An Interview with Charles Johnson

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an interview with

CHARLES JOHNSON

Conducted by Jonathan Little

Like his narrator in *Middle Passage* (1990), Charles Johnson charts a course through the vexed and volatile issues of multiculturalism and racial politics in America. The rush of publicity Johnson received after his best-selling novel *Middle Passage* won the National Book Award in 1990 drew attention to his versatile and prolific career as a cartoonist, novelist, short story writer, essayist, and screenwriter. Whatever the medium, Johnson continues to address the charged philosophical questions surrounding cultural and individual racial identity.

Johnson began his artistic career with two collections of political cartoons lampooning American race relations, *Black Humor* (1970) and *Half-Past Nation-Time* (1972). His interests then turned to writing. After completing six unpublished novels, Johnson published *Faith and the Good Thing* (1974). The novel reflects his primary interest in blending philosophy and fiction as he depicts Faith's search for the truth or the meaning of life, the "Good Thing." His next two novels, *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and *Middle Passage*, both set in the nineteenth century, also show African-American characters struggling to define themselves as they search for spiritual and metaphysical happiness in the face of difficult odds.

Johnson explains the link between philosophy and fiction in *Being and Race* (1988), his phenomenological study of African-American writing since 1970. In it he argues for the need for "aesthetically venturesome" and "wickedly diverse" philosophical African-American fiction that is not tied to any single genre or motivated by any single ideological or political agenda. Johnson's collection of short stories,

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Jerry Bauer

CHARLES JOHNSON

The Sorcerer's Apprentice (1986), illuminates his range as he experiments with realism, allegory, fable, fantasy, and science fiction. His novel in progress concerns Martin Luther King, Jr., whose ability to draw from many different spiritual and cultural traditions has impressed and influenced Johnson.

Johnson's publishing career has coincided with an equally prolific career in television and film screenwriting. His credits include *Charlie Smith and the Fritter Tree* (1978), a dramatization of the life of a 135-year-old African-American for the PBS Vision series, and *Booker* (1988), a program about the childhood of Booker T. Washington for the Walt Disney channel. He has recently completed a screenplay adaptation of *Middle Passage* for Tri-Star Productions.

Johnson was an energetic and engaging host during my stay from July 31 to August 3, 1992, in Seattle, where he teaches creative writing at the University of Washington. He showed me around the city he calls "the social correlate of my soul," with its African-American mayor and harmonious mixture of Asian, African-American, white, Native American, and Latino-American populations. It seemed strikingly appropriate to Johnson's eclecticism that during our wanderings we toured an amphibious assault Navy vessel, a downtown bookstore where he has given several readings, a local artist's backyard studio, and, at Johnson's home, which was being remodeled, the boarded-up entrance to his home gym; he has for eleven years practiced Chinese *choy li fut kung fu*, and he now teaches it in a neighborhood center. As we walked, I had the uncanny feeling that I was momentarily participating in one of Johnson's fluidly polymorphic and international fictions.

Q. In all your novels it seems that your central characters are questing after some kind of enlightenment and that during this process they have to work through a variety of options embodied in other characters in the novel. Is this an accurate interpretation of the structure of your novels?

A. In each one of the novels there is a progression from ignorance to knowledge, or from a lack of understanding to some greater understanding. Certainly that's true of *Faith and the Good Thing*. I know it's true of *Middle Passage*. The last chapter is "Moksha" in *Oxherding*

Tale, meaning "enlightenment" or "liberation." Yes, you're right. That is the structure of the books, probably the short stories too. There's usually a moment of awareness, an epiphany if you like, a place where the character is smashed into a larger vision under the pressure of events. Usually he goes through a lot of positions that other people hold, which are partial. It seems kind of Hegelian in that way. Not that the final position synthesizes all of them, but that the character goes through several moments.

Q. What happens to individual identity during the process of development your main characters go through?

A. I think it dissolves. "What is individual identity?" is a central question for me. I personally don't believe in the existence of the ego. I think it's a theoretical construct. There's no empirical verification for it at all. And if there is such a thing as identity, I don't think that it's fixed or static; it's a process. I think it's dominated by change and transformation, more so than by any static qualities. It is many identities over the course of a lifetime. That identity, if it is anything at all, is several things, a tissue of very often contradictory things, which is why I probably have a great deal of opposition to anything that looks like a fixed meaning for black America. I just don't believe it. It's ridiculous as a thought.

Q. Is this process of development similar to Ralph Ellison's statement, "Thus because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it"?

A. That's a nice quote. I'm not sure what it means, but I'm certainly willing to give credit to Ellison for anything. It's very interesting to me where we get the notion of the self. Hume, with his radically empirical approach, looks into his experience to see if there's anything that corresponds to the idea of a self. What he finds are memories, impressions, sensations, but no self. For Hume the self is inferred as a thing that holds all of this together. It's much the same in Buddhism, where the self is an illusion. In Buddhism all you have is this flow of impressions and sensations. The self is one of those objects we talk about without having fully examined it. For me, if

there's any way to talk about it, it's as a verb and not a noun. It's a process but not a product, and never is a product, unless it's dead, and then there's no more possibility for action and change. Once dead, it becomes somewhat like Whitehead's idea of the eternal object.

