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Political Principles and Ideologies in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*

Raphaël Lambert

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Introduction

- 1 Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990) takes place in 1830 and is told from the point of view of narrator-protagonist Rutherford Calhoun. Calhoun is a recently manumitted slave of twenty-two who, after a few months of petty thievery in the lower-depths of New Orleans, stows away on the slaver the *Republic* in order to evade a local mobster as well as a besotted schoolmistress intent on marrying him. During the journey back and forth between America and Africa, Calhoun is exposed to two radically different political models. The first of these models is that of Ebenezer Falcon, the tyrannical captain of the *Republic*, and the second that of the Allmuseri, a mythical African tribe of which 40 members are held captive in the belly of the *Republic*.
- 2 Although Calhoun defines Falcon as a man of Manifest Destiny and a fervent patriot who has embraced the values of his conquering nation, Falcon is anything but a blind follower of the dominant ideology. Instead, Falcon uses this ideology to satisfy his greed and make a place for himself in an already-globalized economy with few or no limits. From his Puritan forebears, Falcon has inherited an immoderate sense of self-discipline and an impressive work ethic—virtues that he has diligently twisted into his own theory of the dualistic “structure of the mind” (98), which places war at the center of human experience. Falcon resembles another war-addict, Judge Holden in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985); indeed, both *Middle Passage* and *Blood Meridian*, written

in the 1980s and set during the expansionist nineteenth century, can be read as a warning about the blend of religious fervor, laissez-faire economy, and American exceptionalism that typified the rhetoric of the Reagan years from 1981 to 1989.

- 3 The other model to which Calhoun is exposed in *Middle Passage* is the Allmuseri model, which is associated with virtues of nonviolence, tolerance, and unity. The novel even implies that the contact with the Western world of Falcon has vitiated the pacifist nature of the Allmuseri and forced them to enter what Calhoun calls a “world of multiplicity” (140), which is characterized by conflict rather than harmony. However, the latter part of this essay questions this tenuous argument and contends that Allmuseri culture, long before it confronted the worst manifestations of Western culture aboard the *Republic*, had a few skeletons in its own closet. Focusing on the Diamelo character, a ne’er-do-well tribesman turned top dog thanks to the successful Allmuseri insurrection on the ship, and drawing on Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, the essay goes on to demonstrate that Allmuseri culture, behind its façade of perfection, is as flawed as any other culture. In the end, the Allmuseri Utopia is not so different from the Puritan Utopia that spawned the likes of Falcon and the world of ruthless competition and antagonism he lives in.

Captain Ebenezer Falcon: Context and Ideologies

“And because the condition of man [...] is a condition of war of every one against every one [...] it followeth that in such a condition every man has a right to every thing, even to one another’s body” (80).

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*

- 4 When it comes to the slave ship and its captain, the text does not shy away from metaphors. The aptly named *Republic* is like the country it incarnates: still in its infancy and unsafe. Its lowest deck is separated from the bottom of the sea by “only an inch of plank” (35) and its crew “spent most of the time literally rebuilding [it] as we crawled along the waves” (36). Also, the *Republic* is not free from financial interests as it is underwritten by “powerful families in New Orleans” (48). Nature itself rages against the *Republic*. On the way back from Africa, “gusts of strong, skirling wind galed and swung the *Republic* broadside to windward, pointing her back the way we had come” (79). The *Republic* is not going back, however, and becomes a “shrinking casket” (81). Later, the *Republic* seems to implode in a blast during the crew’s failed insurrection as a result of which its walls “buckled from a tremendous rolling crash and rumbling that smashed the beams of the ceiling and threw us to the floor” (128). At the end of the story, as a survivor aboard the *Juno*, Calhoun thinks he has become impotent and calls himself “a wreck of the *Republic*” (190). Clearly, the *res publica* is not yet a government “made for the people, made by the people, and answerable to the people,” as Senator Daniel Webster had defined it in a speech to the American Senate in 1830, the very same year the slave ship the *Republic*, in the story, founders.¹
- 5 The text extends the metaphor of the young American republic through Captain Ebenezer Falcon. His last name evokes the American eagle, and his year of birth, 1776, coincides with that of the nation. Furthermore, the republic Falcon incarnates is in his image: brazen and bellicose, but also confident and purpose-driven. A pedophile dwarf

who travelled the world to plunder the treasures of distant tribes and cultures, Falcon is also a polymath and a self-made man in the purest American tradition. In the words of Calhoun, Falcon “possessed a few of the solitary virtues and the entire twisted will of Puritanism: a desire to achieve perfection; the loneliness, self-punishment, and bouts of suicide this brings; and a profound disdain for anyone who failed to meet his nearly superhuman standards” (51). And when Calhoun calls Falcon a patriot, he does not do so in a flattering way: “He [Falcon] was a patriot whose burning passion was the manifest destiny of the United States to Americanize the entire planet” (30).

- 6 The term manifest destiny² had not yet been coined at the time of the story but the territorial expansion of the nation, with its attendant subjugation, removal or decimation of indigenous tribes, was well under way. From the treaty of Paris in 1783 to the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 and the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the young republic of Falcon, through diplomatic maneuvers, business deals and military campaigns, had relentlessly pursued its goal of controlling the vast expanse of land stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific.³ Thus, when it appeared in 1845, the term manifest destiny did not mark the beginning of a national policy. Rather, it encapsulated a mood and ideology harkening back to the beginnings of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The first Puritans, for all their declared intention to build a shining “city upon a hill,”⁴ a Christian Utopia fostering exemplary moral conduct, frugality, solidarity, and equality, were quick to deem the natives benighted heathens, ban them from their towns and villages, and finally drive them out of their ancestral land. The Puritans might not have suspected what their messianic zeal was going to unleash, and after the dissension and turmoil of the early decades, their relative prosperity reinforced their belief that God had chosen them and that the wilderness of the American continent was the place where a God-blessed, perfect society was to flourish.
- 7 In the years leading up to the American Revolution, this rhetoric of Predestination had made its way into political speeches and strengthened the desire to be free from the yoke of England. By then, the harsh Calvinist doctrines of permanent and irredeemable sinfulness, as well as random, divine Election, had long faded into the more worldly values of piousness and hard work as a way to attain salvation. Thus, Americans of the late eighteenth century were more secular and materialistic than their forefathers, but their victorious revolution had also convinced them of their sacred destiny, which had become fused with feelings of racial and political superiority—a sentiment that found a practical application in the ruthless conquest of the West. The character Ebenezer Falcon must be understood against this backdrop of religious and national self-righteousness and so, Calhoun’s depiction of Falcon as a patriot and a man of manifest destiny ought to be qualified.
- 8 For one thing, Falcon does not share the religious fervor of his time and when he tells Calhoun that he believes in “Christian decency and doing right as much as the next man” (32), it is only to exculpate himself from once resorting to cannibalism in a life-and-death situation. Falcon’s position on race is also less predictable than one would expect: upon meeting Calhoun, Falcon tells him that, “generally speaking, [he doesn’t] like Negroes” (30) seemingly because he finds them clueless. Yet, by the end of the conversation, Falcon tells Calhoun that he doesn’t “hold it against [him] for being [...] black” (31). Falcon’s creed is excellence, and while he believes that helping disadvantaged “minorities” (31) spawns mediocrity, he acknowledges that, “discrimination denied [minorities] the training that makes for true excellence” (31). In

