



1994

# Demythifying Melville: Charles Johnson's Middle Passage and the Nightmare of Slavery

Rachel Palencia '94

*Illinois Wesleyan University*

---

## Recommended Citation

Palencia '94, Rachel, "Demythifying Melville: Charles Johnson's Middle Passage and the Nightmare of Slavery" (1994). *Honors Projects*. Paper 11.  
[http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/eng\\_honproj/11](http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/eng_honproj/11)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Ames Library, the Andrew W. Mellon Center for Curricular and Faculty Development, the Office of the Provost and the Office of the President. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Commons @ IWU by the faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@iwu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@iwu.edu).

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Demythifying Melville:  
Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*  
and the Nightmare of Slavery

Rachel Palencia  
Department of English  
Illinois Wesleyan University  
Bloomington, IL 61701

00

Myths are things that never happen but always are.

--Sallustius, On Gods and the Universe

When I discover who I am, I'll be free.

--Ralph Ellison

## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Standard for the Comparison	6
Origins of the Myth	10
The Myth of Character	23
The Myth of Religion	32
Contrived Ending	36
Conclusion	37

## Introduction

When Charles Johnson first began writing he faced such questions as "What is, or is not, the black experience?" and "What do I have to say or contribute?" In his book entitled *Being and Race*, Johnson quotes Malraux who tells us that "artists do not stem from their childhood, but from their conflicts with the achievements of their predecessors; not from their formless world, but from their struggle with the forms which others have imposed on life." (4) These imposed forms create a twofold struggle for black American writers: to break with the European tradition and culture in order to create a sense of American self-hood, and as black writers to break with the norms and traditions imposed by white society in order to create an identity. Insofar as literature traditionally has created a history in which whites act and blacks can only "react" (7), by telling blacks who and what they are, it deprives them of both "humanity and culture of their complexity" (Ellison xx). Identity for the black, therefore, has been defined by a society whose literature is a reflection of its white racist theories. Thus by definition, society creates myths, "racial clichés," designed to control religious, social, economic, and political realities (Ellison 28). More often, however, the black has been written out of history and literature, existing separately, unacknowledged, without an identity. Thus the black American writer begins with a crisis of identity and his fiction is about this search for self and liberation. As Ralph Ellison stated in *Shadow and Act*: "Not quite citizens and yet Americans, full of the tensions of modern man but regarded as primitives, Negro Americans are in a desperate search for an identity" (297).

In his own search for an identity as a black American author, Charles Johnson was heavily influenced by other black writers, such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin and John A. Williams, and what critics are now calling the "Black Aesthetic." Having adopted the styles of these authors, he wrote what he considered to be six bad apprentice novels: "misery-filled protest stories about the sorry condition of being black in America" (Being 5). Unable to read them after they were finished, however, he later realized that he had been uncritical of fiction insofar as writing "doesn't so much record an experience - or even imitate or represent it - as it *creates* that experience" (6). While an author is the creator of an experience, Ellison suggests that he must also challenge the "apparent forms of reality" (106). Since the black has been either left out of history and literature or marginalized and stereotyped, he must be put back into these same forms which have denied his presence and identity. The movement in the twentieth century of Négritude, which is the celebration of this Black consciousness through literature (Dixon 25), suggests that there is a necessity for blacks to recreate, reconstruct, redefine, and essentially "remake the world in their own image" (Dixon 27). In remaking his world, the black author thus reinvents the African self through has been called "Black America" (29).

After Charles Johnson discovered that the role of the writer is as a "mythmaker" of his people, his writing changed. Generally, it can be stated that each author revises the authors he has read, but this statement, when applied to Charles Johnson, becomes literal. In his novel Middle Passage, Charles Johnson rewrites Herman Melville's short story "Benito Cereno." Let me first explain not only how I came to this conclusion but also its validity.

When I first picked up *Middle Passage*, I was struck by an odd sense of familiarity, for having read "Benito Cereno" that same year, I immediately noted a connection to Melville. I became curious to determine not only the nature of that connection but also how an analysis of it might enhance an understanding of Johnson's text. I asked myself: "Why does Johnson deliberately choose to retell Melville?" A few reasons immediately suggested themselves: because Melville represents the canon of classic American literature and because he is an American writer who has adopted the European perspective of the empire. Moreover, Charles Johnson, in telling the story from the point of view of a freed slave, is trying to revise a portion of the canon of slave narratives, and, by doing so, construct an alternate view of American history as well as an alternate history of American literature. *Middle Passage* is both indebted to "Benito Cereno" and revises it.

"History," said Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses*, "is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." (Joyce 28) "History," Charles Johnson might say, "is a nightmare I am trying to revise." This paper explores that revision of the nightmare. The principal tool of revision for Johnson is what I have called "demythification," that is, the deliberate deconstruction or critique of the "myths" that Melville embodies in "Benito Cereno."

When Melville wrote "Benito Cereno," a parable of slavery written at the "dawn of the Civil War" he could not write freely about the American slave experience (Geismar, viii). As an abolitionist, Melville wanted to address the issue of slavery, but American slavery was a controversial topic, and so in order to avoid anonymity and societal disapproval, he sets his story in the Pacific Ocean, rather than the Atlantic, making a statement about Europe's position in regard to slavery and more specifically about

Spain's position and the Spanish Inquisition. One may ask, therefore, "How much of history is really only determined by perspective, by social conventions, or by myths and stereotypes?" In retelling or revising Melville's story of "Benito Cereno," Johnson, in essence, is doing just that: recreating experience and retelling history from a different perspective, just as Melville revised the same tale during his generation. Thus this revision is determined by perspective, and Johnson's, quite different from that of Melville, encompasses the viewpoint of not only a black but also a twentieth century post-colonialist.

Where originally Black America has been given only one identity, one past, one history, one "fixed meaning" and one horror, in his revision, Johnson creates a new black experience by demythifying the common myths that Melville either accepts or creates (Little 161). The two principal myths that Johnson demythifies are the myth of character and the myth of religion. Where Melville's story affirms social order, Johnson's destroys order, for it is this order, this hierarchy, that not only has instituted slavery but also has supported the dehumanization of the middle passage. In humanizing the slave narrative, Johnson gives his characters histories, cultures, and religions thereby creating identities. The middle passage for Johnson thus becomes a demythification; he substitutes the black twentieth century post-colonial perspective for the white eighteenth century perspective of empire.

In exploring the revision of Melville's "nightmare," first I would like to set up the standard for the comparison which will create a basis for comparing Melville and Johnson aside from the similarities of them as writers. Someone once said, for example, that the only way to compare apples and oranges is on the basis of fruit. This comparison,



metaphorically speaking, will not be based upon fruit. Having established the standard for the comparison, I would like to explore Johnson's principal tool of revision, what I have called "demythification." The first myth that Melville is operating under is the myth of character. This myth rests on two stereotypes: first that the black is simple and easily comprehended and second, that in addition to this simplicity, the black is morally and intellectually inferior. Many of the notions that form this mythology have their origins in the figures of the Wild Man and the Noble Savage. By showing the origins and the development of these ideas, the reversal, the demythification, will become clear. In deconstructing and critiquing these "myths," Johnson creates in effect a new "myth." He shows that blacks not only are complex characters but also possess a wide range of emotions, beneath which is not evil nor ignorance but potential goodness and intelligence that has been suppressed through slavery. Also closely connected to the notions of the Wild Man and the Noble Savage, the second myth that Melville operates under is what I have called the myth of religion. This myth rests on two stereotypes: first that blacks are spiritually simple and second that the impulse to revolt is a primitive urge. In his deconstruction, Johnson shows first that blacks are spiritually complex and second that the impulse to revolt has a spiritual basis. Where Dubois said that the problem of the Negro is that he "ever feels his 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 torn asunder," Charles Johnson in *Middle Passage* tries to unite this notion of twoness by presenting its opposite: a notion of unity and of oneness whose sole purpose is the appreciation of Being (Being 24). Johnson not only demythifies Melville but also suggests

that where American and European cultures are built upon notions of division, separateness, and the "other," the way is to go about "singing the world" (Being 123).