Q. So at the end of *Middle Passage,* Rutherford becomes a model for these ideas?

A. Andrew Hawkins's identity in *Oxherding Tale* is that of a free-floating creative force. That's true as well for Rutherford. What he's done is prehended or taken so much from all the people who are already on that ship, from the Allmuseri to the various members of the ship—but he's done that his entire life. That sort of tissue of world experience is what he is. He's become much more humble in terms of making assumptions about objects and others. He's more willing to listen and wait for them to speak, which is a very phenomenological position in the world. It's very simple. It's not a difficult idea.

Q. His identity, though, I would say, isn't lost; rather, there's an accretion.

A. It's cumulative, if you like. It's Whitmanesque in a particular sense. I'd like to talk about it in the same sense that Toomer does in the poem "Blue Meridian." Let's be more specific. When you say "his identity," what do you mean?

Q. Maybe I'm looking at calcified perceptions of identity, but I was thinking in terms of his development as a character. Does he lose himself, as Ellison would say, in the process of finding himself?

A. I like that formulation, yeah. There's a line by Husserl that's really very nice: "I lose myself in the objects and the others." Yes. I do think that's what it is. What he finds is not a fixed notion of the self. It's something that's very expansive. You've seen, for example, the Necker's cube? When I show it to my students, they always see the initial kinds of variations, tilting left, tilting right. We write them down, and we do this for about half an hour. Then someone begins to see things that nobody else did in the room. The others don't see

them until that person has narrated and described it—"I see a . . ." Everybody else is looking and straining, then, "Oh yes! I see that now too."

We go through this, and we get maybe thirty possible disclosures of that one simple object in class, each based upon everybody's different backgrounds—where they're coming from and where they were born, how they grew up, the kind of mother they had, the father they had, the objects they looked at. All of that's brought to disclosing the object. But somebody will say, "I see a paper bag," and nobody else is able to see it. Only if that person describes it will the other people see it. So at one point, what is entirely subjective becomes intersubjective. We share an image. When we go down the line, looking at profiles of the Necker's cube, you can never really get two of those images at once.

One of the things that's interesting is that people are sure in the beginning when they first look at it. "Oh, it's got to be this, it's got to be that," they say. Then they become more humble as they get to the thirteenth profile, the fifteenth profile, the twentieth profile, and then if somebody new comes in the room there may be yet another disclosure of the object. If you said "What is it?" which is the final question I ask them, they know they can't answer that question, because it's a box leaning left, *hyphen* a box leaning right, *hyphen* a box leaning up, *hyphen* a box leaning forward; it's *hyphen* a fish tank, *hyphen* a paper bag, *hyphen* a stage, *hyphen* looking down at a pyramid. Its being is a hyphenated being, always open-ended. It is all of those perceptions, but only one of them can exist at a time before consciousness. Using Husserl's idea of consciousness, we must say that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something.

In much the same way, that is how I talk about every phenomenal object. Things are given to us in profiles. Sides, angles, but not the entire thing. We have to walk around, for example, that wall. That's given to us there. But empirically, we have no sense at all that there's a room on the other side. This all could be like a Hollywood movie set. Until you walk around and see the other side and confirm or refute that, you just don't know. That is much like where we find Andrew Hawkins and certainly Rutherford Calhoun at the ends of *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage*. There have been so many profiles disclosed and revealed for the meaning of the world that one has a

very humble attitude about making existential claims about it. You know that even if you've exhausted all the possible meanings at this moment, the next generation, given its experience and what it brings to that object's revelation, will find something new. Being is historical. I'm in agreement with what Merleau-Ponty says of perceptual experience, that the more revelations and disclosures and profiles you get for the object, the more ambiguous it's going to become, the more hazy. That's what interests me. The easiest images to get are the first two or three. Box left, box right, box forward, box back.

When I think about how we write it seems we always go with the first two or three perceptions. We don't go with the fifth or the fortieth, because you have to dig to get to those. You have to force the imagination. You have to go to the trouble of confirming with somebody else, "Did you see that?" Of course, all science begins that way too, with a first person seeing—the scientist looking into the microscope. It's one person, one consciousness and this object. He has to say to a colleague, "Come here, look at this, do you see that?" Then you have intersubjectivity. If you have three people, it's even better. That's what I believe in far more than objectivity. Intersubjectivity is shared meaning, a shared vision.

But the problem with our writing is that we reach for the first one or two meanings. The reason we don't dig deeper is because the resistance is so great. In other words, you may have to free up all your presuppositions, all the prejudices, all of your background to be able to get to the thirtieth or fortieth profile or disclosure of the object. Usually, I think that happens in the social context. Somebody else on the other side of the room coming from another part of the world, or world experience, will through language, as Heidegger says, allow this object to be disclosed for somebody else. If you do it by yourself you have to fight against all the presuppositions and prejudices. I think that's what fiction ought to be about. It ought to be about getting beneath those sedimented meanings, all the calcified, rigid perceptions of the object.