other words, Falcon does not buy the racist rhetoric of his time. He knows that the so-called inferiority of minorities is not innate but results from unfavorable conditions. Yet Falcon takes injustice for granted, for this injustice underlies his success as a slaver.

- 9 Falcon is an opportunist and his political opinions owe more to rationality than deep-seated values. Falcon is anti-British because he hates “men like George III” (50) and the monarchical system they embody; and he is anti-Jeffersonian because the Embargo Act of 1807 “threw seamen and shipbuilders out of work” (50).⁵ Furthermore, Falcon joined the slave-trading industry (even though his government has banned it since 1808) in order to avoid both conscription in the underequipped national fleet and impressment into the Royal Navy. As for Falcon’s dream to “divide the western region of the continent into empires separate from the United States, one of which [he] hoped to shape himself” (50) so as to establish “a true American Utopia” (50), it is reminiscent of the attempt by Aaron Burr, Jr., Jefferson’s first Vice-President, to raise a private army and appropriate a large swathe of land out of the Louisiana Territory.⁶ Falcon is no more motivated than Burr by the purported ideals of his nation to bring freedom, democracy and prosperity to whoever Americans subdue in their move westward, and judging by his repressive conduct at the head of the *Republic*, his “true American Utopia” would be every bit as despotic as the regimes of Europe he so abhors.
- 10 The mere thought of a country ruled by Falcon is preposterous but Falcon’s fantasy is nonetheless evocative of the Puritan heritage of the United States. Like any other Utopia, the society the Puritans wanted to build in the New World quickly degenerated into a national agenda of religious exclusivism, racial discrimination, expropriation, and extermination. Falcon inherited from the Puritans neither their sense of mission nor their religious fervor, and if he believes in any kind of exceptionalism, it is more his own than that of the nation. As for his fixation on excellence, it has little to do with the Puritan notion of moral excellence unless that moral excellence is considered a determining factor in the development of work ethic in the United States. But even on that particular issue, the parallel between Falcon and the Puritans is limited for the Puritans saw hard work and thrift as a contribution to the commonwealth rather than personal gain. By contrast, Falcon works essentially for his personal benefit and cares little about the welfare of others. It is hard to see a connection between the microcosm of the fictional *Republic* and that of the historical Massachusetts Bay Colony and yet, both places are autocracies governed by absolute rulers. Falcon is the skipper of a slave ship—a floating penitentiary as it were—and behaves accordingly. The Puritan leaders based their success on a strict observance of their religious precepts, which was also a way of asserting their relative independence from both the crown and the Church of England.⁷ The Puritans were sectarian in the sense that they tolerated no other creed, and authoritarian in the sense that they were self-appointed and restrained freedom of speech and controlled people’s behaviors.⁸ What Falcon has inherited from his forefathers is an absolute self-confidence and a grim determination—two virtues which, together with the expansionist disposition of his nation, help him shape a cynical view of the world he lives in.
- 11 Just as Calhoun’s depiction of Falcon as a man of manifest destiny is both anachronistic and rather conjectural, his association of Falcon with that “special breed of empire builder, explorer, and imperialist” (29) is slightly off the mark. While it is true that Falcon’s models are the conquistador Pizarro and the navigator Magellan, American imperialism, i.e., the extension of American political and economic influence around

the globe, did not start before the Mexican-American war of 1846 under the presidency of James K. Polk (unless one considers the involvement of individuals like Falcon in the transatlantic slave trade a forerunner of American imperialism). Calhoun is accurate, however, in his assessment of Falcon as a mere soldier of fortune working for wealthy entrepreneurs eager “to stock Yankee museums and their homes with whatever of value was not nailed down in the nations he visited” (49). Falcon is a pawn and he acknowledges that much to Calhoun shortly before passing away. The ship, he tells Calhoun,

wasn't *our* ship from the start [...] Every plank and piece of canvas on the *Republic*, and any cargo she's carrying, from clew to earring [...] belongs to the three blokes who outfitted her in New Orleans and pay our wages. See, someone has to pay the *bill*. I'm captain 'cause I knew how to bow and scrape and kiss rich arses to raise money for this run. (147)

- 12 Falcon's candid confession is a stark reminder that greed, rather than politics, race, or ideology was the prime motive in the slave trade—or any other trade. At the time of the story, the American industrial revolution was underway and the pious, thrifty, and hardworking original Puritan settlements had morphed into a ruthless, compulsive mercantile economy. The claim that each and every individual, regardless of his origins, was entitled to his share of the loot was anchored in the national rhetoric even though slaves, indentured servants, Native Americans, and non-European immigrants were denied access to it by law and by force. For others, bootstrapping and resilience are promises of success, and Falcon's fanatical self-discipline, ambition, and overall philosophy of “Never Explain and Never Apologize” (143) make him the archetype of what the young republic stood for.
- 13 In the Captain's journal Calhoun discovers that Falcon has devised for himself a series of exercises that he calls “Self-Reliance” (51). Falcon would thus precede Ralph Waldo Emerson whose paternity of the term, after all, has been contested.⁹ Humor notwithstanding Falcon is a dreadful perversion of the philosophy of the self that Emerson elaborated in his seminal essay of 1841. On the surface, Falcon corresponds to what Emerson defines at the beginning of “Self-Reliance,” as genius: “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius” (1841, 259). Perhaps because he wants to reduce his dependence on his financial backers with independence of mind, Falcon trusts no one but himself, and never tries to justify his questionable deeds with the religious and political rationales of his time. He has also developed his own theory of the human psyche, which he expounds to a skeptical Calhoun:

For a self to act, it must have somethin' to act *on*. A nonself [...] that resists, thwarts the will, and *veto*es the actor. [...] Well, suppose that nonself is another self? What then? As long as each sees a situation differently there will be slaughter and slavery and the subordination of one another 'cause two notions of things never exist side by side as equals. Why not [...] if both are true? The reason—the irrefragable truth is each person in his heart believes *his* beliefs is best. (97)
- 14 At this stage, Falcon's view of the world deviates from Emerson's, for Emerson believes in a God-given inborn knowledge that each and every individual ought to discover in order to achieve moral truth: “A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light that flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages” (1841, 259). In other words, we have it in us, through divine mediation, to strive toward integrity and help build a better society rid of greed and materialism. To this inherent goodness of humankind, Falcon opposes the inherent

evilness thereof. According to Falcon, “no man’s democratic” (97) and “the final test of truth is war on foreign soil. War in your front yard. War in your bedroom” (97), and as though to mock the Emersonian virtue of solitude, i.e., the capacity to remain immune to the dominant opinion, Falcon adds that “war [will rage] in your own heart, if you listen too much to other people” (97). On the personal level, Falcon’s nihilistic convictions have turned him into a paranoid megalomaniac. On a general level, his belief that we are in a state of permanent conflict within ourselves and with others absolves him of the crimes he has committed and accounts for his nation’s aggressions both on the continent and abroad. Closing his disquisition on the binary oppositions that constitute the structure of the mind, Falcon, as if distorting the principles of Transcendentalism even before they were formulated, tells Calhoun that these binary oppositions “are signs of the transcendental Fault, a deep crack in consciousness itself” (98).

- 15 Falcon’s theory of dualism reinforces the image of the United States as a war-mongering nation but war, in the mind of Falcon, is more than a pretext to invade foreign lands or protect the nation from implausible enemies.¹⁰ War, for Falcon, is inherent to human nature and therefore, it would be futile to either ignore or believe there is a way around it. Falcon’s conception of war echoes that of another fictional character, Judge Holden in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* (1985). A vicious scalp hunter in the infamous John Glanton Company that roamed the US-Mexican border in 1849-1850, Holden shares with Falcon an encyclopedic knowledge, a sexual preference for children, and a marked interest in the topic of war. According to Holden, “the trade of war” is inclusive of “all other trades” (260) and transcends human experience itself. “It makes no difference what men think of war,” Holden tells his campfire companions one night. “War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way” (259). Holden also concurs with Falcon’s theory that the human mind is driven by conflict when he argues that, “war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one’s will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is forced to select. War is the ultimate game because at last war is a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god” (260). Holden’s theory is thus a reworking of the Calvinist doctrine of Predestination whereby war is the ultimate arbiter between two conflicting parties. Holden’s theory is no more far-fetched than the religious belief from which it derives, and his twisting of that belief is probably not so different from what advocates of Manifest Destiny did with the doctrine of Predestination: all they had to do was disguise their expansionist ambitions as a divinely pre-ordained mission and equate non-white/non-Christian with non-Elect to start the conquest of coveted territories and the decimation of local indigenous populations that stayed in the way of the move westward.
- 16 While Falcon uses Manifest Destiny as an opportunity to satisfy his greed and indulge his megalomania, Holden embraces the national, Anglo-Saxon superiority complex intrinsic to Manifest Destiny to satiate his predatory urges. Historically, the notorious John Joel Glanton had been a soldier in the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) with which the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny was closely associated since the term had been coined in a press article justifying the annexation of Texas in 1845. If Ebenezer Falcon is Charles Johnson’s way of questioning such American core values as self-reliance and

entrepreneurial spirit, Judge Holden is McCarthy's way of deconstructing the myth of Manifest Destiny and showing how the proverbial rugged American individual, the promoter of liberty and the ambassador of democratic ideals, can turn into a merciless killing machine in the name of religious, cultural, and political superiority.

- 17 Strikingly, *Blood Meridian* and *Middle Passage*, published only five years apart in 1985 and 1990 respectively, feature eerie central characters equally fascinated with war, and provide the reader with a critical view of Manifest Destiny, a doctrine from the first half of the nineteenth century. Arguably, the military involvement of the United States in various Cold War-related conflicts over the postwar years marked both Johnson and McCarthy. It should also be noted that both works were completed during the Reagan years, a time when the idea of American exceptionalism was forcefully revived. Just a few years after the debacle of the Vietnam War President Ronald Reagan rekindled American pride and confidence by increasing the military budget, beefing-up anti-Soviet rhetoric, and backing anti-Marxist insurgents around the world. What makes the Reagan Doctrine a modern echo of Manifest Destiny is not only its ambition to impose American ideological and military domination everywhere, but also its religious undertones: Reagan labeled the Soviet Union the "evil empire"¹¹ and saw the United States as the "leader of the free world" sent on a divine mission to bring others the gift of American democracy, prosperity, and freedom.¹²
- 18 Freedom is a very slippery concept but in Reagan's mind, it was strongly associated with free-market economy—a system rid of government control, regulated by the law of supply and demand, and by extension supportive of individual initiative and the accumulation of wealth. Incidentally, Ebenezer Falcon would not have disapproved of so-called Reaganomics and its onslaught on social welfare as it fits his creed of excellence and the related components of hard work and self-improvement. As demonstrated earlier, however, Falcon is well aware that the system on which he thrives is blatantly unfair. By contrast, Reagan blindly adhered to that system, and this may explain why authors such as Charles Johnson and Cormac McCarthy sounded the alarm and felt the urge to suggest that there was nothing *new* about *neo*-liberalism, that behind the veneer of economic dynamism and the tale of prosperous communities lies a deeply inequitable system in which the more virtuous and talented are not necessarily the most successful. Through his recurrent use of John Winthrop's metaphor of the "city upon a hill," Reagan depicted a world of God-fearing, close-knit communities made prosperous by the miracle of capitalism, thus consolidating the misguided belief that capitalism and freedom are interchangeable notions.¹³ However, when Winthrop spoke of freedom, he did not have free-market economy in mind. Rather, he envisioned a commonwealth of self-sacrificing people whose liberty was limited by the rule of God and the theocrats who enforced it. Winthrop and his flock, like the rest of the counter-Reformation, welcomed commerce and social mobility, but their world remained self-contained, controlling, and closer to a socialist than a capitalist Utopia. It is not the world of John Winthrop of which Reagan was nostalgic; it is the world of Falcon and Holden, a world in which the original purpose of the Puritans (building the New Jerusalem) and their values (thrift, hard work, and good morals) have become an excuse for conquest and personal advancement.