### Standard for the Comparison

Johnson's debts to Melville may be explored through a consideration of the similarities between the two works in language, theme, plot, and characterization. These establish the grounds for the comparison and thus will serve to make sharper the grounds for the contrast which is the second half of this paper. Suggesting a clear Melvillean connection, Johnson uses in his narrative some of the same slave names from Captain Delano's account in "Benito Cereno" such as Babo, Atufal, Diamelo, and Francesco. It is not merely the similarities of the names that indicate a connection to Melville but also the similarities in characterization. Atufal, for example, is described in both works as a large black in an iron collar; Babo, a seemingly servile slave; the oakum pickers and hatchet polishers of Melville carry over into *Middle Passage* in the picking apart of old ropes intended to "control a rebellious nigger" (Middle 74) and in the hatchet polishing of Babo, who although he had "always seemed so servile before, sat sharpening a hatchet" (132). These slaves aboard the San Dominick (Melville) and the Republic (Johnson) are from specific African tribes, the Ashantee and Allmuseri respectively, and are characterized by witchcraft and sorcery: the "black wizards of Ashantee" (Melville 116) become in Johnson "a whole tribe . . . of devil-worshipping, spell-casting wizards" (Middle 43). Associated with wizardry and magic, they are feared because they represent not only the unknown but also god-like power. At the

same time, because they can be dismissed as racially inferior, even sub-human, their power is underestimated. In "Benito Cereno," for example, the slaves are left unchained on deck because they are seen as too ignorant to organize a revolt; whites by nature are the "shrewder race" (126). In *Middle Passage*, Falcon also underestimates the blacks who "don't think too well, or too often" (30). After the revolt, however, both parties must reevaluate their previous assumptions for, according to Delano, it was the black "whose brain, not body, had schemed and led the revolt" in "Benito Cereno" (Melville' 175); and in *Middle Passage* Falcon also comes to the same revelation: "Then we underestimated the blacks? They're smarter than I thought?" (146). Melville and Johnson suggests that the slaves have been underestimated because society determines value and nature by surface and physical appearances.

Both texts are accounts of slave ships on a symbolic journey, whose voyage between the two worlds, the land of freedom and the land of bondage, is called a middle passage. These ships, the San Dominick in Melville and the Republic in Johnson, are both microcosms of society: small but complete worlds with their own hierarchies, laws, and religions in which every event implicates a greater meaning, a universal significance or truth. During both voyages a slave revolt occurs and, upon overtaking the ship, the slaves plan to revert its course to their homeland. In order to do so, however, they must spare the lives of the crew members capable of navigating their return. The role of master and slave, therefore, is reversed, and now it is ironically the slaves who are left to determine the value or worth of life. After the revolt, however, both ships, having lost their navigators, are stranded without course or direction. Consequently, the San Dominick and the Republic become floating death ships, not only

lacking direction but also water and provisions, a "pitiful skeleton crew of half-starved ex-slaves. Without much water, without good canvas, and almost without an experienced crew" (Middle 152). At this point in their wanderings, they encounter another ship, a savior ship: the Bachelor's Delight in "Benito Cereno" and the Juno, the floating gin palace of *Middle Passage*. Out of greed and the poor condition of their ship, the revolted slaves suggest the takeover of the new ship; for as Squibb in *Middle Passage* relates: "Diamele wants to fire on her, then abandon this tub - and us - fer that 'one" (176) and in "Benito Cereno:" "the Negro Babo again drew him aside, telling him that that very night he would be captain of two ships instead of one" (168). Neither ship, however, overtakes this "savior" ship but rather, by the end of each account, both the San Dominick and the Republic are destroyed virtually through not only what they have encountered but also what they have become.

And what of the leaders of such societies? Both Benito Cereno, the presumed captain of the San Dominick, and Ebenezer Falcon, the captain of the Republic, are what Amasa Delano calls "paper captain(s)" (Melville 107). Neither is the owner of the ship nor its cargo but rather the guardian; they are in fact middlemen on the middle passage. Their character or role, based on false fronts and appearances, is determined largely by the perceptions of the crew, and the "outsiders:" Delano and Rutherford. The true captain of the San Dominick, for example, Alexandro Aranda, was murdered in the takeover and Benito Cereno is forced by the slaves to assume his role in order to deceive Delano; Falcon, although he is the captain, is not the owner, for the Republic is financed by three American investors. Both "captains," therefore, are no less enslaved than the blacks they carry with them. Aside from their role as captains, Don

Benito and Falcon are also characterized by illness and defects. Benito Cereno, sick through the entire account, is unable even to stand unsupported for long periods of time and must depend to a great extent on Babo, his black servant (note the reversal of a master and slave). Falcon is a dwarf; he possesses a perverse sort of charisma which is similar to Melville's Captain Ahab of *Moby Dick*, and where Cereno relies on Babo for support, Falcon must rely upon steel-toed boots, magnetized rings, and booby traps. Although both captains are characterized by illness and defects, ultimately their demise is caused by the loss of their will to live, the inability to face the future and their roles in both present and past. For Benito Cereno, the middle passage has "shadowed" him, presented him with the knowledge of human nature. For Falcon it is the personal knowledge of a future life of failure and dependence that destroys his will to live. As men of the middle passage, both are killed by their voyages.

The narrators of "Benito Cereno" and *Middle Passage*, Amasa Delano and Rutherford Calhoun, are outsiders. Their presence aboard the slave ships disrupts the balance of the ship's society. Captain Delano, for example, is in a marginalized position because he does not know the true account of the events aboard the San Dominick. Rutherford Calhoun, the narrator and outsider aboard the Republic, occupies a marginal role not only because he is a stowaway but also because he is the only black aboard ship who is not a slave. His race naturally makes him an outsider in the white world of the slave ship, for he represents, as does Delano, an alternate point of view, nor is he an Allmuseri. Delano and Calhoun are both educated narrators, capable of disclosing the implications of the middle passage, but more than narrators, they are survivors; they provide

the testimony which creates the history of the San Dominick and the Republic, the alternate point of view of the middle passage.

### The Origins of the Myth

Jean Price-Mars once stated that "nothing will be able to prevent tales, legends, songs come from afar or created, transformed by us, from being a part of us, revealed to us as an exteriorization of our collective self" (Dixon 40). Myths, therefore, are not truths about the "other" but rather truths about the self insofar as they are formed out of that which is repressed within the soul. Created to assure individuals of their own worth and identity by separating from them what they are not, myths and stereotypes are "not so much to crush the Negro as to console the white man" (Ellison 41). When I use the term "myth," I refer to a specific type of stereotyping and classification that is both negative and limited to race, color, religion, economic, or political differences, that marginalizes these individuals as the "other."

