

Charles Johnson's Unity through a Reconstructed History  
in *Middle Passage*

In his novel *Middle Passage*, Charles Johnson uses religious, philosophical, and cultural allusions in an attempt to unify man amid the divisive nature of a fictionally constructed history. Johnson seeks to reshape the history of slavery by extending the meaning of slavery to include anyone who has ever been physically, mentally, or spiritually enslaved. In his article, "Black Skin, White Tissue: Local Color and Universal Solvents in the Novels of Charles Johnson," Richard Hardack traces Johnson's use of slavery as a metaphor in widening the definition of who is enslaved and to what: "Johnson systematically develops this perspective, treating slavery only as a form of slavery: that is, as a metaphor with almost exclusively psychological and metaphysical, rather than historical or political, consequences...Johnson uses the metaphor of slavery to transcend history" (1030). Marc Steinberg states in "Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*: Fictionalizing History and Historicizing Fiction," that "Johnson focuses on slavery as being more of a transcendent psychological notion than a particular historical moment. Instead of specifying the subject, he universalizes the concept and, as such, reminds us of the possibilities of many forms of continued physical, psychological, and cultural enslavement" (384). *Middle Passage* begins with Rutherford Calhoun's manumission and subsequent freedom of body. Calhoun's struggle for mental freedom entrenches him in a war of words with Captain Falcon and his duties with constructing the log book. Calhoun's ultimate battle for autonomy is a spiritual one, juxtaposed by the Allmuseri tribe, and fleshed out within the novel through Johnson's use of religious anachronisms and allusions.

Through Calhoun, Johnson places the control of historical construction in the hands of a freed slave. Falcon tells Calhoun, “You’re a bright lad. Do your best. Include everything you can remember, and what *I* told you, from the time you came on board” (*Middle Passage* 146). Therefore, there will be two points of view represented, Falcon’s and Calhoun’s. The result of these instructions also assumes other points of view will be left out of this portion of history. Hayden White proposes that a person constructs history at a certain time from an emotional point of view: “The same set of events can serve as components of a story that is tragic *or* comic...depending on the historian’s choice of plot structure that he considers most appropriate for ordering events of that kind so as to make them into a comprehensible story” (84). Calhoun receives the log book on July 3, suggestive of a forthcoming independence, yet he ‘emplots’ six entries prior to his reception of the book, thus rewriting his personal history through his own ‘choice of plot structure.’ Calhoun takes on the Captain’s role and, in doing so, participates in the established system rather than overthrowing it. Louis Althusser argues that “the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class ‘in words’” (132-133). This argument views Calhoun’s writing of the log book not as an emancipation, but as a re-establishing of the ruling ideology of the slave traders, or for Johnson, those who produce enslavement through division. Johnson, as well as Calhoun, utilizes the same method of reforming history as historians do, and, therefore, does not

produce a fully accurate ‘historical’ account of slavery. Rather, he rearranges similar events based on different viewpoints to create various stories. Hayden White states that “[i]n order to write the history of any given scholarly discipline or even of a science, one must be prepared to ask questions *about* it of a sort that do not have to be asked in the practice *of* it” (81). Beyond the sovereignty of voice offered to anyone bound in enslavement, whether it be bodily, mental, or spiritual, Johnson deepens Calhoun’s liberation by posing questions about the self and how people are connected with one another. When writing, or re-writing, history, this process establishes a deeper, more spiritual release for Calhoun and all who are enslaved.

Division creates a barrier to unity, the ultimate freedom, and Johnson shows how these dividing lines are established in a falsely-constructed history. A fallacious history can be politically interpreted, or culturally altered in order to shift power from one ideology to another. Johnson illustrates the fictionalization of historical ‘facts’ through an anachronism of the Piltdown man:

Some masters, as you know, groomed their slaves to be gladiators: the Africans with a reach, or thickness of skull, or smoldering anger that, if not checked, would result in slave rebellion. So it was with Santos... You have seen, perhaps, sketches of Piltdown man? Cover him with coal dust, add deerskin leggings and a cutaway coat tight as wet leather, and you shall have Santos’s younger, undernourished sister (*Middle Passage* 10-11).

