one part of the book would be safe. The people knew if even part of their almanac survived, they as a people would return someday" (246). Silko explains, "The 'Almanac' title [of her novel] refers to the Mayan almanacs or Mayan codices. There are four manuscripts that survived the on-going inquisition and persecution of the Mayan Indian people and all Indian peoples once the Spaniards and the Portuguese arrived" (Silko, "Interview with Barnes" *Conversations* 64). Silko suggests that some Indians who learned writing in Spanish from European priests in the early days of colonization must have decided to translate and transcribe the almanac. Whereas up to then the indices had been transmitted orally, accompanied by logographic writings carved into stone, this method of transmission would not have been sufficient to preserve the codices for future generations. Logographs, the script used among the Maya prior to the introduction of the alphabet by the Spaniards, were highly contextual and therefore depended on being passed on from generation to generation. The alphabet, on the other hand, with its arbitrary signs, does not depend on context. It made the almanacs accessible beyond

their initial cultural realm. "With the cataclysm of the coming of the Europeans they [the Mayans] could no longer count on human memory if humans themselves were being destroyed" (Silko, A*lmanac* 64). The Indian translators wrote down in Spanish what had been the knowledge of their Mayan priests (64).[71] Silko writes further:

> The almanacs were literally like a farmer's almanac. They told you the identity of the days, but not only what days were good to plant on, but some days that were extremely unfortunate with famine and war. There were other years, even epochs, that would come that would be extremely glorious and fertile. The Mayan people were obsessed with time and knowing each day. They believed that a day was a kind of being and it had a . . . we would maybe say a personality, but that it would return. (64)

In order to preserve this knowledge, keepers of the almanac must handle it carefully; old pages are fading and need transcribing, and for the lost sections, replacements have to be written that are appropriate to be included. In *Almanac*, Yoeme passes on most of the notebooks to Lecha, but she also gives Zeta a portion, "the smallest bundle of loose notebook pages and scraps of paper with drawings of snakes" (134). The two sisters are supposed to participate in keeping the notebooks, but also to "care for one another throughout their lives" (134). They are not only connected because of their being twins and sharing possession of the almanac, but also because Zeta has raised Lecha's son Ferro. Thirty years ago, two days after giving birth to her son, Lecha disappeared on an

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[71] While the introduction of the Spanish language and the alphabet helped preserve the almanacs, it also led to a cultural dispossession of immense proportions. "In Central Mexico, the reader of the [logographic] text fleshed out the bare script in much the same way as a jazz musician improvises on a simple score, using it to trigger his or her memory and incite his or her imagination, to give each text full meaning in performance" (Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain* 139-40). The introduction of the alphabet by the Spaniards made this form of literacy increasingly irrelevant, and many turned from literacy in the former writing system to illiteracy in alphabetic writing.

important business trip, from which she did not return until the following year. Upon her reappearance, Zeta reproached her for not having called, but agreed to keep the child when Lecha moved away again.

In the interim years, both their lives remain connected to their grandmother's heritage, albeit in divergent ways. Lecha realizes that she has powers as a clairvoyant of a special kind. She can locate missing people, except "the only ones [she] can locate are dead" (138). She starts working for a daytime TV show, in which relatives are invited and Lecha reveals to them the location where their loved ones have been left after falling victim to a crime. Routinely, she "would lower her voice and say she regretted what she was going to say, then reveal the location of the victim; Lecha had never been sorry. . . . Lecha knew her abilities had been a gift from old Yoeme" (147). Meanwhile, her sister Zeta first works for a tour bus business, a cover-up for her boss's smuggling of "live green parrots and fake Rolex watches" across the border between the United States and Mexico (127). Later she opens a tour bus business of her own, and begins trafficking in antiques. When the antiques trade slows down, she switches to drugs first, and later to firearms.

"Smuggling" is not exactly how she refers to *her* trade, though. Zeta recalls that "the people had been free to go traveling north and south for a thousand years, traveling as they pleased, then suddenly white priests had announced smuggling as a mortal sin because smuggling was stealing from the government" (133). Zeta finds fault with the priests' admonition on several accounts. First, she wonders if the "white priests who told the people smuggling was stealing had also told them how they were to feed themselves now that all the fertile land along the rivers had been stolen by white men" (133). Second, she asks "where . . . the priest and his Catholic Church [were] when the federal

soldiers used Yaqui babies for target practice" (133). Third, she mocks the term "government." "Stealing from the 'government'? What 'government' was that? Mexico City? Zeta had laughed out loud. Washington D.C.? How could one steal if the government itself was the worst thief?" (133). Her reasoning culminates in a condemnation of both the Mexican and American authorities that is also Silko's major point of criticism, which she has repeatedly voiced in interviews and essays:

> There was not, and there never had been, a legal government by Europeans anywhere in the Americas. Not by any definition, not even by the Europeans' own definitions and laws. Because no legal government could be established on stolen land. Because stolen land never had a clear title. (133)

Following the logic of illegal governments, Zeta sees her "business" as a way of gathering money for the cause of taking back the land. She has learned her line of argument from Yoeme, who used to claim that "all the laws of the illicit governments had to be blasted away" (133). Zeta has come to spend "every waking hour . . . scheming and planning to break as many of their laws as she could" (133). If one initially wonders how she can justify smuggling as an acceptable trade, her argument shows such an objection to be one-sided, even if it does not resolve the ethical problems of drug and firearms trafficking.