These oppressed, alienated, and exploited areas of humanity that exist in the imagination and belief system of the Western world are projected in the notion of the "wild" man (Dudley 3). Although this humanity possesses a history as both desirous and forbidden, it exists at the expense of another's suffering. As Augustine suggested, man establishes "meaning" by denying meaning to the different, the other, and thus the focus on wildness, for example, limits the notion of civilization by suggesting what it is not. As both a cultural and individual projection, the notion of wildness belongs to the same cultural groupings as madness and heresy which not only designate conditions but also confirms the values of

their opposites: civilization, sanity, and orthodoxy (Dudley 4). The conditions under which "wildness" is defined evolve with the changing societal patterns of behavior insofar as that during a period of religious zeal, for example, wildness would be defined in terms of religious faith. Despite the changing connotations of the Wild Man, the "other," the marginalized man, has endured.

The purpose of this next section is to present the "genealogy," albeit in a limited sense, of the Wild Man myth and show the evolution from his origins in Judaic, Greek, and Christian belief through his "triumph" in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when he was viewed as the "Noble Savage" and up to the twentieth century (Dudley 3). Wildness, or "savagery" in its Latinate form, has been associated, since Biblical times, with the wilderness, the undomesticated and uncivilized part of the world (Dudley 7). In creating a wild world, apart from the civilized world, society transfers its negative associations through what Hayden White has called "civilizational identification by negative definition" (Dudley 6). Consequently, modern cultural anthropology has determined that "wildness" is the repressed content of both primitive and civilized society so that instead of the Wild Man existing separately from society, he is in fact within every man, an idea which begins in the eighteenth century with Rousseau (White 7).

The foundations of the externalization of this "other" are found in Hebrew and Christian belief, and support the connection between the internal psychological state and the outward physical appearance. This concept suggests that one's physical nature reflects his/her inner nature so that one who possesses a bad or evil nature will have physical indications of this immoral self, such as deformity. Thus the notion of wildness and

the "other" suggest a belief system founded upon division. The ancient Hebrews, for example, believed that humanity had become "fractured and fragmented in time" but still possessed the potential for reunification (Dudley 8). In medieval Christian theology, this unification was represented by the Great Chain of Being, which supposed that society moved toward a reunification that would return them to a state of innocence, like that of Adam and Eve before the Fall. Originating with Judeo-Christian story of the fall in which original man is expelled from the garden because of the introduction of sin and confusion, the notion of an inner state as wild or bad arose. The Hebrew version is an explanation as to how man arrived at his present state, and that although some people were considered the "chosen," the idea of the fall explains their struggle despite their eternal salvation. Nature, therefore, becomes an opposing force which man must overcome in order to win back his "proper humanity or god like nature" (Dudley 12). However, the Fall does not play the same role in Christian theology as it does in Hebrew. The Christian version of the fall suggests an inherent flaw in mankind, a species taint which excludes man from God without special grace, a natural flaw which is the origin of the Wild Man in Christian belief. Salvation or unification, therefore, is determined by faith, so that one who is willing to accept the doctrines of the church and the Christian religion is among the saved. Both Christianity and Judaism include notions that there were only a finite number of "saved." Wildness, therefore, is not only a moral condition, but also suggestive of a distinct, as well as select, relationship to God. Although the notion of original sin seems to suggest that, to begin with, we are all wild men, it also has divided humanity into "saved" and "damned."



The notions of damnation and wildness have been associated particularly with the color black. In the Bible, for example, Ham, Noah's son, for seeing his father's nakedness, was said to be evil and the progenitor of a race of "wild men." In support of this, the Hebrew language contains root words that etymologically associated blackness with the proper name of Ham: Egypt, the land of bondage; Canaan, the land of pagan idolatry; accursedness; and fertility. The Wild Man's physical attributes, which are thus rooted in blackness, are the evidence of an evil nature (Dudley 16). Nimrod, the son of Cush, another example, is said to be a descendant of Ham because of not only his blackness but also his "attributes of the primal giants: grossness and rebelliousness" (Dudley 15). Augustine further suggests that Nimrod is a "mighty hunter *against* the Lord" as opposed to "for" the Lord. He is a founder of the city of Babel, whose people, for trying to build a tower to heaven, brought down the curse of different languages on earth. The Wild Man thus is identified through his blackness, his wandering life as a hunter, linguistic confusion, sin, and physical aberration (Dudley 16).

During the Middle Ages, the depiction of the Wild Man changed in terms of his humanity and physical attributes. Society was obsessed with notions of order and structure, and the medieval man thus became dependent upon not only his rationale but also his faith in God's ability to sustain this order. Subsequently, the phobias of this era--chaos, insanity, and ungodliness (the "new" phobia was leprosy)--were projected into the myth of the Wild Man. Desiring to place the "other" as far from Europe as possible, the myths of these Wild Men and their monstrous races became located in India, Ethiopia, Libya, and other remote areas (Husband 5). These races, descended from Ham and his brother Japheth, are a race of

"wild" men whose physical aberrations indicate their savagery. Augustine, an important Christian theologian of the Middle Ages, proposed that these different kinds of races, as described by ancient travellers, such as cyclops, pygmies, men with feet as big as umbrellas, headless men with eyes in their shoulders, etc. should be denied "possession of an essential humanity" (Dudley 18). In this era, the Wild Man was denied a humanity insofar as God was thought to have endowed a human body with an animal soul. Consequently, the Wild Man's embodied *inhumanness*, thereby losing his human rights by virtue of his "animalness." Thomas Aquinas defined this animal soul as "pure desire undisciplined by reason; it desires but knows *not* that it desires" (Dudley 18-19). During the Middle Ages, man's reason, as well as faith in God, was extremely important insofar as it tried to determine and sustain order. Thus the Wild Man is the animal "other," ruled by desire and chaos rather than reason, order, and God. Possessing an animal soul, Wild Men were thought to be subservient to "civilized humans." Seen as animals, their inferior nature justified society's actions. Therefore, it could do what it wished with these "animals:" enslave, domesticate, or even kill them without sin because sin cannot be committed over those whom man is allowed to rule. White points out that even Dante in *The Divine Comedy* placed those individuals with the closest thing to an animal soul, carnal sinners, those who "submit reason to lust," in the second circle of hell. However, if these people had been wild men, without a human soul, they would have been presented as pagan monsters, the guardians and torturers of hell. Without reason, ruled by desire, the Wild Men of the Middle Ages were denied a humanity.

These men, however, were often confused with the notion of barbarians. In ancient Rome, for example, both groups were thought to be

"enslaved" to Nature, like animals insofar as they were unable to control their desires, incapable of self-control, or a stable lifestyle. Although barbarians and wild men seem to possess some similar characteristics, there are some clear differences. The easiest distinction to make is the difference between those that lived under some law (barbarians) and those that lived without any law (Wild Men). The similarities of the myth of the barbarian and the Wild Man are, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

The characterizations of the Wild Man evolved during the Middle Ages, and he took on new mythic proportions. For example, at the beginning of the thirteenth century, he was a giant, but by the end of Middle Ages he was reduced to Lilliputian size. It is also during this period (twelfth century) that the Wild Man becomes covered with hair, except on his face, hands and feet, and the breast of wild women (Husband 7). As an iconographic convention, hairiness was a visual indication of his existence outside of man's "civilized order" (Husband 7). Appearing closer to the animal kingdom, the Wild Man was also thought at times to be cannibalistic. This idea would reappear significantly during the Age of Exploration in the New World. Other myths and distinction were also created during the Middle Ages. For example, the Wild Man always lived alone, or at the most with a wild mate (different from the barbarians). He was, as indicated by Augustine and Nimrod, either incapable of speech, a mute, or only able to communicate through a series of grunts and unintelligible sounds. Despite his sexual appetite and lusts, he was incapable of "assuming the responsibilities of a father," and lacking responsibility, therefore, his behavior "matched his primitive surroundings:" violent to wild animals and others of his kind, uprooting

trees, and eating his kill raw (White 20). As Timothy Husband points out in *The Wild Man Medieval Myth and Symbolism*, although he was a hunter, the Wild Man was hunted frequently. Paintings and sculpture from the fourteenth century thus often depict him of all fours running from hounds and the "civilized" hunters (Husband 3).