In 1912, bone fragments thought to be the evolutionary ‘missing link’ between apes and humans were discovered in Piltdown, England. At the time of Piltdown man’s discovery, very few early human fossils had been found and none on English soil, leading scientists at the time to declare the findings as the remains of the ‘First Englishman’ (Weiner 197). The discovery invigorated a sense of English nationalism not only across borders from country to colony, but also across history. Branding the discovery as ‘English’

purposefully permeated the notion of England's dominance throughout world history and boasted power over every other world culture. However, in 1953, proof emerged that the Piltdown man contained the lower jawbone of an orangutan deliberately combined with the skull of a fully developed human (Weiner 196). Johnson refers to this particular piece of history because an unimaginable hoax influenced global research of human evolution for over forty years. The Piltdown case is an example of how racial, nationalist, and gendered discourses shaped history at the time: Piltdown's semi-human features were explained by reference to non-white ethnicities, whom many Europeans of that time considered a lower form of human; the English hyped the find as native to England, while American and other European scientists remained skeptical; the collected specimens were referred to as male despite evidence suggesting they were female, perhaps to downplay the Suffragette movement at the time of their discovery (Goulden 280). The ruse of the origin of man reflects the questionable construction of the slave in slave narratives, as seen through Johnson's use of the Piltdown man in reference to Santos. Johnson shows his readers how history can be falsified, and beyond that, why it would be perpetrated as false. In other words, constructing history in certain ways establishes a counterfeit, but wide-reaching power that keeps those who constructed the story in power by saturating history through the manipulation of institutions and doctrines. In the case of the Piltdown man, the erroneous construction was England's way of establishing their roots as a global power; in the instance of Santos, the much-feared gladiator slave forms out of the combination of rage inherent in all slaves into one body that is easily controlled by its master then used to fight against other slaves, thus quelling any instance of rebellion against the slave owners. Santos works as the muscle for Papa, shifting the gladiator slave

narrative slightly in that Santos is paid for similar work rather than forced into it. Santos will collect his fellow African-Americans and bring them to Papa for his disposal, as seen in Santos's delivery of Calhoun to the gangster. Where Santos begins as a divisive tool amidst his peers, steered by Papa, he later reveals his genealogical relation to the oldest tribe in Africa, the Allmuseri, toward the end of the novel. Johnson reconstructs the use of the gladiator slave as a connection within the slave population rather than for its division – the anger harbored inside the gladiator slave is no longer aimed at fellow slaves because there is a recognition of relationship. Johnson's application of the 'First Englishmen' to a gladiator slave from the first African tribe reallocates the history of man from European origins to African roots.

All historical documents are created in much the same way Johnson or any other writer would create a 'fictional' text. A set of events is ordered by someone, who most likely was not in attendance at any of the incidents about which they are writing, then they organize these occurrences into a series that makes the most sense to the reader, in the writer's opinion. Hayden White urges us "to imagine that the problem of the historian is to make sense of a hypothetical *set* of events by arranging them in a *series* that is at once chronologically *and* syntactically structured, in the way that any discourse from a sentence all the way up to a novel is constructed" (92). Steinberg argues that "Johnson...explicitly or implicitly attempts to inscribe some form of historical retelling;...writers do so, of course, primarily to reveal, not conceal, truth about nineteenth-century America. But inscribing possibility, and not recorded 'fact,' is questionable business to some who might accept written document as doctrine" ("Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* 385). Very little 'fact' enters into the construction of history,

so to call historical writings ‘doctrine’ and narratives ‘questionable’ sets up a biased view, privileging certain voices and negating others. “All documentation might be biased and inherently unreliable. A postmodernist like Johnson probably would not be comfortable simply overwriting an unsubstantiated or incomplete truth with perceived truth. His sweep is broader, and he questions the very notion of data collection, historical analysis, and truth itself” (“Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*” 386). Johnson is not trying to ‘overwrite’ anything or anyone; he is attempting to illustrate how all creations, both literary and physical, are connected, despite their origins, constructions, falsities or truths. “Because of his experiences, Calhoun now seeks a different kind of connection. He sees history differently, as a continuum, a process, not numerous transcendent moments” (“Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*” 389). Johnson seeks to break the chains of a constrictive historical timeline in which it is widely accepted that each generation is better or more advanced than the last; he believes that linear progression across time (past/present/future) and along the construction of narratives (beginning/middle/end) leads to division. Instead, Johnson offers another way to view time, history, and narrative as non-linear, non-privileged and interconnected by using American slavery as a backdrop for the multiple ways people are enslaved and through the use of anachronisms from eras and cultures outside his novel’s setting. Because of Johnson’s methods, we learn no one era is better than another and no one culture is more valid than the one prior, or the one parallel to it, or the one that is to follow.