Now, at sixty, the two women become coincidentally preoccupied with the notebooks they have had in their possession for years. Zeta thinks it is no accident that Lecha returns to the ranch just as Zeta has "finished typing the transcriptions of the pages into the computer" (136). Lecha says once the notebooks are transcribed, she wants to "figure out how to use the old almanac. Then we will foresee the months and

years to come—everything" (137). She also regrets that she did not start transcribing the notebooks years ago; "then we'd already know what's coming. But I was having too much fun—there was no time for old notebooks and scraps of paper" (137). The messages in the almanac are not easy to interpret, as the fragments that appear throughout the novel show; they remain general and are subject to interpretation. One message from the Spirit Snake is, however, very clear. It occurs in Zeta's portion of the notebooks. It reads,

> *I have been talking to you people from the begin-*
>
> *ning*
>
> *I have told you the names and identities of the*
>
> *Days and Years.*
>
> *I have told you the stories on each day and year*
>
> *so you could be prepared*
>
> *and protect yourselves.*
>
> *What I have told you has always been true.*
>
> *What I have to tell you now is that*
>
> *this world is about to end*. (135)

The message of the Spirit Snake implies that despite its warnings, people have not paid attention, and have therefore not been able to protect themselves. They have not been vigilant. Lecha exemplifies this attitude; she has worked as a psychic and helped people find their murdered loved ones; however, for years she has not engaged with the notebooks, not paid attention to her grandmother's legacy. Now she can see the importance of the notebooks and wishes she had turned to them earlier. The Spirit Snake, who used to live "*at the Beautiful Lake*," disappeared after jealous neighbors of

the Old Laguna "*broke open the lake so all the water was lost"* (135). Afterward, the reign of Death-Eye Dog began and has lasted over five hundred years. However, the notebook of the Spirit Snake also contains a more hopeful message, although from an anonymous speaker: "One day a story will arrive at your town. It will come from far away, from the southwest or southeast—people won't agree. The story may arrive with a stranger or perhaps with the parrot trader. But when you hear this story, you will know it is the signal for you and the others to prepare" (135-6). Since the almanac, like the novel, does not specify time, the story that is supposed to arrive might be years to come, or just about to occur. There is, however, a sense of anticipation forming: people are starting to be attentive to signs for change.

No single character in the novel qualifies as a savior, the personification of right and justice, and yet there are several from whom people draw hope and reassurance. The two twin brothers from a small mountain village near the Guatemalan border play such a role. According to "rumors and television reports about two brothers, . . . [s]pirits talked to one of the twins and told him what the poor people must do, what the poor Indians must do. Spirits talked to him and scolded the people for being lazy and weak, for selling out to the Europeans" (589). The spirits are angry with the people who have not paid attention and slipped into the role of victims. The spirits do not pity the people, but admonish them for laziness and weakness, and tell them that they have to act. The spirits come to one of the twin brothers in the shape of two macaws. "The macaws had flown out of the jungle to perch on the shoulder of one of the brothers . . . . Before the blue and yellow macaws had alighted on the brother's shoulder, theirs had been just another pitiful group of rural squatters hounded to death by the Mexican army and police" (589). The transformation is astounding. Previously, the group around the twin brothers went

unnoticed, but suddenly it grows to "thousands of Indians and mestizos as well as hundreds of whites who gathered to learn what spiritual messages had been received" (590). More people come every day to join the group, and also, "now the authorities were dealing with a religious cult that seemed not to fear death much because they already talked to spirits of the dead anyway" (590). The group feels guided by the spirits of the dead, not threatened.

Another figure to whom people look is the Barefoot Hopi, a Hopi tribesman who served a ten-year prison sentence until five years ago. He had been convicted for shooting down a helicopter. The Hopi has a habit of going for walks "along the river to feel messages from the earth through his bare feet" (617). The Barefoot Hopi says that "he had no regrets about shooting down the helicopter. The helicopter had been hired by rich tourists from Beverly Hills to hover over the Snake Dance at old Oraibi" (617). People in the helicopter saw in the Indians' Snake Dance a tourist attraction and felt entitled to intrude on the premises without invitation or permission. "The Barefoot Hopi regretted the injuries to the pilot and passengers, but he did not regret prison" (617). In prison, he realizes what he needs to do. Once released, he starts rallying a movement against the very institution of the prison:

> The Hopi knew he might work to make preparations the rest of his life, yet never see the day when the prisons and jails all over the U.S. were hit with riots and strikes simultaneously. But that didn't discourage the Hopi. One human lifetime wasn't much; it was over in a flash. Conjunctions and convergences of global proportions might require six or seven hundred years to develop. (617)

One can imagine that during his ten years of prison, the Hopi had seen a

disproportionately high number of non-white and lower class inmates, which begs the question of what exactly correctional institutions are correcting.