Before the "discovery" of the Americas, legends filtered into Europe concerning the monsters of the New World: men with the faces of dogs, with feet so large that they were used as umbrellas, cyclops, and even cannibals. Thus during the Age of Exploration, from roughly the 1400's (particularly after Columbus's voyage to America) to the 1600's, the habitat of the Wild Man was transferred to the Americas. The exploration and colonization of the New World, a debt mostly incurred by Spain, had a twofold purpose. First, Columbus's journey was intended to find a route to the fabled Indies of Marco Polo, and subsequently a road to its riches: gold, gems, and spices. In addition to increasing Spain's wealth and influence, it was a means to spread Christianity, both purposes which would destroy the lands and the people they encountered. Despite the "wild" nature of these New World inhabitants, according to some (such as Bartolomé Las Casas), they still possessed a soul in a state of potential grace, from which arose the notion of "christianizing" the heathens, the saving and destroying of souls in the name of religion. As Spain noted in the *Leyes de Partidas*, along with the justification for war: "the first, in order that the peoples shall increase their faith and that those who would combat it shall be destroyed . . . ." (Zavala 15). In the name of religion, Europe explored and conquered areas of both the New and Old World, spreading Christianity and enslaving the "other."

Although this "discovery" helped to dispel many of the myths of the period, many more still flourished, particularly those associated with the Wild Man. During this period two versions of this "other" appeared: one (which we have seen before) held that the Indian was "wild," he was the incarnate of desire, often cannibalistic, possessed with not a human soul but rather an animal soul, and therefore subject to enslavement; the second version of the "other" was the notion of the Noble Savage, a man of innocence and Edenic purity who was the "antitype" of the Wild Man and of the corrupted world, who represented freedom from restriction and convention. These two versions of the Wild Man would become intertwined through history, representing both the forbidden and desirous.

The myth of the Noble Savage we owe in part to the descriptions of the Indians by Columbus and the missionaries, as well as to Rousseau in the eighteenth century. Columbus described these New World inhabitants as "good servants and of quick intelligence," but he also paid particular attention to their nakedness, as an indication of not only their lack of "civility" but also their purity or innocence (Dudley 43). The description of the land itself was also flattering and suggesting of an Edenic or earthly paradise. As Samuel Elliot Morison notes, Columbus had discovered a Edenic world from which arose the notion of the Noble Savage:

But to the intellectuals of Europe it seemed that Columbus had stepped back several millennia, and encountered people living in the Golden Age, that bright morning of humanity which existed only in the imagination of poets. Columbus's discovery enable Europeans to see their own ancestors, as it were, in a "state of nature," before Pandora's box was opened. The "virtuous savage" myth, which reached its height in the eighteenth century, began in Guanahaní on October 12, 1492 (Dudley 44)

The chronicles of the New World suggest, consequently, an envy or admiration of this Noble Savage, free from the trappings of civilization.

Despite this positive depiction of the Wild Man, many of the original *negative* myths still existed, due in extent to New World's geographical remoteness and Europe's lack of cultural reference. Many of the indigenous practices, such as human sacrifice, perpetuated the notion of the New World people as animalistic, without human souls, who were in fact cannibals. The etymological derivation of *cannibal* traces this myth. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the "r" and the "n" in Spanish could be interchanged. The word *Caribe*, indicating the inhabitants of the New World, thus evolved into *Canibe* and later *Canibal*, suggesting this particular type of savagery (Dudley 45). Cannibalism thus became the justification for the Indian's enslavement or maltreatment for according to anthropologist, John Rowe, "There is no question that the Spaniards attributed cannibalism to many Indians who did not practice it in order to enslave them, but there nonetheless seems to be a good basis in fact for the attribution of cannibalism to *some* Caribs" (Dudley 45). Bartolomé Las Casas, having witnessed the maltreatment of the Indians, gave up his land and slaves in order to become a Dominican monk. He became the crusader for Indian rights, uncovering the atrocities committed in both the name of the Spanish throne and in the name of God. The most underlying issue of the period was not the treatment or baptizing of the Indians but rather a deeper issue: whether or not the Indian was rational. The theologian and philosopher Francisco de Vitoria gave his opinion to Carlos V in 1541:

The Indian aborigines . . . are not of unsound mind . . .but have, according to their kind, the use of reason. This is clear, because there is a certain method in their affairs; they have politics which are

carefully arranged and they have definite marriage and magistrates, overlords, laws, and workshops, and a system of exchange, all of which call for the use of reason; they also have a kind of religion (Dudley 47).

The debate still raged in 1550 and again in 1551 when Las Casas argued in Valladolid against Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, a scholar and humanist. It should be noted that in lieu of its atrocities in the New World, Spain is the only colonial power who examined and discussed the relationship of the "conqueror to the conquered" in its overseas territories (Dudley 47). The Age of Exploration thus became not only a quest for new lands and routes to the Eastern riches of the Indies and China but also the means to spread Christianity in the enslavement and classification of the Wild Man.

During the Renaissance, art and literature were supposed to present an idealized reality: "kings were kingly, heroes were heroic, lovers were distracted, and nature was ordered by a providential plan" (Dudley 87). Exploration, according to Earl Miner in "The Wild Man Through the Looking Glass," led men into nightmare realms. These worlds and descriptions are in fact more European than they are representative of aboriginal life. The New World ("other" world) and the writers of the period seemed to be more interested in the civilized man in the Wild Man's domain than the Wild Man himself. Often defined by parentage, legitimacy, language, costume, and madness or any combination of these characteristics, the Wild Man was associated with Nature and its wild(er)ness. There is a certain recurrence of images in the "naturalistic description of savages:" dirt, darkness, bestial appearance, sexuality, and cannibalism (Dudley 89). One of the texts of the Renaissance that explores this notion of wildness is Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Although more about the "civilized" (Prospero) in the uncivilized world, the presence of a Wild Man (Caliban)

suggests a threat to the notions of order and civilization. During the Renaissance, both the Spanish and English word for cannibal was *canibal*, the derivation found in New World literature. Thus, Caliban, an anagram for *canibal*, becomes directly associated with that particular savagery (Palencia 1). One of the many writers to suggest this, Shakespeare proposes that the Wild Man is, to some extent, a mirror image of Europeans (Dudley 96). It must be noted that images of the Noble Savage also appeared during the Renaissance, particularly in Dryden's *Almanzor*, "When wild in woods the noble Savage ran" (Dudley 106). From Montaigne's "De Canibales," Shakespeare's Caliban, and Dryden's *Almanzor* we can see the variety of identities that the Wild Man/Noble Savage carries within him during the Renaissance: a dual nature in which the civilized world still plays the lead role.