For the average person, doing this, letting meaning flower in this way, can be frustrating. It doesn't allow them to *use* the object as they'd like to. For utilitarian reasons, they say, "That's a Necker's cube leaning left, or a Necker's cube leaning right." But that's not good enough for the artist or the philosopher. I think we have to

bracket the whole idea of utility if any object—or the world—is going to disclose whatever meaning it has. I think the same thing is true of racial phenomena. Very often we only deal with surface images, the most easily graspable meaning, which is usually the meaning we've inherited, or somebody else's vision, now our own. For the sake of progress, we have to go much, much deeper. Metaphor allows us to do that.

Q. You seem heavily postmodern in your emphasis on parody and intertextuality. There's a sense of creative theft or borrowing in your works, Rutherford perhaps being the best example of this, as he "trespasses" on other identities and becomes interpenetrated by them.

A. What do you mean by "borrowing"?

Q. In terms of the structure—Homer's *Odyssey,* for example. You not only borrow structural elements but historical detail from sea narratives, slave narratives. You obviously spent a lot of time doing research for *Middle Passage.*

A. I did in fact. Let me see if I can make sense of that in terms of where we just were in our discussion. What I didn't have when I got to *Middle Passage* was knowledge of the sea, so I spent six years reading every book and rereading every book I could on that subject, anything relating to sea adventure. I read Homer, Apollonius of Rhodes, the Sinbad stories, slave narratives, Gustavus Vasa, and some material that was sent to me from Werner Sollors at Harvard. I looked at all of Melville again, Conrad. You name it, anything I could.

Why do that? Well, for two reasons. One is very writerly. I needed to know the parts of ships; I needed to know what that whole universe was like. But I needed to know the literary universe of the sea as well. What I needed to know were the profiles, again, the disclosures, the meanings that other writers for two thousand years have had for this particular phenomenon, the sea. I needed, in so many words, to look at that Necker's cube and see the phenomena of the sea disclosed over and over again. If one looks, and this is a simple matter, I guess, at any author who's written about the sea, whoever it is, the sea means something quite specific in the way that it is disclosed and experienced.

But why, why did I do that? Is that borrowing, is that stealing, is that intertextuality? I think it's something else. I think it's the fact that all knowledge, all disclosure, all revelation from the past, from our predecessors, black, white, and otherwise, is our inheritance, and most of the time we just don't know it. Seriously, we just don't know it. That's why we do research. Any sense that other human beings have made out of the world, any sense that they have pulled out of this universe of non-sense as Merleau-Ponty would say, any judgments—all that is what we have inherited as human beings. And in a way, that's how I have to write. I have to know that. We are perpetually indebted to our predecessors for that. It's not something I can ignore or something I can abandon. I may come upon a disclosure of the object that's different from anything that's come before, but I think it's predicated on all that came before. In the same way, I don't think you can get the Einsteinian universe without first the Newtonian universe. It's all a long conversation, and the writer does not come into this discussion *ex nihilo,* born with nothing behind him.

Does that make sense in terms of how *Middle Passage* came together, and why research? It isn't just to do a historical novel. It's not that. It's to understand what others have brought to the rendering and disclosure of the subject. You could call it borrowing, I suppose. My intention is somewhat different, a very synthetic technique.

Q. I think you install the reference, but you also subvert it, or you do something new with it.

A. Yes, if I'm doing it, it's again much as we discussed that Necker's cube. I'm trying to say, "Yes, the sea is this, as so and so said, yes, the sea is that, as so and so said, but it's also *this.*" It keeps opening up, I hope, as we progress through the book. The same thing happens with the major characters. We're seeing sides of them disclosed in dramatic situations in the course of the novel as they interact with different people. They learn things about themselves that they could not have known except through these encounters.

Q. In terms of African-American fiction now, where would you come down with Toni Morrison when she seems to rework the Black Aesthetic and the Black Arts Movement? She seems to reject politi-

cal prescriptiveness but at the same time holds on to the aesthetic principles of black art. She identifies them as non-Western and oral.

A. Let me say a few things. I don't want to be unfair to Toni. I understand what the Black Arts Movement was and why it came about. It was very interesting and very exciting. It had a big impact on me when I was a cartoonist. But in *Being and Race,* I try to trace through some of the limitations that are imposed on creative freedom by that particular orientation, and also on intellectual freedom. If we were going through our Necker's cube and all those profiles, we would probably have to stop at a certain point if we had a Black Nationalist orientation or a Black Aesthetic position. That's why I had to move away from it. It just wasn't answering enough questions. It wasn't going deep enough in terms of investigating phenomena. People in the Black Arts Movement do not seem to be widely interested in questions that are crucial to all of us. Our relationship to the environment, for example, our relationship to technology. All the human questions. I do think it's a narrower focus.