Towards the end of *Almanac,* the International Holistic Healer Convention takes place in Tucson. Wilson Weasel Tail will hold the opening address. The Barefoot Hopi will speak there, too. A group called Eco-Warriors announces they are coming and will show a video of their latest feat: a few of their own partisans laid down their lives for the cause by blowing themselves up along with the Glen Canyon Dam. Many of the characters in *Almanac* come to the Convention, which turns out to be a combination of speeches addressed to an international audience, various smaller meetings of interest groups, and aggressive marketing for healing products. Calabazas, Zeta's business partner, is impressed with the amount of cash that he sees "slow brown hands receive from anxious white hands," and he remarks, "You know, all this time we were in the wrong business" (732). Calabazas senses a shift in focus, but how far-reaching this shift will be remains to be negotiated beyond the pages of Silko's novel.

Storytelling as a Twofold Narrative Strategy of Resistance

In *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko presents two sets of stories, the fragments from the old almanac that she "quotes," and her own stories. The question arises: "Who tells the stories?" The contemporary stories are all narrated in the third-person by an omniscient narrator. However, through the fragments of the ancient almanac we also hear multiple anonymous voices, many of which predate the translation into Spanish and have thus been transposed from the oral tradition and logographs into alphabetic script.

In what follows, I argue that Silko uses her telling of stories to practice two forms of resistance. On one level, she writes against temporal linearity and its apolitical

pretensions. She opposes boundary drawing that isolates national histories from the continuous flow of time, a religion that did not care for, but preyed on humans and anchors an inward-turning individualism, the division of self and other that assumes superiority of the Cartesian ego, and the resulting exploitation of the earth as if it were inanimate matter. On another level, Silko's resistance also tries to blaze a trail where change seems impossible. It is a form of proactive resistance that Foucault sought to articulate towards the end of his career, and that Jacques Derrida called the only "*un*-deconstructible," the urgent need to proceed in times of uncertainty and a seeming lack of options (133).

Storytelling, in Silko's writing, takes on the meaning of opening space into which life might in time grow. I first trace *Almanac's* resistance against prevalent forms of thought that confine it to narrow conceptions; then I consider the multilayered practice involved in the keeping of the old almanacs, which reaches into the present and beyond. They are not "pure" stories, but marked by the people who have preserved, transcribed, translated them. To understand the stories is not to finally decipher them, but to dwell in them, to let them speak the secrets of their time, paraphrased over and over again, and to recognize the secrets of our own time. Both lines of resistance, I argue, lead to a promise of healing, alluded to in the bizarre and imperfect International Holistic Healers Convention at the end of *Almanac,* which nevertheless revisits the body and the earth not in order to destroy or dominate, but to take good care of them.

Borders, Boundaries, and Bodies

The many characters in *Almanac* who constantly cross borders, and who are of mixed descent, reflect Silko's own experience of growing up on the Laguna Pueblo

reservation. Referring to her ancestry – one quarter Laguna Pueblo, combined with European American and Mexican American – she says of the major biographical influences on her writing: "I grew up at Laguna Pueblo. I am of mixed-breed ancestry, but what I know is Laguna. This place I am from is everything I am as a writer and human being" (Rosen, *The Man to Send Rain Clouds* 176). To live among the Laguna Pueblo means to "be immersed in a community where every interaction reinforces a narrative vision of oneself and one's belonging" (Silko, *Backtalk* 323). The vision of oneself and one's belonging is in flux, related to the transforming stories and through them to the outside world. Having been in contact with the oral tradition of storytelling among the Laguna Pueblo from early childhood, she explains its dynamic as follows: "The structure of Pueblo expression resembles something like a spider's web – with many threads radiating from a center, criss-crossing each other . . . . Words are always with other words, and the other words are almost always in a story of some sort" ("Language" 54-5). One is reminded of Bakhtin's observation that "each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life," and that "the word in language is half someone else's" (*Dialogic* 293).[72] The Laguna structure of expression that Silko describes informs the way in which knowledge is available in their language. To distinguish the Western European ordering of knowledge from the storage of knowledge in stories, Silko explains:

> Because the information is stored in narrative, it's ordered completely differently than Western European ordering of, like, technical botany or biology, by taking things apart. It puts things together and reinforces stories. So that a deer hunting story can contain valuable information in a

[72] See also p. 25 of this study.

> number of different areas that you'd have to cross-catalogue. (Perry, *Backtalk* 323)

The recurring theme in these multiple stories is the earth as nourishing and cherished by the Pueblos, a theme that reinforces a sense of connectedness, and that also serves as a reminder that connectedness with the earth and the community implies responsibility.

The sense of connectedness that Silko experienced as part of the epistemological and communal outlook among the Laguna Pueblo has strongly informed her aesthetics as a writer. At the same time, she has expanded and transformed the "threads" and points of connection in her stories. In *Ceremony* (1977), she weaves a pattern of connectedness across continents and millennia, and in a final twist she describes the cultures of this world as "one clan again, united by the fate the destroyers planned for all of them" (246). The nuclear threat of destruction unites the world into one clan "by a circle of death" (246). The ending of *Ceremony* also gestures towards *Almanac of the Dead*, where the necessity of redefining communal boundaries in view of impending crisis becomes a constituent part of the narrative. Silko calls *Almanac of the Dead* her "763-page indictment for five hundred years of theft, murder, pillage, and rape" (Perry, *Backtalk* 327). Europeans have pillaged the earth, mined mountains and thereby come too close to the "four worlds below" (Silko, *Almanac* 121). Lecha's and Zeta's father, the mining geologist, experiences the effects of violating Mother Earth: "Somewhere within him there was, arid and shriveled, the imperfect vacuum he called himself" (120). Eventually, he sits down in a hotel room and slowly dries up, "shriveled as a cactus blown down in a drought" (123).