During the eighteenth century, however, the Wild Man reached his height as the Noble Savage. Developments in the sciences, which are the origins of modern anthropology, linguistics, historiography, etc., and the growing awareness of non-European cultures led to a revolution of European thought. The focus on "other" cultures was designed to give Europe a greater understanding of its own, and the Wild Man, the symbol of these cultures, was used as a model from which to compare the notions of civilization and rationality, and to determine the origins of social groupings (Dudley 230). Following a century of search for order and rationality, the "disorderly figure" of the Wild Man was forbidden, his passions, lusts, animal qualities, and violence were tempered with "Cartesian restraint" (Dudley 228). Due to the influence of the Jesuits and the unpopularity of "original sin" (Dudley 282), the Wild Man lost his negative habits and identifications. He became the "prototype . . . against



whom civilized values were to be judged" having progressed from ambivalent primitiveness to nobility (Dudley 227). The Indians of the Americas became the representative figures of these virtues of the Noble Savage which were: valor endurance, hospitality, and gratitude for favors (Dudley 294). Rousseau internalized the Wild Man, and determined that he was within man, although man often preferred to call him a Noble Savage (Dudley 234). He united the nobility of virtue of the Noble Savage with the passion of emotion of the Wild Man to create the prototype. He suggested that, at his earliest stages, the Wild Man was indeed wild but that he evolved because of the "interaction of man's developing intelligence with the new opportunities created by shifts in his social and physical environment" (Dudley 240).

With induction of the nineteenth century and its imperialism, the Wild Man no longer presented a physical threat except perhaps on the "farthest frontiers of the white man's civilization" (Dudley 281). He was not a physical reality but rather, as Peter Thorslev suggested in "the Wild Man's Revenge," what we have "lost or repressed in becoming civilized" (281). The character and connotations of the Wild Man evolve insofar as they are determined by the changing attitudes toward the natural and the primitive (Dudley 282). For example, Rudyard Kipling, a nineteenth century author of literature of empire, suggested that the "collective" wild men of the Empire had become the "White Man's burden," the "lesser breeds without the Law" (Dudley 285). More enduring, however, than Kipling's theory is the notion, going back to Rousseau, of the Dionysian savage, or the internalized Wild Man. He is both myth and "universal psychological reality" thus immune, to an extent, to science and fact (Dudley 286). Although I have presented the Wild Man as often being

associated with the American Indian, he was thought of increasingly as black, and the "black man was in the white man's chains" (Dudley 298). As suggested earlier, there is a tradition in Christianity which associates blackness, black hearts and sins, with evilness and the devil. As Thorslev suggests the black Wild Man stands as a symbol of the "darker side of human nature, and therefore his chains are justified" (299). If we agree to the notion the Dionysian savage, however, we are proposing that through the enslavement of the "other" we are enslaving and destroying a part of ourselves, the internalized Wild Man and Noble Savage. The chains of slavery thus represent the restricting of passion and ideas by civilization and reason.

In the twentieth century the role of the Wild Man has changed dramatically with the abolishment of slavery at the end of the nineteenth century and the Civil Rights movement in the 1960's. The Wild Man, who previously existed as background material upon which the real events occurred, is now given a voice. Thus by the middle to late 1900's, the voice of the Wild Man is in fact the black, the Indian, and the "other;" he is not merely the marginalized character who speaks with the voice of a white author. The Wild Man author must now "remake" his world, and as Charles Johnson rewrites, remakes, Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno," he is, in fact, demythifying the common myths, such as the Wild Man and the Noble Savage, that Melville, perhaps unknowingly, is perpetuating. While the origins of the Wild Man may have seemed tedious (or brief), fully understanding the myth and all of its connotations will help to make the demythification clear and emphasize not only the task of the black author but also the tradition of marginalization and myth evident in both "Benito Cereno" and *Middle Passage*.

## The Myth of Character

It is the black, the "wild" man of the dark continent, in Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno," whose viewpoint in the historical account of a slave revolt, is omitted. On the journey, the middle passage between the land of freedom and the land of bondage, history is told from a European perspective, and American history, adopting this practise, overlooks the story of the colonized to focus on the empire. The first myth that Melville is operating under is the myth of character. This myth rests on two stereotypes: first that the black is simple and easily comprehended and second, that in addition to this simplicity, the black is morally and intellectually inferior. The origins of this myth rest in the Wild Man and his counterpart the Noble Savage. In deconstructing and critiquing these "myths," Johnson shows that blacks not only are complex characters but also possess a wide range of emotions, beneath which is not evil nor ignorance but potential goodness and intelligence that has been suppressed through slavery. Essentially, Johnson demythifies not only the Wild Man but also the Noble Savage.

"Benito Cereno" is the unfolding of a rebellion plot. As told from the point of view of a white captain, Amasa Delano of the Bachelor's Delight, who is naturally innocent, genial, and good-natured, the slaves are first depicted as Noble Savages. However, as soon as Delano recognizes the illusion of peace and subservience, the negro becomes the Wild Man. Depicted as a cunning animal without a human soul, "wolf-like," he repays the whites' "kindness" with murder, insurrection, and mockery (158). The "mistake" made by the captain and crew was in not chaining the slaves and

in allowing them to remain on deck, "to range within given bounds," instead of kept below deck (Melville 103). Their consequent rebellion illustrates, for Delano, the "true" nature of the black. His conclusion not only affirms the nature and civility of the white race but also allows and justifies slavery. The black is the Noble Savage as long as he remains in his subservient role as a slave. It is when he tries to leave this assigned role that he transforms into the Wild Man thus presenting a threat to white identity and "civilized" society. Amasa Delano's stereotyping of both whites and blacks, reflective of European and American attitudes during the period, is part of his unrealized prejudices whereby all whites are benevolent and all blacks possess an abject nature. It must be remembered that although Delano's perspective and myth-making is different from Melville's, the story of Benito Cereno is told from his (Delano's) point of view. The focus of this essay rather is more broad: Melville's stereotyping and the common myths that he either accepts or creates, however unknowingly.

Although the characteristics of the Wild Man and the Noble Savage have become intertwined through history, their differences rest fundamentally in the notion of nature: evilness versus innocence respectively. In "Benito Cereno," the slaves, particularly Babo, Don Benito's servant, are characterized by their faithfulness, parallels to non-threatening animals, and innocence when they are thought to be fulfilling their roles and duties. For example, the first time Delano sees Babo he equates his face with that of a shepherd's dog in which "sorrow and affection were equally blended" (Melville 96). He is a faithful servant and a "natural valet(s) and hair-dresser(s) . . . harmonious in every glance and gesture; as though God had set the whole Negro to some pleasant tune"

(Melville 136). Moreover, the black is presented as "stupid" for by nature the whites were the "shrewder race" (Melville 126). Once the black becomes the Wild Man, this ignorance metamorphoses into cunning. Melville clearly indicates that the reason that Delano does not recognize the insipid and evil nature of the black is because of his "undistrustful good nature" (91). The white man therefore is represented by this benevolent captain who, despite his engagement in the slave trade, is a good person. Captain Delano is the type of man who takes to blacks as he does to dogs: "not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs" (Melville 136). Although the institution of slavery Melville considers to be inhuman, the slave owners, such as Don Benito and Delano, are depicted as care-givers instead of as cruel overseers. This type of reversal or partial definition can be equated with a the modern religious notion of "hating the sin, not the sinner." Melville is adopting a similar definition: slavery is bad but slave owners do not have to be.

As Melville warns us, however, "slavery breeds ugly passions in man" (141). In a moment of realization when Babo tries to stab Benito Cereno, the true events aboard the San Dominick become apparent to Captain Delano. All of the day's occurrences and mysterious actions take on double meanings, and the previous characterizations of the black as the Noble Savage reverse, transforming him into the Wild Man. Thus it is important to notice the change in description and language that Melville employs here in contrast to his previous characterizations of the faithful servant: "he (Babo) was snakishly writhing up from the boat's bottom, at the heart of his master, his countenance lividly vindictive, expressing the centred purpose of his soul" (154). The other slaves aboard ship become just as piratical and evil as Babo, welding hatchets like "delirious black

dervishes" (154). During their revolt, as an example of their cruelty, they kill their master and captain, Alexandro Aranda, and having removed the flesh from his bones, replace the figurehead of Christopher Colon (notice the connection to the New World and its conquerors, an idea which will appear also in *Middle Passage*) with his skeleton. Beneath which is written in chalk, "Follow your leader" (155). Although he was the mastermind behind the revolt and conspiracy, Babo is, in a sense, the story's "tragic hero" (Geismar viii). Mute, he is dragged off to the gallows, his body burned, and his head fixed on a pole in the Plaza as an example and warning.