The Tranquilizing Philosophy of the Allmuseri

“Utopia is the grotesque en rose, the need to
associate happiness—that is, the improbable—
with becoming, and to coerce an optimistic, aerial
vision to the point where it rejoins its own
source: the very cynicism it sought to combat. In
short, a monstrous fantasy” (86)
– E.M. Cioran, *History and Utopia*

- 19 Within the internal structure of the novel, Falcon’s theory of the dualism of the mind and its correlate of infinite conflict and the might-makes-right mentality finds its antithesis in the philosophy of the Allmuseri tribe. In Falcon’s Manichean view of the world, the victor imposes history on the vanquished. By contrast, the Allmuseri believe that reality is not imposed from outside but rather revealed from inside through a process they call outpicturing. According to this belief,

Each man outpictured his world from deep within his own heart [...] As within, so it was without. More specifically: what came out of us, not what went in made us clean or unclean. Their notion of “experience” (...) held each man utterly responsible for his own happiness or sorrow, even for his dreams and his entire way of seeing. (164)

- 20 Outpicturing, as Barbaba Thaden has shown, resonates with the Buddhist idea of karma.¹⁴ But outpicturing is also related to self-reliance as it holds each person accountable for the way they lead their life instead of measuring each person’s life by a series of external criteria. In such a system, Falcon would be able to justify his deeds neither on the ground of humankind’s innate corruption nor by claiming that he ought to satisfy the demands of wealthy people above him. Furthermore, outpicturing is an implicit denial of the Protestant notion of chosenness, whereby the United States so often justified its territorial expansion and decimation of people deemed inferior. Admittedly, Allmuseri would never engage in hostile activities against non-Allmuseri as they are of a pacifist disposition. And they would never deem other people inferior as they form an egalitarian society that need not measure itself against others, as it is perfectly harmonious and self-contained. At least such is the view of first mate Peter Cringle who is the main provider of Allmuseri lore to the narrator Rutherford Calhoun.

- 21 Ashraf Rushdy, in his meticulous “Phenomenology of the Allmuseri,” speaks of “accumulatedness” (373) to define what Calhoun calls a “remarkably *old* people,” which seems to “have run the full gamut of civilized choices, or played through every political and social possibility” (61). Physically, the Allmuseri seem “a synthesis of several tribes [...] a clan distilled from the essence of everything that came earlier” (61); and according to Cringle, the Allmuseri “might have been the Ur-Tribe of humanity itself” (61)—a belief that Ngonyama, the charismatic leader of the Allmuseri, will corroborate at a time when, still in chains, he is trying to inveigle Calhoun to teach him how to steer the ship. It is easy to imagine how those Calhoun calls the “ragtag crew” of the *Republic*, those “refugees from responsibility” who, Calhoun continues, “took to the sea as the last frontier that welcomed miscreants, dreamers, and fools” (40),¹⁵ would idealize the world of an exotic tribe in order to cope with their own:

According to legend, Allmuseri elders took twig brooms with them everywhere, sweeping the ground so as not to inadvertently step on creatures too small to see. 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 could not steal. They fell sick [...] if they wronged anyone. (78)

- 22 This world, seemingly organized around such traditional Buddhist values as compassion for all living creatures, vegetarianism, detachment from worldly possessions, and non-violence is antipodal to the world that has evolved from European greed.¹⁶ Europeans, in Allmuseri mythology, are used to illustrate the fall of man. Europeans, the myth goes, “fell into what was for these people the blackest of sins. The failure to experience the unity of Being everywhere was the Allmuseri vision of Hell. And that was where we lived: purgatory. That was where we were taking them—into the madness of multiplicity” (65).
- 23 According to Rushdy, “The Allmuseri believe in a form of intersubjectivity so [emphasis added] basic that their ideas of failure and hell are represented by division, individuality, or autonomy” (373). Rushdy’s use of the intensifier “so” to emphasize the elemental nature of Allmuseri intersubjectivity is meant as an objective observation, but it also suggests that Charles Johnson endowed his ideal tribe with attributes that leave little room for ambiguity or interpretation. Thus, the uncomplicated system of communication among Allmuseri tribesmen indicates that the reality of Allmuseri life has been simplified so that the Allmuseri, by Johnson’s own admission, epitomize “the complete opposite of Capt. Ebenezer Falcon’s conflict-based, Western vision of the world” (Miller). Rushdy’s intention, however, is not to ponder but rather describe Johnson’s creation and thus, Rushdy carries on his dispassionate description of the Allmuseri:
- According to Allmuseri phenomenology, the individual subject’s ideal condition involves the renunciation of being situated in the material world. In other words, the ideal of intersubjectivity includes the condition of the individual’s being ‘unpositioned’ in the world, of each person’s having a relationship with the tribal community that is so [emphasis added] integral that the individual is rendered “invisible” in the “presence of others.” (377)
- 24 Here again, Rushdy feels compelled to use the intensifier “so” in order to describe the attachment of Allmuseri individuals to their tribe perhaps because that attachment is more coercive than volitional. The state of plenitude that the unity of Being confers on the individual is not one of harmony, cooperation and solidarity with others since the very idea of otherness, which presupposes two interactive subjects, is altogether obliterated from such a system. Nor are the Allmuseri a tribe that draws its strength from heterogeneity, differences and negotiations among its members. Instead, the unity of Being implies a willful and complete surrendering of the self to the community, which suggests that the Allmuseri can conceive of freedom only through the dilution of the self in the wider community. Thus, the Allmuseri community is indeed the opposite of the traditional occidental community characterized by a balance between individualism and communal fraternity.
- 25 Johnson’s community, however, is only conceivable in the case of a very self-enclosed entity such as a monastery (where consensus is both the rule and a disembodied notion transcended by love of God) or an isolated group of human beings that would have been living in autarky for generations. Such societies can only operate if preserved from any contact with the outside world and the Allmuseri, if we are to believe Cringle, seem to have fiercely defended their freedom from interference since Europeans who “had been to their village [never] lived to tell the tale” (43). However, this story about the Allmuseri’s hardline policies toward outsiders is later tempered by Calhoun who