White Europeans, Silko's character Yoeme claims in the novel, were in bad spiritual condition when they arrived. By the time Europeans invaded the Americas, the

Inquisition had swept over the European continent and shed much blood. "'Mother Church' was a cannibal monster. Since the Europeans had no other gods or beliefs left, they had to continue the church rituals and worship; but they knew the truth. . . . [A] church that tortures and kills is a church that can no longer heal; thus the Europeans had arrived in the New World in precarious spiritual health" (718). Concealed between the lines of Yoeme's remarks lies a story of loss, since the Europeans gradually had to give up their ancient gods when Christianity spread.

From a Native American perspective, the Europeans arrived in the New World without spiritual guidance. They convinced themselves that the land they took was vacant, because the connection between the land and the people in the Americas was different from European notions of property. But Europeans knew that they constructed a claim to the land based on European culture and rhetoric, and that the legal system of land distribution they established was not of this place. It took a considerable level of repression to forget that "stolen land had never had clear title," even according to their own law (133). Against the "Eurocentric tendency to label certain actions as good or evil," Silko holds the "Pueblo vision of the way things are": "In this universe, there is no absolute good or absolute bad; there are only balances and harmonies that ebb and flow" (Silko, *Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirit* 64). A story emerges about white Europeans who had lost touch with their spirituality and ancient gods, who were committed to a Church that shed blood and built their new home on the lie that the land they found was theirs to claim. The repression that it takes to ignore this lie and dismiss the fear of the spirits residing on the appropriated land turns into violence and death.

Under such conditions, what comes into focus is the body, and more specifically the Indian body, which is violated, mutilated, and killed. When Silko's character Yoeme

flees because more and more Indians are being hanged from the cottonwood trees, war is being waged on the Indian body, which is transformed from a living being into a hull of dried-up skin hanging from a tree. Wilson Weasel Tail was "raised on a small, poor ranch forty miles from the Wounded Knee massacre site, an allusion to a particularly brutal incident that also shows the fear among whites of the ghosts with which the Indians communicate. At the massacre in December 1890, "from the heights above, the army's Hotchkiss guns raked the Indian teepees with grapeshot. Clouds of gun smoke filled the air as men, women, and children scrambled for their lives. Many ran for a ravine next to the camp only to be cut down in a withering cross fire" ("Massacre").[73] Soldiers were decorated with medals, notwithstanding that they had opened fire on many women and children through their teepee walls. While writing *Almanac,* at some point Silko asked herself whether she really had to write about "all this incredible twisted sexual torture" and about

> America's fascination with blood and violent death. . . . But I knew I had to because nobody really wants to talk about it. I had to connect that with Christianity and the Holy Eucharist and the Church and the Inquisition. And I knew people weren't going to like it, but I had to do it. (Silko and Ellen, *Conversations* 327)

[73]Confined to reservations, the buffalo gone, and depending on Indian Agents for their existence, "many [Sioux] sought salvation in a new mysticism preached by a Paiute shaman called Wovoka. Emissaries from the Sioux in South Dakota traveled to Nevada to hear his words. Wovoka called himself the Messiah and prophesied that the dead would soon join the living in a world in which the Indians could live in the old way surrounded by plentiful game. A tidal wave of new soil would cover the earth, bury the whites, and restore the prairie. To hasten the event, the Indians were to dance the Ghost Dance. Many dancers wore brightly colored shirts emblazoned with images of eagles and buffaloes. These 'Ghost Shirts' they believed would protect them from the bluecoats' bullets. During the fall of 1890, the Ghost Dance spread through the Sioux villages of the Dakota reservations, revitalizing the Indians and bringing fear to the whites." The army tried to arrest the Indian leaders and intercepted one of them, Big Foot, with his band on the way to "seek protection at the Pine Ridge Reservation." In the course of events, a shot was fired and triggered an immediate eruption of battle, which ended with the death of over 300 hundred Indians and twenty-five soldiers ("Massacre").

Silko projects a cannibalist view of Christianity, of ingestion rituals that are meant to honor Christ's sacrifice, but also of a church that devours its own members and opponents in the need to destroy bodies.

Almanac's large number of characters, plot-lines, and settings constitute a multiplicity that escapes conventional criticism. Its emulation of the old Mayan almanacs prioritizes a cyclic rather than linear view of temporality. As Gregory Salyer observes, "because there are so many characters, plot lines, and settings, paying attention to the particulars in the novel is practically impossible" (100). He argues that there is a point to the confusion emanating from Silko's multiple stories. "Literary criticism, whether traditional or contemporary, depends upon certain assumptions about time and place, namely, that time is stable and apolitical, and the landscape is a palimpsest for culture" (100). Silko attacks Western European methods of recording time as "completely political. Colonialists always want time and history not to go back very far," because the consideration of the past prior to established colonial rule makes visible former cultures that colonialism destroyed; to draw boundaries of national histories enables repression of events that would prove incriminating (Perry, *Backtalk* 329).