Morrison is an extremely talented prose stylist. I happen to think that the earlier books are better than the later ones. *Sula* is a very interesting book. And in *Beloved* she achieves something I would talk about this way: I would say it is the penultimate or final fruit of the Black Arts Movement. It's extremely poetic. You can look and see that for six years she spent time revising and rewriting those lines. And she's very good at that. But on the other hand, I have real problems with the vision that animates that book. Again it has the problems that you find in the Black Arts Movement. I could take you through the book step by step and say why that's so. It's an interesting, middle-brow book. I don't think it's an intellectual achievement, because I'm not sure where the intellectual probing is going on. The last book, *Jazz,* is really—I don't know what to say about it. There are no characters, there's no story, there's no plot, and even the poetry which Morrison is so good at is not there. It just isn't there. I'm not sure why she released that book at all.

We still have to address the Black Arts Movement as an ideology and speak about it in those terms. There are wonderful things that came out of that period, and important things, but I'm not sure it led to very much literature that we would consider to be lasting.

I've got first editions on my shelf of books from that period that I'm sure most people have never heard of. I found them to be interesting when I read them, but, unfortunately, they did not meet the standard that Ralph Ellison set in 1952 with *Invisible Man*, or the standards set by Albert Murray with his remarkable essays in *The Hero and the Blues*.

The question is this: Are there two aesthetics? Is there a white aesthetic and is there a black aesthetic? What constitutes a black aesthetic? The oral tradition? What's that? Take call and response, for instance. Everybody says that. Where is call and response in the novel? This is my question. I know what it is. It occurs in the black church when the minister and the congregation respond back and forth. Sure. As my friend Stanley Crouch points out, you can tell a story orally, but when you get to the novel you have to do things that are particular to the novel as a form for that story to come to life.

There's a lot of easy, simplistic thought that goes on in our discussion of black literature. A certain voice is supposed to represent the oral tradition. Well, there are lots of voices in the black community, lots of voices. Why is one selected over another? We have the voice of Du Bois, we have the voice of Douglass, we have the voice of Harriet Tubman, we have the voice of Malcolm X. Why is one voice chosen to represent the oral tradition? I also get really tired of people saying, well, black people have been telling stories for years and years. *Everybody's* been telling stories for years and years. Some of those are wonderful stories, such as when Julius Lester collected black folktales. They are beautiful, wonderful stories that were told orally and finally set down. But when you compose them on the page in one of the literary traditions that we inherit, you have to do things to those stories to make them effective as literature. Character development, connections, transitions, all kinds of things.

We have a way of talking about these so-called differences between the white and black aesthetic that do not make a great deal of sense. Skip Gates has this idea of signifying as somehow being a part of this. But again, if that's a general aesthetic proposition, then you should be able to go to any black literary work of art and find that it signifies in the way that Skip is talking about. You can't do that. All these works will defy that very simple notion of how you go about it. And the same thing with the oral tradition. I just don't believe it.

I don't believe that there are two aesthetics. It cannot be universally demonstrated for all black literature.

Q. So you would also reject Morrison's idea that literature should be used as a means of African-American empowerment?

A. What does she mean by that? What does that mean? African-American empowerment through literature? How does a book do that? Does a book empower me to vote? I don't get it. How do you interpret that?

Q. It seems to me that she and others feel that you can maintain connection with a heritage, an ethnic identity that might be lost or appropriated by mainstream culture. Writers can use literature as a means of counteracting oppression and historical conditions.

A. That sounds great, but I still don't get it. We need a definition of empowerment. We need a definition of identity. I want a definition of how something is appropriated by something else and what that means.

First of all, as a writer, I don't believe that art imitates. There is a mimetic element, but I really think that what a writer does is create an experience on the pages of the book for the reader. You're creating experience. You're not transcribing experience. If you talk about the African-American past in your work, you're obviously interpreting an experience. Language will distort and transform, as William Gass points out. It's all filtered through a consciousness, and the consciousness obviously of the author.

I think that these claims about black writing are simplistic. I kind of understand the intention behind them, but I don't think they make a great deal of sense. How does *Jazz* counteract oppression and historical conditions? How does any literature do that? There are certain instances and times when books have a huge impact, as with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* during the abolitionist movement. There are direct connections—this led to that in the public sphere—but claims are being made here for literature that have not been demonstrated at all. Is *The Great Gatsby* about empowering white people, is that what that's doing?

Q. Is that necessary? The privileged whites are already being represented. I think Morrison and Alice Walker, for example, are talking about people who have been left out of the tradition, left out of the representation. As writers they are celebrating an identity that had previously been silenced.

A. I think that's what they say they are doing. I think to put it that way, however, is really coded. People who were left out, silenced, marginalized. Yes, I buy that. You can write about people and publish works about individuals who have never had a story told about them before, or who have never been allowed to tell their own story. Of course, it's still Morrison telling the story, it's not that person. It's her imagining that person. Or Clarence Major can do that in his book *Such Was the Season*, where the protagonist is a black woman matriarch in an Atlanta political family. That does bring something new to our literature. It brings a new angle, a new perception, a new character's perspective to our literature. It may bring a different voice to our literature as well.