reports that, “the Allmuseri spat at the feet of visitors to their village” in deference to “the stranger’s feet [that] must be hot and tired after so long a journey and might welcome a little water on his boots to cool them” (124). Stories about Allmuseri culture abound and are evidence of a wide array of emotion from dread to veneration, but they are mostly the fruit of the crew’s imagination. Such stories are the stuff of a fantasized world, and all the myths and legends that had made their way in the hearts and minds of the crew do not stand the test of reality when circumstances compel the Allmuseri, all forgiving and pacifist that they are, to resort to violence in order to take control of the ship:

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

- 26 The Allmuseri have slain a good number of the crew, and they have split into rival factions—one led by the charismatic and magnanimous Ngonyama, and the other by the impulsive and mean-spirited Diamelo. The clash of the very traditional and endogenous Allmuseri world with a world of chaos where one has to vie for power and domination reveals imperceptible cracks underneath the veneer of harmony that coats Allmuseri society.
- 27 The general tone of the story suggests that most readers must have imputed the dramatic transformation of the Allmuseri to some sort of Western contamination, which is most likely the response Johnson wanted to elicit. But Johnson has also left room for circumspection: when Calhoun spins his yarn, time has passed and he has had time to reflect on what happened on the slave ship the *Republic*. Thus, Calhoun speaks in retrospect and judges Ngonyama’s early description of his tribe’s glorious past with distance and a tinge of skepticism. Like the rest of the crew, Calhoun is fascinated with Allmuseri mythology but a posteriori, he is also able to voice reservations when he tells the reader that Ngonyama, “unfolded before me like a merchant’s cloth his tribe’s official history, the story of themselves they stuck by” (76). Like any other community, Calhoun implies, the Allmuseri have fashioned their own version of the past and even if Calhoun, like his shipmates, must wait for the successful Allmuseri insurrection to fully come round and accept that the “ageless culture” he “wanted to be his own” (78) is as iniquitous as any other, he has clearly dismissed such beliefs as those Rushdy takes for granted throughout his essay: “The Allmuseri [...] are a tribe who have developed their own concepts of history, identity, the performance of doubles, nonlinear and nonbinary modes of mentation, and their own theory of subjective and intersubjective being” (377). Despite Johnson’s efforts to depict the Allmuseri as a unique people, the latter part of this essay shows that the Allmuseri do not constitute a civilization apart from other civilizations, and that their model of a homogeneous society free of discordance is more conceptual than factual, and more coercive than liberating.
- 28 Once Diamelo has put most survivors on the ship under his yoke, Ngonyama confides to Calhoun that the reality of Allmuseri everyday life is a far cry from what he had been telling him so far. The Allmuseri legal system is rudimentary and expeditious, and theirs is a class-based society. “You know,” Ngonyama tells Calhoun, “in our village I was a poor man, like you, but [Diamelo’s] father was well-to-do [and] Diamelo is used to getting his way” (137). Thus, Diamelo’s influence over his people is not the result of

charisma but inherited social status. Ngonyama tells Calhoun that before they were captured, "Diamelo had been a soger who drank palm wine and drifted indifferently from one occupation to another" (154). He had been "the village wastrel" Ngonyama continues, "the bully who proved himself on smaller boys [...] contemptuous of the doddering elders, [and] impatient with the painstaking years required to master one of the complex Allmuseri crafts" (153-4). Prior to his capture, Diamelo cared little about his culture but he found in his fellow tribesmen's shared hatred of Ebenezer Falcon a catalyst for self-aggrandizement. And what better instrument of power than the very discourse of racial differences with which his former oppressors justified the enslavement of the Allmuseri?

- 29 Diamelo is not alone in resorting to identity politics. On one occasion, as Calhoun fears for his and Cringle's safety in the presence of Babo, Francesco, and Atufal—three of Diamelo's murderous henchmen—Ngonyama himself reassures Calhoun thus: "No one will hurt you here, Rutherford. These men are your brothers" (131). Diamelo, however, is much less sympathetic toward Calhoun than Ngonyama is, and he orders Calhoun to kill Cringle as a token of his allegiance to the Allmuseri. Diamelo's mistrust of Calhoun is legitimate to the extent that Calhoun, as a crewmate, is complicit in all the cruelty inflicted on the cargo; but Diamelo's resentment towards Calhoun has deeper roots. For Diamelo, Calhoun is simply not African enough. He calls Calhoun a "Cooked Barbarian" (153) on account of both his American identity and lighter complexion. Diamelo may be seen as a forerunner of "the late sixties' Black Power movement and contemporary beliefs in Afrocentrism" (Little 148), but this is still an understatement for Diamelo's rhetoric of racial purity leads him to impose a very rigid program of acculturation: "Only Allmuseri [is] to be spoken by the crew when in contact with the newly empowered bondmen" (154); furthermore, the crew is not allowed to sing in English while working; they must also learn Allmuseri stories, "nurture [the Allmuseri] god" (155), use Allmuseri medicine, and "lower their eyes" (155) in respect when in the presence of Allmuseri people. Finally, Diamelo has become so obsessive about race that he "never spoke to the Americans except through a third person" (153) and "continued to wash himself in salt water whenever Cringle's shadow fell upon him" (155).
- 30 Diamelo's discrimination policies anticipate, albeit in reverse, the rules of European colonizers in Africa and the theories of racial purity and hygiene developed by Arthur de Gobineau at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ By reversing discrimination, however, Diamelo and his followers appropriated a power only their god could grant them through a session of outpicturing. Indeed, Falcon had once explained to Calhoun that the Allmuseri god could create "alternate universes, parallel worlds and counterhistories" (100); but this turning of the social order upside down remained confined to a ritual and may be understood as yet another step toward tolerance and wisdom. Experiencing counter-history under the spell of the Allmuseri god may teach humility and boost one's karma, but experiencing counter-history in reality on a slave ship bound for the New World unleashes feelings and behaviors that are much less glorious. Such a role reversal is also the stuff of the folktales of yore in which the poor suddenly became the wealthy—a relief mechanism whereby those who had nothing could, if only in their imagination, fill the shoes of those who ruled them. In this perspective, counter-histories suggest that Allmuseri are as subject to division and dualism as Westerners are, for what would be the purpose of such a mechanism if there were no injustice or no need to ever right a wrong in the world of the Allmuseri?