Almanac valorizes the cyclic, long-term perception of time in native cultures. Circumstances favor the Native Pueblos who are not pressed by the fear of death or the lack of time. They can wait "another hundred years, until the Europeans ha[ve] been outnumbered and the people ret[ake] the land peacefully" (*Almanac* 710). Natives and non-Natives who have joined the twin brothers are ready to follow the prophecy and join them on their march north: "Wacah, El Feo, and the people with them believed the spirit voices; if the people kept walking, if the people carried no weapons, then the old prophecies would come to pass, and all the dispossessed and the homeless would have

land; the tribes of the Americas would retake the continents from pole to pole" (711). From the multiple stories without distinct time references emerges a movement that evokes the above-mentioned image of "ebb and flow" in which "harmonies and balances" are always reestablished. While the stories are not closely related, they align themselves gradually in two directions: rise and decline. The patient preparation of retaking the land is juxtaposed with stories of disintegration of initially successful players in the socioeconomic sphere. Accidents happen, as in the case of Menardo, an insurance agent, who orders his servant to shoot him in the chest to demonstrate the strength of his bulletproof vest. Since the vest is a staple in his "personal protection product-line," he wants to demonstrate how reliable it is, but the vest does not hold: "How tragic! Microscopic imperfections in the fabrics quilting; a bare millimeter's difference and the bullet would safely have stopped" (509). In a time of increasing upheaval, Menardo had started wearing the vest at night. He had been looking forward to the test, to live the moment of looking death in the eye and being delivered. But the combination of his paranoiac obsession with safety and his intended marketing manoever turns deadly. The scene is symptomatic: stories of corrupted characters who become ruthlessly obsessed with their personal and financial success, who lose grip, and see their fate turn against them, proliferate in Silko's novel. While seemingly fragmented, the stories are connected within a larger pattern. As Janet St. Clair notes, the stories form "great looping convergences of modern Western thought – become the eviscerated signifiers of a radically limited vision" (87-88).

Almanac of the Dead rejects Euro-American cultural and epistemological hegemony as illegitimate and resists conventional literary criticism to the point of inverting the relation between literary text and criticism. Instead of analyzing the novel,

literary criticism finds itself under scrutiny. If available theories rely on the notion that spatiotemporality unfolds in linear history, we have to ask ourselves to what extent such analytical tools serve to perpetuate Western cultural and epistemological hegemony. According to Mignolo, "political process (and social events) will, out of necessity, be interpreted in the frame of existing macro-narratives, which are indeed theories" (*Local* 9). He states the need for "macro-narratives from the perspective of coloniality" in order to interpret "events and political processes that attempt to counter the control of the State or of global forces, . . . underlining both the act of protest, the creative energy of subaltern events and processes to create a more just and equal society" (9). Almanac lays bare the limits of such approaches to literary criticism in eluding the conventional categories of critical analysis.

A strength of *Almanac* is to propose such reflections not as postcolonial gestures of apology and reconciliation, but as acts of self-preservation in which storytelling, as well as macro-narratives, are decisive for the future of the world. Mignolo emphasizes the importance of constant awareness of the "ethics and politics of research and teaching," if both are supposed to contribute to "decolonization, and the decolonization of scholarship" (27). For those who dismiss *Almanac* as a writer's imaginary vengeance for atrocities Native Americans have suffered until this day, it may be interesting to consider that Silko's predictions are not entirely a work of her imagination, but belong to the "long-standing prophecies" that have been passed on among Native peoples for generations (Salyer 117). The process of storytelling has kept these prophecies alive until today, an indication that storytelling is a potential measure against assimilation and destruction of the tribes.

While many of the stories in *Almanac* concern death resulting from corruption,

sexual violence, and greed, Silko's implicit criticism of hegemonic Western culture is the most unsettling message. In *Almanac*, Western culture and epistemology are relegated to their place of one option among many. Though *Almanac* is relentlessly anti-Western, however, it does not strive towards an idealized stasis of Native cultural identity as exclusive of otherness. While *Almanac* promotes and plots the reclaiming of the land by the dispossessed, Silko's comments on the novel indicate that she proposes no simple reversion of history through an expulsion of Euro-Americans from American soil. Her statement that "the retaking of the Americas . . . has to be done with the help of everybody," not in a "literal" way but through "spiritual" agreement, should guide us away from reductive early misreadings of *Almanac* that failed to recognize its allegory of inner revolutionary change (Silko and Ellen, *Conversations* 194). The novel strongly suggests that the help of everybody is required in the context of the ancient almanac.