I'm not sure that American literature hasn't always done that. Bill Gass has an unusual and interesting analysis of character in fiction. He says that what we are dealing with on the page are concepts. And from Gass I have to go to Sartre. Characters are constructs, mental beings, who have more in common with mathematical entities than real people. They are not real people, but nevertheless, it is the act of consciousness that brings them to life during the reading experience, that creates a "fictional dream in the mind," to use a phrase from John Gardner.

These are created objects. We draw and prehend from the world in the creation of any particular art work, and that means you draw things you've heard from other people, their behavior and so forth. But when someone makes the claim that what we've done is empowered a certain class of people by giving a representation of them on the page, I'm not sure what that means. I sort of say, yeah, that seems to be a little bit of what's going on. Ten percent of what you're saying sounds right, but I'm not sure that claim can be made as strongly as some people would like to make it.

Beloved is about a woman who kills her kids. How representative is that of women during the period of slavery? I have no idea. Mor-

rison says that it's based on a real woman. I would have to say that woman is probably, if not psychotic, then someone who needs a lot of help. If black people had done that en masse, we would not be here today. People killing their kids to save them from slavery? Come on, we're still talking the sixties here, and certain very clever, cute ideas that I just don't think were the case. I don't think that the historical record confirms that.

Q. So you don't feel that African-American literature has a social obligation or function?

A. I do, but not that one necessarily. I do think that art should be socially responsible. I do halfway believe most of the time in John Gardner's notion of moral fiction. Where social responsibility comes into play is in the simple fact that whatever the work is, whatever the book is, whatever the product is, it's something that we interject into the public space. It's a public act. It's our human expression, and we are responsible for all our forms of human expression, all our deeds and actions, of which art is one. The artist has a tremendous degree of responsibility. Whether it's the responsibility of promoting or supporting certain political ideas, I really don't know about that. I don't know if that's what art should be about. Somebody can write a book that is a political indictment, but should he or she write every book like that?

I would like for people to look at my books and feel that they are socially responsible. I say that because I try my very best to be fair to every character on one level. I remember when I used to pass drafts of things by John Gardner. I was still young, and I would set a certain character up to say and do things I didn't like, just so I could slap him around, and thereby slap around some people I knew who behaved like that. He would write in the margins of the manuscripts, "Shame on you. Why are you doing this? Why are you presenting this straw man to me? What am I supposed to do with this character, dislike him?" I really had to think about that aspect of John's criticism. I find that the most reprehensible characters, like a Captain Falcon, have to be characters I find enormously interesting, somebody I would like to poke at and get under the skin of and see as many sides of as I possibly can during the course of this fiction.

That character must be subjected to the same kinds of things that everybody else is. Every major character for me is a character of evolution and change. They are not the same at the end of the book as when we first saw them. The ideal novel would be one in which there are no minor characters, where there are no flat characters. Everybody is in this situation of process and change. Everybody is being forced and pressured, as the main characters are, to move forward in their lives, to have their perceptions changed, to react differently in different situations. That would be the ideal novel. What I want is the process novel where everybody mentioned is a main character in the process of evolution. That would be the ultimate moral fiction.

Q. Couldn't you also say that you and Morrison have different political visions?

A. What is her political vision? Can it be stated? We know that Baraka at various times said he was a nationalist, and later he was a scientific socialist, and he explained what that meant. What's Morrison's political vision?

Q. I guess I was speaking more aesthetically, with her ties to the Black Arts Movement.

A. The Black Arts Movement, if you look at it as an ensemble of ideas, is contradictory. What was the Black Arts Movement? You've got to look at Larry Neal, you've got to look at Baraka, you've got to look at John Oliver Killens. Was there a systematic body of beliefs? No, there wasn't. Look at Malcolm X, who had a big impact on my generation. At the end of Malcolm's life, someone asked him what his philosophy was, and he said, "I don't know." He was very honest. This was after his trip to Mecca. No, this was not systematic thought. Not in terms of having empirical evidence for what you're talking about. Not in terms of ethics hooking up in a systematic, intelligible way with epistemology and with ontology. No, it wasn't that. It was a passionate literary movement, in many ways, with a couple of ideas which took different form among different writers. If you talk about the Black Arts Movement, you need to look at just what that was for different sorts of people. Let's take Ishmael Reed.

He says he first began to write in cultural nationalist workshops. When I read Reed's work, I see a particular spin on cultural nationalism. He's said things that are quite different from Baraka and from Larry Neal. You have to ask the question, If he comes out of cultural nationalism, and has some belief in the Black Aesthetic, what is the relationship of that to what Morrison is talking about? Where are the points of similarity and where are the points of difference? I'm sure people are doing extensive work on both of those authors to see the variations. I don't think the Black Arts Movement, as a body of thought, is coherent, consistent, or complete. By complete, I mean taking in as much as possible, taking in all the available profiles of phenomena. It's not philosophy, it's ideology.