Babo's "tragic blood brother" (Geismar ix), Benito Cereno is also destroyed by the same institution of slavery insofar as the Negro has cast a "shadow" upon him which "wafts him to the tomb" (Melville 175). While Benito Cereno blames the "Negro" for the "depths of his own degradation and collapse," their inverted relationship of master and slave is based to an extent on mutual dependence (Geismar viii). Perhaps attributed incorrectly then to the black, Herman Melville often seemed to see the world in terms of polarities (black/white and good/bad). While the institution of slavery and the knowledge of human nature destroys Benito Cereno's will to live, Captain Delano's vision of the world is reaffirmed. Essentially, Melville's nineteenth century world order of master and slave, despite the slave rebellion, is reinstated.

In *Middle Passage*, however, Charles Johnson creates a world which demythifies the world of slavery. By not accepting common stereotypes (reversed for the black author) in which all blacks are good and all whites bad, racial stereotyping is lessened. For example, as slavery is based on a notion of division, Johnson emphasizes the notions of interconnectedness

and unity, presenting a *whole* vision of society in which the slave and the slaver are the same, and all that is outside the self is really inner projection. Johnson suggests that the ultimate question is not who is the "other?" but rather "who is the self?" "what is its relationship to the 'other?'" and "who am I?" for he questions:

the nature of the self, whatever that is, and the nature of human consciousness. . . the nature of the self in our larger discussions of cultural identity, personal identity, racial identity . . . where I end and you begin, for example, the difference between self and other. Maybe all our stories are ultimately about the nature of the self. I think that is finally the ultimate question: Who am I?  
(Davies 144).

The notion of identity thus is both important and unimportant to Johnson.

Where in Melville, only one black, the leader of the revolt, Babo, is characterized, in Johnson, all of the characters, major and minor, receive identities, identities that are changeable rather than static. Johnson's notion of identity, based on ideological principles, is quite different from that of Melville's, which are socially constructed. Johnson does not believe in the ego, or anything that suggests a "fixed meaning" but rather an identity that is an accumulation of things, of encounters, and of people (Little 161). As Johnson states elsewhere "it is a process. . . it's dominated by change and transformation, more so than by any static qualities . . . identity, if it is anything at all, is several things, a tissue of very often contradictory things . . ." (Little 161). Consequently, Johnson's principal character, our narrator Rutherford Calhoun, evolves; he is constantly changing. At the beginning of the novel, Rutherford embodies the "myth" of the black, the same myth that Melville is operating under, the notion of the simple character. He is the rebellious black, a thief and a liar, both morally and spiritually simple. It is on the middle passage, however, that

Johnson deconstructs Melville's myth of character insofar as the middle passage is a progression, a growth, during which Rutherford evolves from a state of ignorance to a state of knowledge, from a lesser understanding to a greater understanding (Little 160).

Rutherford's evolution, as the principle character and narrator, illustrates Johnson's demythification of character. He allows Rutherford's voice to tell his story/version of the middle passage, not only forming a personal history and identity but also creating along the way a new vision of the world. It is essential, therefore, to show his growth as a character from his origins in Illinois through his epiphany to his present newfound knowledge. Rutherford's journey actually begins before he boards the *Republic*; it begins on a farm in southern Illinois when he was a slave under Reverend Chandler. His master, diametrically opposed to slavery, educated both Rutherford and his older brother Jackson. Johnson thus creates a educated narrator, and one consequently that is capable of telling his story. His father, a runaway slave, and his mother having died when he was young, Rutherford was left in the care of his older brother Jackson. From what he tells us, Rutherford has been a thief and a liar all of his life. Rebelling against slavery and any institutions which might be part of that world order, he defines himself as Jackson's "shadow-self" (Middle 113). Thus desiring not to be a "gentleman of color" like his brother, Rutherford's identity is based upon, what Hayden White has called "identification by negative definition" (6). Essentially, at the outset, he is reinforcing the myth of the Wild Man/Noble Savage.

After Reverend Chandler's death, Rutherford, a freed bondman at twenty-two, goes to New Orleans, a town in the "almost religious pursuit of sin" possessing a "steamy sexuality" (Middle 2). He is looking for "life," in



his own words: "I hungered - literally *hungered* - for life in all its shades and hues: I was hooked on sensation" (3). In New Orleans, he leads a life of deception and debt. These transgressions eventually lead him to the sea: he is blackmailed by Papa Zeringue, a black slave trader, and a schoolteacher who has fallen in love with him, Isadora Bailey, to marry her. Fleeing debt and marriage, Rutherford steals a sailor's papers and stows away on the ship *Republic*, which happens to be a slave trader. Although everyone aboard ship is an outsider in some way, "all refuges from responsibility, and like social misfits ever pushing westward to escape citified life, took to the sea as the last frontier that welcomed miscreants, dreamers and fools," as both a stowaway and a *freed* black, Rutherford occupies a marginal role to these already marginalized others (40). Its captain, Ebenezer Falcon, whose despicableness and obsessiveness are reminiscent of Melville's Captain Ahab of *Moby Dick*, however, allows him to remain aboard ship as both a cook in the galley and his "shipboard bride" (46), his "eyes and ears" between the crew and slaves and their "master" (57).

It seems as though Rutherford desires to know intimately everyone he encounters, their fears, desires, and finally their "heart" thereby forming his own identity (Middle 46). He becomes obsessed with two diametrically opposed world viewpoints: Captain Falcon and the Allmuseri. Envy and admiring both, though for different reasons, Rutherford's identity and notion of the self (individual and whole) begins to change. Existing between these two worlds of the Old World and the New World conqueror: "he [Rutherford] could never claim something he had no hand in creating" (78).

Rutherford is caught between these two worlds not only in terms of his personal identity but also during the twofold rebellion. Due to his marginal role with both the crew and the slaves, however, he is allowed the knowledge and confidences of both groups and capable thus of surviving on the "winning" side. His loyalties and opinions conform to whomever he's with: "[a]ll bonds . . . were a lie forged briefly in the name of convenience and just as quickly broken when they no longer served one's interests" (92). When he encounters the Allmuseri tribal god, however, he is presented with the notion of an accumulated identity, a "mosaic of voices within voices" (Middle 171). Although the Allmuseri's philosophy and god will be explored in detail in the next section entitled the myth of religion, what is important here is that Rutherford's character is a process, an evolution, and it is this meeting with the god that prods Rutherford's transformation from a state of lesser understanding in which he embodied the myth of the black to an increased awareness of not only the notion of the self but also the interconnectedness of all things, as James Joyce might say.