Many of Johnson’s critics point to the unreliability of Rutherford Calhoun’s narration as a perceived weakness or oversight in Johnson’s text. Marc Steinberg’s analysis of Calhoun’s unreliability concludes that Johnson’s aim “reflects both the

slave's...use of deception as a survival skill and the potential unreliability of some past slave narratives" ("Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*" 378). However, these critics miss Johnson's targeting of the construction of history through the questionable facts of Calhoun's narrative. By calling into question the reliability of a writer (Calhoun) who is creating a historical document (the logbook), these critics parallel Johnson's suggestion that all of history is constructed, and, therefore, unreliable. In other words, history *is* fiction. John Whalen-Bridge counters Johnson's critics by advocating the outcomes of literary methods used to expand upon widely accepted forms of construction: "Johnson extracts humor from the most painful patterns of life in order to promote eventual health and happiness...he freely shifts modes (he ranges between naturalism, allegory, satire, and even mysticism) in order to envision freedom and happiness in a world of constraint and pain. Critics of Johnson's gumbo of fictional modes have argued that his work...[is] free to be so various only because they are unfaithful to the texture of felt life, but Johnson defenders praise him as a literary trickster" (2). The reliability of Calhoun as a narrator is a deliberate move on Johnson's part because it not only reflects the similar construction of what we accept as historical fact, it also reveals how historical events are connected throughout time and across perceived cultural divides, encouraging readers to unearth the humanity woven into the unreliability of the characters.

In pulling pieces from historically conflicting religions, philosophies, and cultures, Johnson privileges tolerance and points to the 'eclectic' nature of different peoples as being a point of unification rather than division. Johnson's construction of the Allmuseri tribe stands out as his most vivid allusion to what unity might look like or how it may be achieved. Michael Boccia and Herman Beavers cite Johnson's assembly of

the tribe as “not romanticizing the African past, but disconnecting the idea of Being from the construction of Race via his use of Buddhist philosophy to ‘open up’ his characters [since] Johnson’s Africans are as Eastern as they are West African” (518). Thus, the historical connection of race and religion are blurred, dispersing assumptions about the religion or philosophy of African tribes as being something wholly different from ‘Eastern’ or ‘Western’ ways of thinking. The Allmuseri are “eclectic in respect to spiritual traditions from all over the third world,” as Johnson ascribes the tribe with Hindus’ yearly ritual of giving up a selfish desire along with a West African tribe’s custom of spitting at the feet of visitors to cool and soothe them of their long walk (Rowell 545). Johnson also connects the history of the Allmuseri tribe to that of Europeans: “In their mythology Europeans had once been members of their tribe – rulers, even, for a time” (*Middle Passage* 65). Creating the oldest African tribe on earth and establishing their connection to Europeans demonstrates Johnson’s effort to join histories and genealogies where brutal division currently resides. Steinberg states that “Johnson has shown great interest in debunking notions of racial and cultural difference: we are, essentially, and in spite of any apparent differences, intimately connected with one another and to one another’s ancestors” (“Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*” 376). Johnson himself speaks to his intentions in creating the people and the history of the Allmuseri: “[M]y guiding principle was to make them the most spiritual tribe in the world, a whole tribe of Mother Therasas and Ghandis” (Rowell 545). This collection of spiritually peaceful people were changed for the worse by their experience during the middle passage. They revolt, they kill, and they succumb to the multiplicity that essentially destroys their central and deepest values of unity, or Being. Johnson offers a



sense of healing and constancy to the tribe through Santos's confession toward the end of *Middle Passage* that his grandfather's family descended from the Allmuseri and thus corroborates the connection between the two cultures of Africa and Europe. Calhoun's adoption of Baleka symbolizes a continued bond between these two nations in future generations. Through the construction of the Allmuseri's history and the genealogy of his characters, Johnson unites cultures that were so violently cleaved through their shared experience of slavery.