I try in *Being and Race* to distinguish between philosophy and ideology. A philosopher is somebody who is perpetually asking questions. One who always goes back to his initial premise and presuppositions and is willing, if necessary, in the face of contrary evidence, to abandon them if he has to and start all over again from scratch. Ideological positions can't do that. They can't afford to do that. That's the problem I have with them. No philosopher can be comfortable with ideology. And I don't think everything is ideology. I don't think that every idea that we have, every ensemble of beliefs, must necessarily be ideology, whether in the scientific sphere or the philosophical sphere. Phenomenology, if I'm not mistaken, does not build up an architecture of propositions but rather goes back to try to eke out an understanding of what we think we already know. You're always standing in an interrogative mode toward the world.

I would like to believe that I could write book after book after book and someone could believe that they had been written by different people. In this book over here, *Faith and the Good Thing*, black folklore has this particular function. But over there, there's none of that in *Middle Passage*. The sea has this particular meaning there, but in the next book the sea might have an entirely different meaning, given the fictive universe that has evolved out of its unique set of characters. Things could absolutely change in terms of the overall experiential effect, from book to book. That's the kind of freedom I would like to see from novel to novel, from story to story.

Q. Let's say you are writing a novel on King and you are showing the inherent benefits of his position. Isn't that an ideological stance?

A. Why?

Q. Because it's imbued with a political application.

A. A political application? You mean I'm promoting King?

Q. You could be.

A. I'm interested in King. I think he's a very complex figure. I actually think we don't know enough about King. What I'm really interested in is the man, the evolution of the individual. I'm interested in a number of other things too, of a political-philosophical nature about the man. The vision of the civil rights movement—specifically integration—as it applies to King is there because that's part of the man. But I have to say of this man, that, when he first encountered racism, he wanted to hate white people. That's part of who he was. I have to have characters in there who represent the Black Nationalist position, because they're part of his world. All of the stuff that was there, as much as possible, I have to have it. I'm not sure that's an ideological position.

Someone will say, "Well, why did you write about this guy rather than Malcolm X?" I think we have a whole lot of popular material about Malcolm X, and very little on Martin. People don't really understand King, other than a couple of clichéd ideas about him, phrases and sound bytes. But I want to understand what his life was like after he led the Montgomery bus boycott at age twenty-six. I want to know that evolution, that history, up to his assassination. I want to know what a human being has to do to rise to that level of public service. He received fifty death threats. That's what interests me.

Why not Malcolm X? Other people have taken from Malcolm a number of things that they find interesting about him that aren't even true of the man. Even his daughter says that they don't take the whole man, and they've used him for political purposes that even Malcolm probably wouldn't agree with. Malcolm's just too much with us, and King not enough these days. I want people to see

King in all his particularity and texture. I want to know how he shaved when he got up in the morning. He used a depilatory powder because he had very sensitive skin. The stuff stinks, I know exactly what it is. I want to know how much sugar he put in his coffee. That's what interests me.

If I did Malcolm, I'd do one different from the cliché. It would be about this unusual individual who goes from being a hustler to prison to the Nation of Islam to a break with the Nation of Islam, and a bloody public break at that. Nobody talks about the animosity between him and Elijah Muhammad's people. People forget that. And it almost spelled the end of the Nation of Islam. Things got very shaky. I'd go after what Malcolm's broader vision of Islam was about. It wouldn't be a couple of phrases or statements from Malcolm X. It would be his life in evolution, with all kinds of ideas and contradictions. As when he first joins the Nation of Islam, and he says, since he has a Jewish friend, "Do I have to hate Himey too?" This is a life in process. It isn't just one thing. That is the way I would do Malcolm X.

Q. In *Being and Race,* while you recognize the achievement of contemporary African-American women writers, you also qualify this by saying that their writing is "more at the stage of criticism of social crimes." In *Possessing the Secret of Joy,* Alice Walker dwells on the physical and mental mutilation of black women and its result—insanity. Would Gardner call this vision "responsible" and "moral"? Would you?

A. Alice is talking about clitoridectomy. There's a social crime for you. I shouldn't speak for John here. Some of the portraits of black men in those books are so limited and so one-profiled, as opposed to thirty or forty images of black men, that they don't seem moral to me. It's not just Walker. You could also talk about Morrison. You do not see black men like Colin Powell or W. E. B. Du Bois or astronaut Ron McNair or Frederick Douglass. It's an extremely narrow range of human beings. You basically see black men who are fuck-ups. And there's a lot that can be said about black men who are fuck-ups. But how does that tap into the general negative images we have of black males in the eighties, coming from the Reagan administration, with

Willy Horton and Bush, and these comic images of black men in film and on television? Where, finally, are the images of human beings who are black and male and lead responsible lives? You don't see anybody like the mayor of Seattle, Norman Rice, who's a remarkable human being. Those are not characters in our books. Stanley Crouch is of the opinion that that is going to be the next wave.