- 31 The novel does not elaborate on the role counter-histories play in Allmuseri culture, but going back to Michel Foucault's original concept, the advent of counter-history marks the end of a historical discourse whose function was "to speak the right of power and to intensify the luster of power" (2003, 66). According to Foucault, history before the sixteenth century was very linear and served to reinforce sovereignty by binding the history of the nation and its subjects to the history of the monarch. The new discourse, from the sixteenth century on, disrupted such a pattern by revealing the protean nature of history and establishing that "one man's victory is another man's defeat" (2003, 69). Foucault argues that the unifying function of history was thus replaced by a principle of heterogeneity—a principle that would be in contradiction with the principle of homogeneity typifying Allmuseri society. When Calhoun remarks, prior to the insurrection, that "the Allmuseri seemed less a biological tribe than a clan held together by values" (109), he is too much in awe to realize that he is trying to actualize the American motto of his age, *E Pluribus Unum* (Out of many, one), through Allmuseri society, which seems to have evolved beyond a race-based identity and rallied under a set of unifying values applicable to all members of society irrespective of biological differences.¹⁸ But Calhoun has overlooked a detail: the homogeneity of the Allmuseri tribe extends to physical sameness. By virtue of their geographical isolation and absence of biological diversity, the Allmuseri could have never developed their own brand of scientific racism, which is based on difference and alterity. It does not mean, however, that Allmuseri people never feel the need to discriminate, if only among themselves, as the foregoing difference of social status between Diamelo and Ngonyama shows. And this is what Calhoun finds out, for the much-admired Allmuseri society, like any other society, is riddled by dissensions that only a series of communal rules and values manage to keep in check.
- 32 Counter-history, in the words of a Foucault scholar, "blocks the unifying function of the official history by bringing to the fore the oppositions and divisions in the political body" (Médina, 2011, 14). The conflict that has arisen between the partisans of Diamelo on the one hand and those of Ngonyama on the other is evidence that the legendary harmony of the Allmuseri before their deportation was precarious at best. It is hard to query a culture that has instituted a monthly "Day of Renunciation," a day of rejoicing on the occasion of which one "[gives] up a deep-rooted, selfish desire" (180). The Day of Renunciation is a striking example of the tribe's self-fashioned narrative of communality, and it constitutes a distant echo of the system of taxation found in any welfare state and democracy worthy of the name. However, the Day of Renunciation can also be seen as a means of control whereby each and every citizen is bound to do what others do, thus forcing rather than promoting consensus and solidarity. In Foucauldian terms, the Day of Renunciation could be called a heterotopia.
- 33 In "Different Spaces," the only text in which Foucault expands on the concept of heterotopia, Foucault defines heterotopias as,
- real places, actual places, places that are designed into the very institution of society, which are sorts of actually realized utopias in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within the culture are, at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed, sorts of places that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable. (178)
- 34 While heterotopia is most often understood as a physical space (prisons, schools, gardens), it can also refer to a non-physical space or, in the words of Foucault, "temporal discontinuities" (182). In the fourth principle of his "heterotopology" (179),

Foucault describes what he calls “heterochronia,” a phenomenon in which “the heterotopia begins to function fully when men are in a kind of absolute break with their traditional time” (182). Foucault gives museums and libraries as examples of “heterotopias of time that accumulates indefinitely” (182); but he also talks of heterotopias “that are linked [...] to time in its most futile, most transitory and precarious aspect, and in the form of the festival” (182). These heterotopias, Foucault argues, are “absolutely chronic” (182), and Foucault illustrates his point with fairs, “those marvelous empty emplacements on the outskirts of cities that fill up once or twice a year with booths, stalls, unusual objects, wrestlers, snakes ladies, fortune tellers” (182-3).

- 35 Foucault’s words find an echo in Calhoun’s description of the Day of Renunciation in *Middle Passage*. Indeed, Calhoun describes the Day of Renunciation as a “day a celebration, a festive holiday [...] colorful with dancing and music and clowning magicians everywhere” (180). Yet, the Day of Renunciation should not be construed merely as a fair, let alone a carnival in the sense Mikhail Bakhtin gives this notion.¹⁹ While the Day of Renunciation is akin to an annual jubilee on the occasion of which the Allmuseri celebrate their culture, it is not a moment of license and excesses on the occasion of which political and social hierarchies are inverted so as to make real the utopian longings of the populace. On the contrary, the Day of Renunciation is normative rather than transgressive. It is a ritual that is intrinsic to Allmuseri life and as such, it is a heterotopia. Heterotopias play a preponderant role in the formation of social identity even though the citizens are unaware of them. The Day of Renunciation is never questioned; yet, it is a ritual all Allmuseri tribesmen are expected to participate in and as such, it is an instrument of discipline. Furthermore, the Day of Renunciation seems to play simultaneously the two distinct roles Foucault ascribes to heterotopias. The first role of heterotopias, Foucault argues, is to create “a space of illusion that denounces all real space, all real emplacements within which human life is partitioned, as being even more illusory” (184). Whether deliberately or not, the Day of Renunciation, with its demands for penance and charity, implies a lack of fairness and equality in the seemingly ideal world of the Allmuseri. The Day of Renunciation can also be perceived as a heterotopia of compensation, i.e., a heterotopia whose role is to create “a different space, a different real space as perfect, as meticulous, as well-arranged as ours is disorganized, badly arranged, and muddled” (184). The Day of Renunciation, like any other festival, aims to promote social harmony and sends back both to the community and outsiders a perfected version of that community, a tale of equality and generosity which the destitute crew of the Republic has eagerly bought into.