The Allmuseri are not an infallible tribe, as Johnson reminds us of their failings throughout the novel. A "one-handed Allmuseri thief" shows both the vice of thievery within the tribe as well as the tribal punishment of "lopping off a thief's right hand" (*Middle Passage* 65). Johnson paints a picture of a tribe without worldly needs: "Eating no meat, they were easy to feed. Disliking property, they were simple to clothe. Able to heal themselves, they required no medication. They seldom fought... They felt *sick*, it was said, if they wronged anyone" (*Middle Passage* 78). Steinberg claims that "the tribe emerges as a fantasy of wholeness [which] is also interestingly a white fantasy of the behavior of black slaves... Little sickness and fighting, little desire for material, easy to feed and clothe – what perfect slaves for a master" ("Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* 380-381). However, Johnson's formation of the Allmuseri is a realistic portrayal of human-ness, complete with failures and vices. Johnson privileges the Allmuseri's disconnection with material needs, their vegetarian diet, their holistic health and gentle demeanors over any violent, divisive, carnivorous yearnings. Where Steinberg sees the Allmuseri as a definition of the 'perfect slave,' Johnson's interpretation of slavery sides

with those who harbor hate or cruelty to any living being and remain dependent upon material wants, who is everyone other than the Allmuseri.

Upon seeing the holding cell in the belly of *The Republic* for the first time, some of the Allmuseri attempt suicide as a fate preferable to living on the ship. Johnson illustrates the complexities of being human, the revered and the hard to look at, to ensure that the Allmuseri are not separated from the human experience but included in it along with every other character in the novel. In “Rutherford Calhoun’s Night-Sea Journey,” Marc Steinberg views the stealing, killing and suicide attempts within the Allmuseri as proof that the tribe operates as an unachievable ideal: “the tribe is...an unrealized construct set up as an ideal and manifested as a failure” (4). However, the flaws within the tribe are intentional; they are Johnson’s way of connecting conflicting cultures through the dark side of humanity as well as the light. Where Steinberg sees a failure in the “Edenic quality of intersubjectivity” (“Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*” 379), there is actually a deliberate construction of what it is to be human in an endeavor to erase, or at least blur, the barriers of difference. Applying an “Edenic quality” to “intersubjectivity” is oxymoronic because Steinberg is enforcing a singular Christian viewpoint of humanity’s beginning onto a concept that bases itself on a culmination of viewpoints. Therefore, the ‘ideal’ of a tribe or of humanity’s origins is historically constructed yet any one human will never be perfect, without ‘sin’ or failures; the ideal rests in the realization of human connectedness, that our failures and our successes affect one another, and that relying on perceived differences keeps us from the ideal of connection.

Johnson attempts to heal the wounded image of Africa marked by the devastating effects of colonialism and slavery, primarily through the beliefs of the Allmuseri and the god at the center of their tribe. “No subject/object distinction exists for the Allmuseri or their god, a separation that for Johnson gives rise to all dichotomies, between man and woman, black and white, and all other created binaries and hierarchies. In part, then, the recreated Allmuseri paradoxically salvage our image of Africa by doing away with all distinction between black and white, as well as self and other” (Hardack 1030). Once again, Johnson breeds reconciliation beyond the realm of those affected by physical slavery in his opening up of the definition of what it is to be enslaved in body, mind, and spirit. In widening the experience of slavery, Johnson mends a multiplicity of wounds. Steinberg struggles with the acceptance of this philosophy, claiming its absence of proof ascertains its impossibility: “For those of us (‘Westerners’) who equate information and documentation with history, the tribe cannot be real,” and the questions about fear, difference, guilt, or otherness they potentially represent are “without answers, for like the original log, the Allmuseri can’t be read; they are an unreadable text, as is substantiated by the fact that they have no fingerprints” (“Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage* 380). These questions represented by the Allmuseri, however, are answerable. They are answerable in innumerable ways when the questions are posed in a philosophical manner. The dissatisfaction Steinberg feels as a ‘Westerner’ stems from the possibility of not being able to satisfyingly prove there is only one, definite answer. If Steinberg, and by extension other ‘Westerners,’ rely upon “documentation with history” to validate answers to philosophical questions, they will continue to be mired in disappointment. Since

history is fiction, constructed much like narratives within a novel, using history to justify anything seems an illogical stance to take, especially when pondering the philosophical.