After the revolt, the task of feeding this god falls to everyone and when Rutherford encounters it, it comes to him in the form of his father, the runaway and fugitive slave Riley Calhoun. Presented in the only form with which he had "unfinished business," this deity, a Freudian or even an Elizabethan visitation, reaffirms Johnson's notion that we are all who have ever come before us and all who we have ever encountered. God, therefore, becomes merely a projection of the self: "Suddenly I knew the god's name: Rutherford" and in his epiphany, Johnson illustrates not only Rutherford's evolution but also black spirituality which falls under the myth of religion (Middle 171). During this epiphanic moment, he realizes

that his identity, who he is, is not based upon a notion of division, as suggested by slavery and white America, but rather upon a notion of unity, and he becomes selfless, the opposite of all the negative characteristics that he previously embodied. His notion of identity, thus is no longer based upon who he is not but rather as he states:

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. The 'I' that I was, was a mosaic of many countries, a patchwork of others and objects stretching backward to perhaps the beginning of time  
(Middle 162-3)

As Ellison would say, he loses himself in the process of finding himself (Ellison 162). This new perspective allows Rutherford to put into context his own place in society and essentially allows for the restructuring of the world (in contrast to Delano's reaffirmation of world order). His role is as one on the middle passage: between two worlds. Insofar as he is a freed black American, Rutherford is the product and culmination of the integration and clash of two cultures whose world orders and belief systems exist in opposition to each other. Johnson, as the mythmaker, is in effect remaking the world in his own image. In Rutherford's evolution, he depicts the complex character of the black whose nature, though poisoned by slavery, has the potential for goodness. Where Melville's blacks, beneath their simplicity, are inferior, Johnson suggests rather that slavery has been the dehumanization of the black. Melville's thematic center, the simple and immoral nature of the black, Johnson reverses on the middle passage. Through the perspective of a twentieth century black post-colonialist, Johnson demythifies Melville's notions of the black as a simple and immoral character through Rutherford's evolution.

## Myth of Religion

The second myth that Melville operates under is what I have called the myth of religion. This myth rests on two stereotypes: first that blacks are spiritually simple and second that the impulse to revolt is a primitive urge. In deconstructing these "myths" Johnson shows first that blacks are spiritually complex and second that the impulse to revolt has a spiritual basis. In Melville, the notion of black spirituality or religion is not allowed; there are no references to a slave or black religion, spirituality, or god; it is not even questioned for God is a white god, and he is in his heaven. In Johnson, the Allmuseri, unlike Melville's Ashantee, are described in depth and are given a culture, a past, a history, and a religion for they are a "remarkably old people" and in them Rutherford senses the "presence of countless others . . . a crowd spun from everything this vast continent had created" (Middle 61). Through the person of Ngonyama, Johnson is able to describe in depth the philosophy and belief system of the Allmuseri thereby presenting the black as both culturally and spiritually complex.

As Johnson himself states: "[o]f all the players who promenade through this narrative, he (Ngonyama) was easily the most mysterious" (75). Like Rutherford, he seemed to exist between the two worlds of the slave and the slaver. As one out of ten slaves elected "major-domo" in charge of keeping his fellow slaves in line, Ngonyama had more freedom and privileges than many of the other slaves (Middle 74). During his periods on deck he often blended into the background, possessing a "quiet magic" (76). Watching and "studying everything," Ngonyama gradually came to learn the ways of the ship and sailors, through Rutherford learning

some English and the rudiments of steering (75). In exchange, Ngonyama taught Rutherford some of the Allmuseri language and cultural history. As Calhoun describes them, they are in fact "not even 'Negroes. They were Allmuseri" (76). Their folkways were so different from anything American or that he had ever encountered, that Rutherford envied them. He did not just envy their differentness, but their philosophy which, based on a notion of unity, gave him an identity and culture. For example, in their language the predication "is" which "granted existence to anything, had over the ages eroded merely into an article of faith" (77). Rather than biologically, their clan thus was held together by values, a certain "vision" if you will (109) for as Ellison suggested, it is not culture that binds people together but rather an "identity of passions" (Dixon 25).

The vision held by the Allmuseri is one of unity in which the appreciation of Being was the goal and task of every person. The world of the slavers and of Rutherford, before his epiphany, is one in opposition to Allmuseri belief, for, as he explains:

They saw us as savages. In their mythology Europeans had once been members of their tribe - rulers, even, for a time - but fell into what was for these people the blackest of sins. The failure to experience unity of Being everywhere was the Allmuseri vision of hell. And that was where we lived: purgatory (Middle 65)

Slavery, therefore, based on a notion of division and multiplicity rather than unity, negates black spirituality. Although understood by few Westerners, Ngonyama explains that the Allmuseri had to be the police of their own hearts because they believed that "what came out of us, not what went in, made us clean or unclean. Their notion of experience . . . held each man responsible 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" (164). Every action thought or felt thus becomes a reality and echoes "eternally throughout the universe" (140). When the Allmuseri rebelled and killed most of the crew of the Republic, their actions enslaved them more than chains ever could have for murder essentially kills the murderer. They had failed at trying to "win without defeating the other person" (140). Their failure places them in the dual world of the slavers, for according to Falcon "[c]onflict is what it mean to be conscious. . [s]ubject and object, perceiver and perceived, self and other" (98). These "ancient twins" have become imbedded in the minds of the Allmuseri, changing them through their contact to this world of multiplicity and dualism (98). Rutherford sees, for example, in Ngonyama's eyes an "emptiness" for he has been "remade by virtue of his contact with the crew" (124).

Johnson presents the Allmuseri philosophy and *way* through not only Ngonyama but also the Allmuseri's tribal god, who is enslaved and brought aboard the Republic, thereby suggesting that slavery is not merely a physical enslavement but rather a spiritual enslavement as well. As Rutherford's evolution is linked directly to their philosophy and specifically to their tribal god, Johnson's deconstruction of the myth of the spiritually simple black is also connected. The image of Rutherford's father who is folded back into the "shifting field - as waves vanish into water" reaffirms Johnson's notion that we are all interconnected without barriers of time or place: all who have ever come before us and all who we have ever, or never, encountered (172). In his confrontation with the god, Rutherford realizes that the individual self is also part of a larger self, a We: "I had to listen harder to isolate him from the We that swelled each particle and pore of him, as if the (black) self was the greatest of all fictions" (171). Although Johnson suggests that the idea of identity is

important, the Allmuseri notion of unity and the appreciation of Being overshadows, to an extent, individuality. The god's mere presence affirms black spirituality, and in his silence, similar to the silence of Babo, for to say anything was to "fall short of ever saying enough," Johnson emphasizes the inability to articulate the "way" (Being 168).

Having established blacks as spiritually complex through the description of Allmuseri philosophy and the introduction of their god, the revolt takes on a greater significance for they are not merely enslaved but their god is enslaved as well. They have in effect lost their religion for their deity, aside from being mere cargo on the middle passage, sinks symbolically with the Republic. Their revolt, therefore, spiritual as well as physical, is not a primitive urge as Melville suggests but in defiance of their faith and identity. In suggesting that revolt is a consequence of primitivism is to say that the desire to free oneself from bondage is not "civilized." The myth of the black is that he is controlled by these urges, which are not based upon anything but occur as instinctive reactions. Just as one pulls his hand quickly away from a hot stove, the Wild Man, supposedly, ruled by these urges, rebels without thinking or knowing why he rebels but recognizing that he must. Just as Johnson demythifies Melville's myth of character through Rutherford's evolution and epiphany, he demythifies the myth of religion through not only Allmuseri philosophy but also the Allmuseri tribal god.

### **The Contrived Ending**

As a history that Johnson is trying to revise, the ending of the middle passage is positive. The direction of "Benito Cereno" and *Middle Passage*, therefore, are opposite: Melville goes from apparent goodness to real evil and Johnson from apparent immorality and greediness to selflessness. Johnson's happy ending, however, is contrived for Rutherford, Squibb, and three Allmuseri children are rescued by none other than the ship containing everyone he knows, including the woman he has come to love, Isadora; he not only gets the bad guy in the end but also the girl. Rutherford has completed the cycle of the hero for he has journeyed, learned, and returned to share his new found knowledge. In the nightmare of slavery, the ending is the most important for it is the final statement, suggestive of either a hopeful or pessimistic future. Johnson, therefore, presents his version of how he *wishes* the middle passage could end. He uses his principal tool of revision, demythification, to not only deconstruct and critique what I have called Melville's myths of character and religion but also achieve the fairy tale ending.