Conclusion

- 36 In order to understand *Middle Passage*, it is important to separate the point of view of the crew aboard the Republic from that of Charles Johnson. While Johnson has made clear he conceived of the Allmuseri as an ideal tribe meant to be the obverse of Falcon and his western world, he has also left enough clues in the text for the reader to put things into perspective and question the predictable paradigm “sinful West vs. virtuous Orient.” And by doing so, Johnson guards himself against the Falcon syndrome that makes conflict and duality immanent to human experience. The ship, in Calhoun’s own

words, is “a wooden sepulcher whose timbers moaned with the memory of too many runs of black gold between the New World and the Old” (21) but in the opinion of Falcon, it is “a commonwealth” (175). Falcon’s word choice, however unfortunate and cynical, may be understood as a case of semantic sedimentation since “commonwealth” may stand for “republic,” a term referring altogether to the ship and the young United States, while also be associated, in Falcon’s mind, with the Commonwealth of Virginia, place of residence of the Falcon family and home to the House of Burgesses, the first elected assembly in North America. Like early Virginia and its plantation economy, the Republic and its strict social organization hardly constitute a democracy; yet, the ship is a microcosm where individuals, as much as they resent one another, live together and influence one another, thus foreshadowing the tumultuous early decades of the Young Republic and its pluralistic society. This idea of mutual influence and cross-cultural fertilization is central to Johnson’s project: “I suggest on this ship that these characters interpenetrate and change and transform each other. On the ship the people who survive [...] are the ones who are capable of change” (qtd. in Conner 68). The Allmuseri, trapped in their isolated and monolithic world, are not prepared for change. Their society is based on a consensus imposed from above rather than achieved by the people at the bottom. Not surprisingly, when the Allmuseri find themselves, as Calhoun observes, “leagues from home—indeed without a home” (124) and must confront an entirely unfamiliar situation, they idealize their own community and endeavor to create a fantasized version of what their world is really like. As shown earlier, such communities are “heterotopias of compensation,” and when Foucault wants to illustrate his point, he gives as an example, “the Puritan societies which the English founded in America” (184). Thus, just as the Puritans tried to create a community that would be the perfect embodiment of their religious beliefs, Diamelo creates an Allmuseri order based on racial and cultural purity. The well-meaning Puritan project soon devolved into intolerance and violence toward non-Puritans and grew into a system in which the Falcons of the world flourished. It is not difficult to imagine where Diamelo’s “purified” society would lead. From that angle, the two political models to which Calhoun is exposed on the slaver the Republic are not so far apart. Although Calhoun’s decision, at the end of the novel, to return to the United States, get married and lead the conventional and uneventful life of a family man may seem rather lackluster and uncommitted, it can also be interpreted as a deliberate rejection of the two political models to which he has been exposed on the slaver the Republic.

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NOTES

1. Webster's words are paraphrased a few decades later in Abraham Lincoln's 1863 Gettysburg Address. Honoring the soldiers who died at the battle of Gettysburg, Lincoln exalts the Union and concludes his speech thus: "we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth" (qtd. in Basler 21) (emphasis added).
2. Admittedly, the term manifest destiny was coined in the summer of 1845 by John L. O'Sullivan, the editor for the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. In "Annexation," an article championing the integration of the young Republic of Texas into the Union, O'Sullivan wrote that it was the "manifest destiny of the United States to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions" (qtd. in Stephanson xi). And O'Sullivan used that same term again on 27 December 1845 in an editorial for the *New York Morning News*. On that occasion, O'Sullivan supported the United States' claim to the Oregon country and that claim, he argued, "is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us" (qtd. in Horsman 220). Thus manifest destiny is associated with the presidential terms of John Tyler (1841-1845) and James Knox Polk (1845-1849) during which Texas, the Oregon country, California and other territories relinquished by Mexico were integrated in the Union, thus completing the continental United States as we know it today.
3. The treaty of Paris (1783) marked the end of the American Revolution and made official the acquisition by the United States of all British territories south of Canada and east of the Mississippi River. Twenty years later, President Thomas Jefferson doubled the size of the nation with the Louisiana Purchase (1803). In 1819, Spain ceded Florida to the United States, and the Monroe doctrine prohibiting European interference on the American continent was set up in

1823. At the time of the story, while Falcon is crossing the Atlantic to bring back slaves for the plantations of the South, President Andrew Jackson signs the Indian Removal Act (1830) that will force the Five Civilized Tribes (Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, and Seminoles) to move west of the Mississippi River.

4. The “city upon a hill” metaphor is from “A Modell of Christian Charity,” a sermon delivered aboard the ship *Arabella* in 1630 by John Winthrop, a Puritan leader and one of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay colony. With this image, Winthrop exhorted his flock to build an ideal society that would be looked upon across the world as a model to emulate: “For wee must consider that wee shall be as a citty upon a hill. The eies of all people are uppon us. Soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our God in this worke wee haue undertaken, and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world” (Winthrop 47).

5. The Embargo Act of 1807 was Thomas Jefferson’s punitive measure against France and England’s interference with American trade. The embargo “forbade all international trade to and from American ports, and Jefferson hoped that Britain and France would be persuaded of the value and the rights of a neutral commerce” (See “Embargo Act of 1807”). Instead of the expected effect on the two European powers, the measure stifled American trade, depriving merchants, sea captains, and sailors of a job. The embargo was a failure and it is easy to see why Falcon, a warmongering seaman, would resent Jefferson’s weak and misguided response to the Europeans’ hawkish posture.

6. Aaron Burr is also known for killing his political rival Alexander Hamilton in a duel during his Vice-Presidency under Jefferson. The parallel with Falcon is all the more appropriate that Burr’s attempt to create an empire for himself may be interpreted as the desperate gesture of a man who had lost all political credibility and support as well as financial resources.

7. The Puritan leaders saw the Massachusetts Bay Colony as “a commonwealth owing allegiance to no higher political authority than its charter” (Lucas 90)—meaning that Massachusetts was a commonwealth under God rather than a colony bound hand and foot to the Crown of England and its Anglican church. Regarding the “commonwealth faction” of the Massachusetts Bay at the time of the Restoration when Charles II reclaimed the crown of England after the Interregnum of Oliver Cromwell (1649-60), Paul Lucas writes that many in the Massachusetts Bay colony supported the idea that “the colony’s charter was a compact between King and colonists in which the King granted autonomous self-government in return for an annual payment of one fifth of all gold and silver discovered by the inhabitants” (Lucas 90).