The Allmuseri god reflects what the Allmuseri themselves attempt to embody – wholeness. Steinberg warns that “when considering the god, we are forced to consider Calhoun’s reliability; the very existence of the god becomes questionable. It too emerges as a manifestation of contradictions – it is chained, limited in its knowledge...and needs to be fed as a dog would...The god is presented both as a recognizable Western deity (complete with its mysteries) and as something wholly non-Western – something tangible, visible, incomplete, and not all-powerful” (“Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage* 381). This ‘manifestation of contradictions’ is in fact an image of wholeness – the Allmuseri god embodies everything that is and anything that is not. “The Allmuseri connection serves several purposes in Johnson’s fictional universe: it allows Johnson to bridge his Asian philosophical connection to ancestral Africa, and it also historicizes an ideal period in human history before man fell from enlightenment” (Whalen-Bridge 9). Where Whalen-Bridge steps back to look at the bigger picture and takes a more philosophical stance on Johnson’s writing, Steinberg seems again to be searching for facts on which to justify or validate a philosophical or spiritual idea. Western gods are not defined in such a way, so neither should a constructed god represented in a fictional African tribe. Captain Falcon describes the Allmuseri god to Calhoun, iterating that ““Sometimes it’s physical, you know, like me and thee...Mostly, it’s immaterial...[it’s] the only creature of its kind in the universe – *is* the universe, the Allmuseri say...[it has] limitations, lad. I daresay it has downright contradictions...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. You might say empirical knowledge is on man’s side, not God’s. It’s our glory and grief both, a function of the duality of mind” (*Middle Passage* 101-102). Johnson’s ‘god’ inhabits everything, including contradictions and limitations, something potentially foreign for Western thinkers in regard to their God, but certainly not qualities that invalidate the philosophies of the Allmuseri’s god.

Through Calhoun’s narrative, Johnson finds himself within the Allmuseri: “They were leagues from home – indeed, without a home – and in Ngonyama’s eyes I saw a displacement, an emptiness like maybe all his brethren as he once knew them were dead. To wit, I saw myself” (*Middle Passage* 124). If the Allmuseri are a construction of Johnson’s beliefs, or if Johnson is a part of the Allmuseri’s beliefs, they are both aware of their human limitations in solving the problems of man, and that the solution may lie within the acceptance of a unified connection of both world history and all humanity. Calhoun mirrors these thoughts as he reflects upon his journey with *The Republic* and its inhabitants: “I listened to everyone and took notes: I was open, like a hingeless door, to everything...I peered deep into memory and called forth all that had ever given me solace, scraps and rags of language too, for in myself I found...only pieces and fragments of all the people who had touched me, all the places I had seen...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 Passage* 162-163). When Calhoun took over the duties of the log book, he was instructed to only account for two viewpoints, his and Falcon’s, but because of his experiences with the Allmuseri and the crew, Calhoun’s awareness of interconnectedness blossoms into many more viewpoints both aboard the ship and within himself. Trying to survive as a singular being, disconnected from the

whole of all things living past and present and future, brings division within oneself and from one's community. Acknowledging the 'mosaic' of each person does not breed hegemony, it connects each individual with another, across all cultural and historical boundaries.

Johnson seeks to create a metaphysical slave narrative, in which the central question asks, 'what is the self?' Rewriting traditional slave narratives inherently seeks to unshackle both literary and historical slaves, but Johnson moves beyond that freedom to proffer "liberation on the deepest spiritual levels: *Moksha*, as it's put in Hinduism" (Rowell 543). In his explorations of divisions within the self, Johnson "draws almost as much from Zen Buddhism as he does from African-American folklore" (Hardack 1029). Johnson highlights Christian, Greek, Hindu, Norse and African figures to illustrate how connection percolates over diversified religions and cultures. "Falcon...tapped his foot, stopping only to stare as Ngonyama and Meadows carried an African's corpse from below. As with previous cases like these, Falcon ordered his ears sliced off and preserved below in oil to prove to the ship's investors that he had in fact purchased in Bangalang as many slaves as promised. This amputation proved tough going for Meadows, for the last stages of rigor mortis froze the body hunched forward in a grotesque hunker, like Lot's wife" (*Middle Passage* 121). Lot's wife is a Christian parable from the Bible where, as Lot and his family are forced from their home, his wife is killed because she looks back at her earthly possessions instead of trusting God and her husband. This Christian parable derives from the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Orpheus travels to the underworld to retrieve his love, Eurydice. The gods of the underworld release her to Orpheus under the condition that he not look back at her until they both cross the threshold back into

their own world. Orpheus looks back too soon, and Eurydice is pulled back into the underworld forever. Through this biblical allusion, Johnson observes that religions are connected, as each serves as a warning against the human vice of greed, both for material goods and for companionship.