Outside of the five people saved from the Republic, however, most of the populace of the novel has died or been killed, and although that may not seem to fit the fairy tale ending, Johnson suggests, there is no future for those individuals who have not evolved on the middle passage. Essentially, those persons who are products of a *single* philosophy or world view, are lost in the modern world. The Allmuseri, for example, are so changed by slavery and the middle passage that they no longer belong to any world; they are "not wholly Allmuseri anymore" and thus, they are eternally poised between two worlds (Middle 124). For the slavers, the middle passage has not reaffirmed their view of the world as it did with Amasa Delano but rather demythified its hierarchy and stereotypes. Why



then, it must be asked, are some people allowed to be saved? I suggest that by the end of the novels the survivors are not tied to a single world, or between them, but rather exist as products of both worlds, Rutherford, Squibb, and the three Allmuseri children possess therefore a *cumulative* identity. For example, the Allmuseri, although they tried to encompass "everything" in their notion of unity and the whole, left out the idea and possibility of duality and multiplicity. Thus in coming into contact with this "other" world, their world view has been drastically altered. Likewise, in this "other" world, the identity of the crew has been based upon a notion of division. I believe that Johnson in killing off the rest of the crew is also saying that slavery has gone past its time, if there ever was a time for bondage.

### Conclusion

Charles Johnson claims in *Being and Race* that each "new story teaches us what a story can be" (122). *Middle Passage* is the deliberate retelling of a history to include the omitted viewpoint thereby deconstructing the myths embodied in Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno." The black American tradition began enclosed by such literary forms "bequeathed" by whites, so that from the perspective of a twentieth-century black post-colonial writer, Johnson brings the American black experience, something frequently repressed, center stage - from the very first line. Melville it seems was not as concerned with the issue of slavery as he was with the overreaching notion of humanity. Often seeing the universe in terms of polarities (good/bad and black/white), in these conflicts Melville attempts to find a larger universal truth, to assure

himself essentially that there is a truth in the universe (Geismar ix). This knowledge, however, is unattainable for as Melville himself suggests the knot is "[f]or someone else to undo" (Melville 126). This knot of hemp, reminiscent of the Gordian knot, appears in "Benito Cereno" only to be thrown overboard. There is no Alexander the Great, no leader, that will rise to cut it aboard the San Dominick.

Charles Johnson, however, is the writer who, piece by piece, will undo Melville's knot of myth for modern history and literature. Slavery, he says, becomes the "allegory for perceptual bondage or anything that prevents the true appreciation of being or of life" (Little 144). The Wild Man and the Noble Savage have long been a part of this bondage. It is from these forms that Melville gets his myths, and although he modifies them during his lifetime, there are still knots which are left for the next generation to undo, just as Johnson leaves his twentieth century myths to be demythified in the next hundred years. The Allmuseri philosophy is Johnson's twentieth century response to "Caliban's dilemma" insofar as every author attempts to express an experience by compromising "between the one and the many, African and European, the present and the past" (Rushdy 374). He suggests that African-American literature should be opened up to what Johnathan Little has called the "intersubjective phenomenological freedom of 'free variation'" by adopting in a sense Herbert Spiegelberg's principles:

- (1) Using imagination and the technique of variation, we try to occupy the real place of the other and view from this standpoint the world as it is present in all its texture, limitations, and possibilities.
- (2) In transporting ourselves in this manner we must divest ourselves of our own historically acquired peculiarities by adopting as much as we can of the other's viewpoint. We must quit the familiarity of our lives momentarily to experience this.
- (3) After this

transportation we move back and forth between the other's perspective and our own, comparing evidence, collating profiles, criticizing the other's perspective for what it lacks and, according to what we find, amending our own. (Little 148)

Up until the twentieth century Johnson believes that there have been only two options for black characterizations: (1) to accept their marginality and use it to deceive their "masters" and survive, or (2) to embrace "blackness" which has been defined by the white Other (Little 149). As Johnson sees it, the true hero, however, is the one who challenges the values of a system which might destroy him. A black American author, Johnson faces a dual demythification in which he must create and insure not only an American sense of self but also a black identity that is not defined by the Empire. Writing, therefore, in his own words, is the "trespass of oneself on the other and of the other upon me" (Being 39).

In his struggle with the "imposed forms," Johnson demythifies the common myths of character and religion that Melville, however unknowingly, either accepts or creates. It is from his deliberate deconstruction and critique of these myths that the perspective of the twentieth century black post-colonial writer emerges, "singing the world" (Being 123). Where Melville's journey begins in the uncovering of a revolt aboard the San Dominick, Johnson's journey begins before a word is written, it in effect begins with Melville, just as Melville himself began with what the Empire called "the historical world."

## Works Consulted

- Altinel, Savkar. "Book Review: *Oxherding Tale*," Times Literary Supplement. January 6, 1984.19.
- Andrews, William. To Tell a Free Story. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986.
- Baker, Houston A. Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Bell, Bernard. The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987.
- Boas, George and Arthur Lovejoy. Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity. New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1965.
- Christenson, Carol and Thomas, eds. The Discovery of America and Other Myths. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1992.
- Davies, Linda. "Interview with Charles Johnson," Glimmer Train. Fall 1993. 142-158.
- Dudley, Edward and Maximillian Novak, eds. The Wild Man Within. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972.
- Ellison, Ralph. Shadow and Act. New York: Random House, 1964.
- Fisher, Dexter and Robert Stepto, eds. Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1978.
- Gates, Henry Louis, ed. Race, Writing, and Difference. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.
- Gayle, Addison, ed. The Black Aesthetic. New York: Doubleday, 1971.
- Gleason, William. "The Liberation of Perception: Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*," Black American Literature Forum. Vol. 25. 1991. 705-728.
- Harris, Norman. "The Black Universe in Contemporary Afro-American Fiction," CLA Journal. September, 1986. 1-13.
- Heyward, Jennifer. "Something to Serve: Constructs of the Feminine in Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*," Black American Literature Forum. Vol 25. 1991. 689-703.
- Husband, Timothy. The Wild Man: Medieval Myth and Symbolism. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980.
- Johnson, Charles. Being and Race. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.
- Johnson, Charles. Middle Passage. New York: Penguin Books, 1990.

- Johnson, Charles. "A Phenomenology of the Black Body," Michigan Quarterly Review. Fall 1993. 599-614.
- Joyce, James. Ulysses. New York, Vintage Books: 1986.
- Little, Jonathan. "Charles Johnson's Revolutionary *Oxherding Tale*," Studies in American Fiction. Autumn 1991. 141-151.
- Little, Johnathan. "An interview with Charles Johnson," Contemporary Literature. Summer 1993. 158-181.
- Mazur, Oleh. The Wild Man in the Spanish Renaissance and Golden Age Theater. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1980.
- Melville, Herman. Billy Bud and Benito Cereno. New York: The Heritage Press, 1965.
- Rushdy, Ashraf. "The Phenomenology of the Allmuseri: Charles Johnson and the subject of the narrative of slavery," African American Review. Fall 1992. 373-394.
- Sekora, John and Darwin Turner. The art of slave narrative. Western Illinois University Press, 1982.
- Zavala, Silvio Arturo. The defense of human rights in Latin America, sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Paris: United Nations, 1964.