8. In 1636 John Cotton, for instance, stated: “Democracy, I do not conceyve that ever God did ordeyne as a fitt government eyther for church or commonwealth” (qtd. in Sargent 245). And in 1648, John Winthrop discussed the government and the concept of true liberty in the following terms: “This liberty is maintained and exercised in a way of subjection to authority; it is of the same kind of liberty wherewith Christ has made us free” (qtd. in Kaufmann 22).

9. Seth Lobis, in an entry for the online journal *In Character*, writes: “The *Oxford English Dictionary* credits not Emerson but John Stuart Mill with the first use of ‘self-reliance,’ which appears in a letter dated 25 November 1833 that Mill wrote to Thomas Carlyle.” Arguably, this would still put Falcon ahead of Mill, which reveals yet another anachronism in *Middle Passage*.

10. In addition to the two-decade-long War in Afghanistan (2001-2014), one of the most recent displays of American military might is, of course, the controversial invasion of Iraq launched by the George W. Bush administration in March 2003 as part of the War on Terror. In the two or three years preceding the release of Johnson’s *Middle Passage*, the United States of America, under the presidencies of Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) and George H. W. Bush (1989-1993), had been involved in the Iran-Iraq War (1987-1988), orchestrated the invasion of Panama (1989), and led an international coalition in Operation Desert Storm against Iraq for its invasion of Kuwait (1990).

11. Significantly, Reagan used the phrase for the first time on the occasion of a speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida on March 8, 1983. Worried that Congress would help ban the deployment of U.S. cruise and Pershing II Missiles in Europe, Reagan warned his countrymen: "I urge you to speak out against those who would place the United States in a position of military and moral inferiority. You know, I've always believed that old Screwtape reserved his best efforts for those of you in the church. So, in your discussions of the nuclear freeze proposals, I urge you to beware the temptation of pride—the temptation of blithely declaring yourselves above it all and label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an *evil empire*, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from *the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil*" (qtd. in Arnold 347).

12. President Reagan made his views about the role of the United States in the world clear in his State of the Union Address on February 6, 1985: "Our progress began not in Washington, DC but in the hearts of our families, communities, workplaces, and voluntary groups which, together, are unleashing the invincible spirit of *one great nation under God* [...] And tonight, we declare anew to our fellow citizens of the world: *Freedom is not the sole prerogative of a chosen few; it is the universal right of all God's children*" (qtd. in Colucci 649) (emphasis added).

13. Ronald Reagan's amalgamation of capitalism and freedom appears clearly in his Farewell Address on January 11, 1989: "The past few days when I've been at that window upstairs, I've thought a bit of the 'shining city upon a hill.' The phrase comes from John Winthrop, who wrote it to describe the America he imagined. What he imagined was important because he was an *early Pilgrim, an early freedom man*. He journeyed here on what today we'd call a little wooden boat; and like the other Pilgrims, he was looking for a home that would be free. I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, *God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace, a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity*, and if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it and see it still" (qtd. in Gleaves 459-460) (emphasis added).

14. In "Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* as Historiographic Metafiction," Barbara Z. Thaden argues: "Johnson has inscribed into the Allmuseri mindset many classical Buddhist beliefs, such as the belief that even though we are inherently inclined to divide our entire experience into two parts, what we do and what happens to us, this belief is the greatest illusion. Buddhists hold that what happens to us is our 'karma,' and 'karma' is a Sanskrit word which means 'doing.' Therefore, according to the doctrine of the Buddha, what happens to us, as well as what we do, is fundamentally our doing" (761).

15. Calhoun's farcical tone aside, the definition he gives of his shipmates is rather close to reality: historically, slave ship crew were recruited among the lumpenproletariat of slave ports. Their prospects were scant and their mortality rate at sea often as high as that of their human cargo. Comparing crews' and cargoes' death rates on slavers isn't is not new since it had already been "made familiar by Thomas Clarkson in his first major attack on the slave trade" (Klein et al. 99). In his introduction to *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (2007), Marcus Rediker argues that, "for sailors in the slave trade, rations were poor, wages were usually low, and the mortality rate was high—as high as that of the enslaved" (7). In "New Evidence on the Causes of Slave and Crew Mortality in the Atlantic Slave Trade," Richard Steckel and Richard Jensen show that mortality on slavers was contingent on a great number of criteria, and overall their minute study confirms Rediker's opinion.

16. Asked in an interview for *Callaloo* about the traditions that have influenced him, Johnson replies: "Well, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism have always been very attractive to me. I've studied those religions since my late teens, and they permeate my short fiction and novels" (qtd.

in Rowell 545). As for the Allmuseri, Johnson explains in the same interview that his “guiding principle was to make them the most spiritual tribe in the world, a whole tribe of Mother Theresas and Gandhis” (qtd. in Rowell 545). The Allmuseri philosophy is also reminiscent of the counterculture of the 1960s, which embraced Buddhism and other nonwestern religious traditions as a response to Western traditions and values.

17. In *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853–1855), Count Arthur de Gobineau devised a racial ladder at the bottom of which he put “the negroid variety” (205) and at the top the Aryan family. The essay was particularly influential in that Gobineau posited a connection between race and civilizational achievement, which inspired subsequent generations of white supremacists from proslavery advocates to Nazi ideologues. In *Middle Passage*, the creation of the very superior Allmuseri tribe can be read as Johnson’s way of toying with Gobineau’s dangerous theories.

18. This argument echoes that of Richard Hardack who, in “Black Skin, White Tissues,” uses the concept of the unity of Being to discuss issues of racial identity and the riddance thereof arguing, especially, that “for Johnson, the transcendence of particularity or relativism is equivalent to the transcendence of race itself” (1029).

19. In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin writes: “As opposed to the official feast, one might say that the carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed” (10).

ABSTRACTS

Set on a slave ship in 1830, Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage* opposes the political model of Captain Ebenezer Falcon, who incarnates the conquering spirit and ruthless mercantile culture of the United States, to the political model of the Allmuseri, an African tribe of which forty members are shackled in the hold. Presented as pacifist and egalitarian, the Allmuseri will prove as bellicose and self-serving as their oppressors once in control of the ship. This essay demonstrates that both political models are in fact similar in nature as they have Utopian foundations whose ideals their proponents could never live up to and yet still claim to live for.

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