Hindu's Lord Krishna is alluded to as Calhoun gazes upon the banks of New Orleans: "Black men, free and slave, sat quietly on rocks coated with crustacea, in the odors of oil and fish, studying an evening sky as blue as the skin of heathen Lord Krishna" (*Middle Passage* 5). According to W. Crooke in "The Legends of Krishna," "Krishna [is]...at once [a] god and man...regarded as [a] human hero, acting under the influence of human motives, and taking no advantage of [his] divine supremacy" (2-3). Referencing this allusion before Calhoun embarks on his tremulous journey underlines his position between both man and god – he is not only man, because he is able to appreciate something greater than himself like the blue of the sky or the people under it, but he is not yet godly, because he has not been spiritually tested.

Loki, a Norse myth, and Brer Rabbit, an African folk hero, are both alluded to in Falcon's description of the Allmuseri god: "'We're not only shipping Allmuseri on this trip, we're bringin' back their deity too...It's a tricky rascal, though, if you ain't careful...Legend has it the Creature has a hundred ways to relieve men of their reason. It traps them, tricks them into Heaven. It's Loki and Brer Rabbit together'" (*Middle Passage* 102). Orrin E. Klapp follows the development of folk heroes from similar origins spanning multiple cultures: "the hero myths of various cultures seem to be composed of stories from a common repertoire...The total picture suggested by this literature is that as historical personages become legendary, they are made into folk

heroes by the interweaving and selection of mythical themes appropriate to their character as popularly conceived” (17). Klapp associates both Loki and Brer Rabbit with what he describes as folklore’s ‘clever hero,’ one who “is usually smaller and weaker than those with whom he is matched, frequently being a diminutive animal. The victory of the clever hero is the perennial triumph of brains over brawn...A curious aspect of the clever hero is that he frequently verges upon being a rogue or villain” (20). Not only does Johnson achieve an allusion to unity through the connection of all folk legends, but he also pinpoints the internalization of hero and villain in all of us. By unifying this dichotomy within each person, Johnson illustrates the most dangerous form of division is within the self.

Despite Johnson’s personal religious affiliations, he seeks to connect religion in another way through the use of his Christian, Greek, Hindu, and African allusions. The scene in which Falcon calls for the ears of a corpse to be sliced off and preserved so that he may receive his full pay, tests our compassion and understanding for both Falcon and the situation aboard *The Republic*. Religion and philosophy offer a foothold amid this questioning through the allusion to Lot’s wife, and all she encompasses. As Calhoun languidly observes the details of his surroundings, appreciating the people, the animals, and the sky above, religion and philosophy serve as a backdrop through an allusion to Lord Krishna. Even during a reflective, calm moment, something greater than the text is there upon which to rest. The Allmuseri god is described as a trickster, housing both villain and hero within its Being, through allusions to Loki and Brer Rabbit. When we come up against something we do not fully understand yet, religion and philosophy are there. Johnson’s ability to pull from diversified cultures and histories to offer support and



understanding in several different situations through philosophy and religion emphasizes his claim that we are all connected, despite any racial, cultural, or historical discrepancies.

Most critics of Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* focus on the differences and the endemic binaries the narrative creates: black vs. white, male vs. female, free vs. enslaved, Western vs. Eastern. However, Johnson centrally focuses on unity, on ways in which we can bridge the binaries that divide people through class, culture, and history. Primarily through his construction of the Allmuseri tribe, Johnson paints a picture of what this unity might look like: "what we have are, not different worlds, but instead innumerable perspectives on *one* world; and we know that when it comes to the crunch we share, all of us, the same cultural Lifeworld – a world layered with ancestry, predecessors, and contemporaries. To think this world properly is to find that all our perspectives take us directly to a common situation, a common history in which all meanings evolve" ("A Phenomenology" 151). Johnson does not seek to achieve hegemony through blurred differences of unity. He instead proposes that differences in individuals are beneficial to the human race, as long as they do not create division. It is the recognition, acceptance, and respect for each other's differences that Johnson looks for in a unified humanity, not the creation of carbon copies of one another or the silencing of any individual voice. In Johnson's vision of unity, every being has a place and is connected and affected by every other being throughout our world and across the continuum of time. Regardless of race, class, culture, gender, or historical periods, we all create, revise, and affect our collective one world. Johnson examines different

perspectives without calling for a world culture; he invites differences, while warning against division.

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