The "Meaning" of the Ancient Almanac

When Yoeme passes on the ancient almanac to Lecha and Zeta, she emphasizes how "carefully the old manuscript and its notebooks must be kept. Nothing must be added that was not already there. Only repairs are allowed, and one might live as long as I have and not find a suitable code" (Silko, A*lmanac* 129). Zeta's notebook consists of a "bundle of pages and scraps of paper with notes in Latin and Spanish," disappointing to Zeta, but it also contains "drawings of the snakes . . . in beautiful colors of ink" (134). The old notebooks in Lecha's hands include writing in "broken Spanish and corrupt Latin," and she has "already done translation work" (174). When Yoeme tells the two sisters of an encounter with the Apache leader Geronimo—"He was a man who was able to perform certain feats"— she recalls that he stood at the shore in the waves at some

moment, and the next second he had disappeared without a trace (129). Lecha records the incident in one of the notebooks; "Old Yoeme had demanded to see it, and it was then they realized it was the first entry that had been written in English. . . . she had rocked herself from side to side, sighing with pleasure. Yoeme claimed this was the sign the keepers of the notebooks had always prayed for" (130). Yoeme's initial assertion that nothing should be added and that only repairs are allowed is at odds with her joyful reaction to Lecha's latest addition to the notebooks. Martha J. Cutter suggests to read Yoeme's earlier statement as an indication that "repairing the almanac means not so much rewriting it but writing it" (112). The line between old and new becomes blurred, and the safeguarding of ancient recordings is joined by the cautious inclusion of further stories that are deemed worthy of being preserved in the notebooks. The notebooks do not merely record stories from the past, but carry inscriptions of an ongoing process of recording.

Physically, the almanac carries another set of stories that corroborates such a process-based reading: "the material transcribed into the notebooks had been on thin sheets of membrane, perhaps primitive parchment the Europeans taught the native Americans to make. Yoeme had told them the skins had been stretched and pressed out of horse stomachs, and the little half-moons were places the stomach worms had chewed" (246). On the journey north, the four children that had been chosen to carry the almanac to safety often go hungry, and at some point, one of the girls "secretly chew[s] and suck[s] the edges of the brittle horse-gut pages" (247). The almanac nurtures its keepers on several occasions on this difficult journey. They devour whole pages to stay alive. We also learn that "for hundreds of years, guardians of the almanac notebooks had made clumsy attempts to repair torn pages. Some sections had been splashed with wine,

others with water or blood," untranslatable traces of stories that over time do not need translation to become comprehensible (570). With the years, material has been added that Yoeme describes as "debris gathered here and there by aged keepers of the almanac after they had gone crazy" (569). Yoeme's own scribblings are to be found in the margins, including the kinds of "remarks and vulgar humor that Lecha and Zeta had enjoyed many times with their grandmother" (570). But there are also "whole sections [that] had been stolen from other books and from . . . 'farmer's almanacs'" (570). Finally, "not even the parchment pages or fragments of ancient paper could be trusted; they might have been clever forgeries, recopied, drawn, and colored painstakingly" (570). The authenticity of the almanac is thus all but certain.

And yet, "the almanacs had prophesied the appearance of Cortés to the day. All Native American tribes had similar prophecies about the appearance, conflict with, and eventual disappearance of things European" (570). Despite the impossibility to establish the almanac's authenticity, Silko insists that it contains some truth that emerges through repeated acts of translation. "But truth is multifaceted and multilingual. . . . in the past and in the present, truth exists only in the web and tangle of discourse, of contradictory narratives and languages" (Cutter 114). The magic power of the almanac, and of storytelling, is perhaps best revealed in an incident that Yoeme relays to her granddaughters, and that she also records in the ancient notebooks. During her years away from her family, she was arrested and convicted for "sedition and high treason against the federal government" (Silko, A*lmanac* 579). Waiting for her execution in the Alamos Jail, Yoeme saw people "in twos or threes . . . come to stare at me . . . [and] relish the words they repeat again and again—their daydreams of my hanging and dismemberment" (579). But the influenza arrives, and such a great number of prison

guards and officials die that the functioning of the facility is compromised; looters who come for guns and ammunition set Yoeme free (580). Yoeme recalls that "she had had 'a vision' that told her the influenza had saved many others as well as revolutionists such as herself sentenced to die" (581). She strongly believes in the truth of her vision and the fact that the influenza came to her aid.

> Yoeme had made margin notes after the pages describing her deliverance. Yoeme had believed power resides within certain stories; this power ensures the story to be retold, and with each retelling a slight but permanent shift took place. Yoeme's story of her deliverance changed forever the odds against all captives; each time a revolutionist escaped death in one century, two revolutionists escaped certain death in the following century even if they had never heard such an escape story. Where such miraculous escape stories are greatly prized and rapidly circulated, miraculous escapes from death gradually increase. (581)

Although the form in which her "deliverance" comes is disastrous, since millions of people died of the influenza, her belief in the power of stories is remarkably hopeful. The point seems to be not so much whether her deliverance was really ordained by some higher power, but that such moments, when they are captured in stories, become a force that can grow through sharing, like the vision of the two brothers who now march north with an increasing group of followers. In the old almanac, the strength of stories does not depend on their purity, but on their broad circulation and the participation of people in their translation, which "allows [the almanac] to flower and evolve in a new cultural context" (Cutter 112).