If we're going to talk about politics and black writing, then we've really got to talk about politics. You can talk about Jesse, who won't run for office because it's a lot easier to get in front of the cameras. Or you can talk about Ron Brown, or Norm Rice, who will indeed go through what the political process is. You present yourself to people, you have a list of proposals, you get elected, and you go in day after day to confront all manner of problems to serve the greatest number of people at any given moment. That's politics. The other stuff, with the rhetoric, that's not politics. Even if that gets someone elected, that human being, like Norm Rice and the other black mayors, is going to have to go in every day and deal with all kinds of interest groups. Politics is the art of compromise. That's real politics. It's not rhetoric. It's not about ideology. It's about solving problems on a daily basis.

Stanley is right. Someday we're going to have to get those kinds of black people into our fiction. All those workers in the NAACP, all those people, year in, year out, going to every one of the civil rights hearings in Washington. The work is boring, it's dull, it's everyday, it's pedestrian. But that's how you get the passage of civil rights legislation. Somebody can get in front of a crowd and microphones and scream at the top of his voice, but I have to say, for all my feeling for that, it's not politics. We need portraits of lives like that of Norm Rice in our literature to really understand politics. The problem is those lives aren't flashy. They lack dramatic, sensational drama. King used to say that, even with all the attention focused on him. He was certainly charismatic, and so was Malcolm—but what about the thousands of people who made King possible? That's what's also interesting. The people in the background, in the shadows.

Q. In a recent paper you gave at a conference for the National Council of Teacher Educators you cited Allan Bloom and Dinesh D'Souza and others who warn against the Balkanization of Ameri-

can society through multiculturalism. How do you feel about their ideas?

A. I first gave that paper as a way of providing an overview to foreign audiences of what the debate is in America, and I wanted to make it pro and con. I started out talking about the sixties, especially in historical terms, including Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, and the ideals of integration, and how we shifted to the Black Power Movement. It's about literature for the most part, the emergence of different authors of color during the last twenty or thirty years. And I quote D'Souza and Bloom to indicate that there is a counterargument, that there is opposition to what is called multiculturalism. I even quote President Bush, who gave that talk at Michigan a year ago. It came right out of Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals*. He used the phraseology of that book and D'Souza's book. My paper was descriptive, not promotional. I ended with a quote from Julius Lester, who is a writer I deeply admire. He speaks about his education at Fisk. It involved the canon. He didn't have any problem with it. To be honest, I don't have any problem with it either. I have no problem with reading the pre-Socratics anymore than I do with reading the Vedas. We should read all those things.

One of the things we have to emphasize is that no student can hold the elementary school, high school, and university he attends responsible for his intellectual life. The only person responsible for someone's intellectual life is that person. The only thing we can do in the schools is create an atmosphere of curiosity so that people, after they get out of school, continue to be students to the very end of their days, and that's going to involve cross-cultural understanding.

I'm not sure I like the way the whole multiculturalism question is formulated. As I've said, I've been a student of Eastern philosophy since I was nineteen, when I got involved in the martial arts. All black students obviously are students of Western culture, if they are in America, right? So they're already multicultural. If you begin to look at the history of an idea, because all ideas have a history or biography, you find it threading back through time and all groups of people. For example, if you are going to study Aristotle, you've got to be able to look at what happened to Aristotle when he wasn't available in the Middle Ages but was very present in Arab coun-

tries. I think globally in that sense. I don't like some of the ways the arguments about multiculturalism have been formulated, although I think at heart they're absolutely right.

We should read as much as we possibly can from all cultures. It's that simple. For me, it never has been something I had to be noisy about. In the classes I taught, the texts were already from all sorts of different people and places. D'Souza's book pisses off a lot of people. But in a sense, he does say one or two things in there that are not all that bad. He's all for having study groups look at the work of W. E. B. Du Bois. I think we should all be looking at *The Souls of Black Folks*, and all that Du Bois did that was ground breaking in the area of sociology. Even look at his fiction. Du Bois is a major thinker of the twentieth century. But I'm not sure D'Souza would be happy if we have to look at Iceberg Slim. I don't know if you know Iceberg Slim. There are works within black literature and black culture that are definitive and important and should be looked at, but D'Souza is griping about mediocrity, about books that are not worth our attention. I can't help but agree with that.

Q. Wouldn't you draw a distinction between D'Souza and Bloom? Bloom has his traditional great books canon.

A. He does. The thing that's interesting about Bloom is that he was a philosopher. A whole lot of that book is about Plato. I have philosopher friends who like what he does with philosophy in there, but his claims are pretty extreme about women and blacks, about black studies and women's studies. It's a book that feels threatened. It's amazing that it sold as many copies as it did. But he has one line in there that really made a lot of sense to me. He says our task is to understand how Plato saw the world. That was always my sense of philosophy. I wanted to understand how Schopenhauer saw the world. I wanted to understand how Nagarjuna, among the Buddhists, saw the world. The issue is not my going to school to get images of myself, because I don't need that. I don't need a feel-good education. As Julius Lester says, you go to school to learn everything that you are not. Of course, that's ironic, because finally we are all those things, but we are not aware that we're all those things.