References to the old almanac create a subtext that speaks of multicultural and

multilingual spaces through which the almanac has circulated, and from which it derives its force. This subext invalidates the frequent initial interpretation of the novel as affirming Native culture by excluding others. Instead, *Almanac* projects a vision of culture as "self-differentiating," a term Derrida used to denote "a way of being different from itself" (Derrida and Caputo 13). Hospitality, the possibility of welcoming the other, arises from cultural identity understood as "self-differentiating," whereas monologic culture leads to rejection and hostility (14). Culture, conceived as being different from itself, is not founded on origins, from which the present state of things would develop through causal chains of events. The heterogeneity of culture demands a different vision of the past, present, and future; the past is not a former present moment that is constitutive of subsequent moments; it does not determine the present and future. Rather, relations between the past, present, and future remain open-ended. In *Almanac,* the prediction that a story will arrive, and that people will recognize it and prepare, occurs twice: The two instances differ mainly in the last line of the announcement, which reads in Zeta's notebook of the Spirit Snake, "you will know it is the signal for you and the others to prepare" (136). In the other version, contained in Lecha's ancient notebooks, this last line reads, "you and the others prepare by the new moon to rise up against the slave masters" (578). It is impossible to tell which entry is older; they do not follow from each other, but relate to similar circumstances, specified in the second version as a context of slavery.

The connection between the past, present, and future is not linear. In Silko's novel, it is woven through a web of stories; in Derrida's work, the connection of past, present, and future takes "the structure of a promise – and thus the memory of that which carries the future, the to-come, here and now" (*The Other Heading* 78). Walter Benjamin

expresses such a nonlinear view of history by stating that the historian "stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary" (263). Instead, a past moment in time becomes historical through its relation to the "present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time" (263). Past moments related to the present carry within them a hope for the future, since they call for our response to larger contexts that linear history conceals.

Both self-differentiating culture and a nonlinear view of spatiotemporal relations are open-ended conceptions that consider human agency as decisive in shaping the future. In *Almanac,* Silko views the reality of Native Americans in the last five hundred years as having lived under the repression of colonial rule. During this time period, the land has dramatically changed. The question arises, "What form of agency is possible or commendable under those conditions?" Human agency, under the prevaling order, has been subjected to severe constraints, yet Silko's novel envisions storytelling and attentive listening to the stories of others as a form of agency that might reveal ongoing dynamics and open new spaces to be inhabited. Such engagement is an active form of resisting any attempt to naturalize the status quo. Agency in Silko's novel does not consist in carrying out predefined action. It is an engagement with the present moment and its multilayered connections to other moments, past and future, and has an open-ended outcome.

Silko creates a web of stories, old and new, that suggests larger patterns of connectedness than our familiar conceptual frameworks are capable of grasping. Her novel admonishes those who perpetuate unbalanced power relations and suggests that such imbalances will not prevail. In *Almanac's* narrative argument, any conceptual or ideological position is one of the many stories that form the oscillating waves of history.

Any such position might carry within it a promise for the future, or become a reminder of what has once been or needs to be avoided. By evoking both the need for human agency and the possibility of larger patterns of harmonies and balances, Silko appeals to a sense of responsibility rather than activism, a sense of awareness of how one's own actions affect the interconnectedness of all things.

Conclusion

In Johnson's *Middle Passage*, Captain Falcon exclaims, "The Allmuseri god is everything, so the very knowing situation we mortals rely on—a separation between knower and known—never rises in its experience" (101-2). We are familiar with the knowing situation because we are, sometimes painfully, aware of our limited possibilities to attain knowledge. One of those limits is that we can only take in small portions at a time; but as we cut out smaller pieces to examine them we are left to guess what the larger whole looks like from which we have been cutting. Looking is, to be sure, only a metaphor meant to connote all the ways in which we can access knowledge. To reason along these lines is a phenomenon of the twentieth century; in previous centuries, we felt more secure about what we knew, and felt certain that our knowledge was increasing toward a remote but assured point of total transparency. All of this has changed: we now know that the aim of full knowledge cannot be attained, not only because we lack the capacity to grasp all things, but also because while we are trying, our object of investigation changes and transforms; and so do we. Knowledge is process, a constantly changing process of rearticulation.

"Epistemological humility" is in order, to use Johnson's favorite expression, the concession that our assumptions might be false as we try to comprehend objects, those who surround us, or ourselves. Complications arise as we realize that awareness of changed parameters that used to structure our knowledge does not automatically translate into our ability to delete those from all corners of our consciousness. Worse yet is the idea that former assumptions might still inform collective, sociopolitical decisions and affect, in varying degrees, the reality of actual people. Former assumptions are hard

to shed because they have informed our usage of language—our most encompassing means of expression—in all its forms: everyday language, professional discourse, and forms of written recording. We walk on a grid that does not allow us to step where we want to go.

More open-ended forms of expression are needed, a move away from the cartesian self, and from monologic forms of discourse. The three novels under scrutiny in this study use diverse strategies to engage in the reconceptualization of assumptions that are still based on Newtonian mechanics and perpetuate concepts of fixity and universality of spatiotemporal relations. In *Middle Passage*, Johnson engages in such revisions by subverting the logbook, a genre that was a crucial means of controlled and censored recording in the transatlantic slave trade. Fixed spatiotemporal coordinates, and power over authorship and voice mark the genre as ancillary to repression and exploitation. Rutherford Calhoun as the new chronicler of the ship's voyage does away with these constraints. His and the slaves' voices are recorded, and censorship over content is lifted. As an intradiegetic narrator, Calhoun lives events in his story while narrating earlier ones; by sharing his limit experience of pending ship wreck with his shipmates, he lives the emotional transition from a fixed sense of identity to the open-ended relational sense of self that is characteristic of the Allmuseri. The reader witnesses the emotional relief once Calhoun feels liberated from the fixity of constituting identity and recognizes such a notion as narrow and restrictive. In the process of his chronicling, dichotomies of black and white, self and other, and mind and body are being dismantled: Calhoun's experience of getting to know Allmuseri culture makes him slowly realize the vast differences between their culture and his own.

In Powers's *The Time of Our Singing*, we find concrete suggestions not only to

question the dichotomy of black and white, but to work toward a renewed vocabulary that moves away from categorizing to the denotation of variety of skin color. By configurating the voices in his novel as polyphonic, he does not subsume the voices of his narrators under his own, but leaves their relative autonomy intact. Meaning in Powers's novel is created in the space between characters, narrators, authorial voice and reader. Powers thus rejects monologism in favor of an open-ended form of narrative in which the full consciousness of characters is revealed. His rejection of monologism counterbalances the entirely monologic atmosphere of racial discrimination that forms the hostile environment in which the Strom family live. The only space in which their family life can unfold is their home, eventually also violated by arson. Music and color exemplify that all things are essentially the same, yet in their manifestation show their beauty in diversity. His inclusion of events in the novel that defy human comprehension within the familiar spatiotemporal coordinates challenges his readers to reflect about the possibilities and limits of human knowledge.

Since Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* has many characters but no protagonist, attention is shifted from character development to fields of relation, a major concern in the novel. Her narrative of resistance against Euro-American cultural and epistemological hegemony proceeds from a spatiotemporal set of coordinates that are distinctly non-Western, nonlinear, and cyclic. The fragments of the ancient almanac that permeate her novel incorporate pre-colonial voices and those that had been in contact with first European colonizers. Reading her novel is disorienting until it becomes clear that the stories form waves that aline in the two opposite directions of rise and decline. It is left to her readers to either believe in such greater wave-like pattern, or to discard such notions as unlikely. However, that the supposedly cosmic tidal waves that her novel

evokes escape human perception is no indication that they do not exist. Silko leaves her readers with the uncomfortable feeling of limited knowledge and control, and with the possibility that there might be forces at work that are beyond our grasp and yet intervene in human lives. Storytelling as proactive resistance against narrowly defined states' borders and historical periods destabilizes the authority of such notions. Within the larger spacetime frame of the novel, five hundred years of colonialism are indeed not a long time, and from a Native perspective still temporary, not permanent.

Like Johnson, Powers, and Silko, the theorists evoked in this study reject domination; furthermore, in thinking about the concepts that Adorno, Bakhtin, and Foucault propose, stories emerge, of battle, suffering, dialogue, and, with Derrida, hospitality. Even if reduced to abstract concepts, these terms nevertheless refer to lived experience. Foucault writes about his childhood memories of war,

> The menace of war was our background, our framework of existence. Then the war arrived. Much more than the activities of family life, it was these events concerning the world which are the substance of our memory. I say 'our' because I am nearly sure that most boys and girls in France at this moment had the same experience. Our private life was really threatened. Maybe that is the reason why I am fascinated by history and the relationship between personal experience and those events of which we are a part. I think that is the nucleus of my theoretical desires. (7)

He connects his theoretical endeavors with both the marking experience of war and a desire to address his childhood memories. In the context of Silko's novel, it becomes possible to regard theories as stories that are forming part of the oscillating waves that

are history, even if one tends to understand the term metaphorically. Such a notion revises the approach usually taken: to apply theories to literature. In this study, I have attempted to treat relations between novel and theory as mutual: as much as a theory can grasp and criticize certain traits of the novel, the novel can imply commentary on theory. This has also been the case in the relation between *The Time of Our Singing* and Bakhtin's chronotope. While Bakhtin's concept has explanatory force for Powers's novel, his novel displays chronotopic imagining that exceeds the parameters of Bakhtin's presentation of the concept.

In the end, it seems more suitable to regard both theory and the novel as different forms of expression of thought. Such an approach tries to think further the possibilities of theories, to criticize their limits, and to avoid reducing them to a few terms that often come to stand for the entire lifework of a theorist. To consider the novel as an expression of thought draws attention to those elements in the novel that, as Treuer writes, "create[] culture," rather then represent culture (5). Even if what is being depicted in the novel lies historically in the past, it undergoes actualization through the form in which it is being depicted. "Through contact with the present, an object is attracted to the incomplete process of a world-in-the-making, and is stamped with the seal of inconclusiveness. No matter how distant this object is from us in time, it is connected to our incomplete, present-day, continuing temporal transitions, it develops a relationship with our unpreparedness, with our present" (Bakhtin, *Dialogics* 30). To create inconclusiveness in the novel requires indeed imaginative work with form, an aesthetic project that is ongoing and never complete.

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