I'm not talking about multiculturalism so much as I am about

Afrocentricism—the idea that a black student will say something like, "I'm going to study myself." I'm not sure what that means. The whole question of selfhood is a very large one. If you go back fifty generations in the life of any human being, you will discover that they share an ancestor with everybody else on the planet. Race breaks down fifty generations back. Alex Haley could trace his roots back to Africa following one side of his family—I think it was his mother's side. But if he followed his father's side, he would have ended up probably back in Europe. As a matter of fact, the book he didn't get a chance to write and was talking about doing was about how genetically mongrelized all Americans are. That, he felt, would be an even more powerful book than *Roots*. It will never get written now. That, you see, is the issue, the fact that we are a tissue of cultures. We are a tissue of races already; the concept of race, as Kwame Appiah points out, is false. Certainly in modern America there is mongrelization. So if the multiculturalists are using an outmoded notion of race, then their categories are problematic for me. I'm not going to read a book simply because it's by an Asian writer. I'm not going to read a book just because it's by a Native American, or just because it's by a black American. I want to read finely articulated thought, by whoever it is, anywhere on the planet, any culture. But it has to be something that meets the standards I bring to all literature, which means it has to disclose, reveal, and it needs to be worked over a lot in terms of revision and polishing. But I'm not interested in any work because it's by somebody from a particular race. That doesn't mean anything, finally.

Q. I find your arguments about the fluid, intersubjective nature of education and knowledge fascinating. But you don't want to use those arguments to keep out nontraditional texts, or to construct an elitist canon.

A. What do you mean by "elitist canon"?

Q. I mean in terms of Bloom's Eurocentricism.

A. Oh no. I don't believe that. You should have Confucius, Chuang-tse, and Lao-tse, and you should have the *Ten Ox-herding Pictures*, and you should have the great documents out of the Hindu tradi-

tion. But those works have been around for a long time. You could go over to the philosophy department and get some of them, or you could go over to the Far Eastern departments and get other ones. They've been translated for a long, long time. They just weren't in the English departments, which were basically white male in their curriculum. Those texts are there, and the scholars are there to tell you about them, people who have devoted their entire lives to translations and interpretations. I feel extraordinarily enriched by their efforts. I couldn't have gotten it otherwise, prior to the rise of multiculturalism. That movement didn't bring those books into existence.

Now, when you say an elitist canon, I'm not sure what you're saying exactly. Some people would throw the canon out entirely. Why do we need a canon? I don't know about using the term "canon," but I do think there are certain works that have been valuable to human beings for five hundred years. Some of those works still speak to us. I finally went back and looked at Thomas a Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*. Believe me, it *does* speak to contemporary life. The elegance of his thought, the way he delves into the human situation—it is beautiful. There are certain texts that we need to know because of the vast influence they've had on other people. That's why I say we need to know the teachings of Confucius, because they have influenced so much that people have done. We need to know the principal texts of Buddhism. We need to know the great literary works of China, India, Japan, Africa.

I do think that art is elitist. It is an elitist activity. That may sound like a strange thing to say, but I will say it. When I sit down to write a book I put in the best thought, the best feeling, the best technique and skill I can muster. I'll go over it twenty-five times over five or ten years, I don't care. Because this may be the last utterance I make to any human beings, my last statement in language. I have to be able to stand behind it. I push the language so that it's far above pedestrian, laundromat speech, or language you would overhear in the supermarket, because I care about the language. When I'm talking I can't revise my words over and over and over until they are as precise as I can make them. Also, when I write I can rethink my feelings, so that if I might hurt somebody I can look at that feeling again and try to create something that won't be harmful to others. I do believe in the masterpieces. I believe that a great work of art is a

special appearance in our lives. There are works that do not have that intention. They are written for popular or commercial reasons. Some journalism has to be written too quickly for it to develop those layers of thought and feeling you find in masterworks, to reach that level where no sentence can be pulled out without disturbing the sentence in front of it, the sentence behind it, thereby making the paragraph in front of it and behind it collapse. That's the kind of art I'm talking about.

I do think art is elitist. I don't think you can substitute, just because it's a "text," an African-American comic book for Melville's *Benito Cereno*. I used to be a cartoonist; I know how comic books are done. I know how much work goes into one and how much work goes into great fiction. That doesn't mean socially that I am elitist, because I'm not. But the reason I left journalism was because I couldn't do this in that field. The reason I left behind being a cartoonist was because I was looking for the means that would allow me to express the most I could. When I say best thought, best feeling, best skill, I mean even more than that. I mean the book will pull me to a new level of skill. It will demand that of me. When I start it, I will have to learn new things in order to finish it. I'm going to have to develop techniques I've never dreamed of to complete it. A great work of fiction has the same importance to me as a great work of philosophy. That's why I say it's elitist.