

Seeking the Ox

"Finding his way by listening, he enters the gate . . ."
(*Kuo-an, Ten Oxherding Pictures*)

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CJ Society Presentations at ALA and beyond . . .

Since the founding of the Society in Boston in 2003, we have presented panels on Johnson's work at every meeting of the American Literature Association, as well as at other scholarly venues. These presentations have been marked by lively debate, new scholarly insights to Johnson's work, and especially a growing fascination with this complex and multifaceted writer and man.

The 2004 ALA meeting was particularly memorable, since Johnson himself attended our panel and gave comments to each scholar about his work. Following the panel, Johnson read from his recent collection of short fiction, *Dr. King's Refrigerator and Other Stories*.

The reading was followed by a reception sponsored by the Society and by the African-American Culture and Literature Society, at which the AACLS presented Johnson with its prestigious Stephen Hender-

son award, recognizing Johnson's contributions to African-American literature and culture. The evening concluded with a memorable dinner at Greens Restaurant, an elegant locale in San Francisco that is owned and operated by the Green Gulch Zen Buddhist Center of Marin County. The Society was honored as well by the presence of Maxine Hong Kingston at this dinner, marking the first time these two great American Buddhist authors have been brought together.

The following day, Society members met again with Johnson and Kingston to conduct a lengthy interview with the authors. This fascinating exchange has been edited by John Whalen-Bridge, and is forthcoming in the journal *MELUS* later this year. The 2005 ALA meeting in Boston also included a fine panel, and we also presented papers at the Penn State Conference on the African-American Novel

(see story on p.2). At the 2006 ALA meeting, again in San Francisco, the CJ Society for the first time put forth two panels, each focusing on Johnson's achievements in short fiction. Member-



Charles Johnson receiving the Stephen Henderson Award from AACLS president Loretta Woodward, ALA 2004.

ship and enthusiasm continues to grow with each year. (MC)

Message from the President: CJ Society History

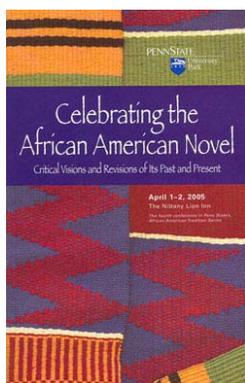
Panels on the work of Charles Johnson were held at the International Association of Philosophy and Literature in 2000 and 2001, and it was at the 2001 conference that I had the good fortune to meet Will Nash, Richard Hart, Bob Bunch, Mike Boylan, and Charles Johnson himself. We had a wonderful panel on Johnson, with Charles

Johnson as respondent—a rare opportunity!

During a plenary in which time momentarily came to a complete stop, Will Nash and I began to chat; I said we should have a Charles Johnson Society, and he said he had been thinking that too.

At the next American Literature Association I rounded up the

requisite thirty signatures, and we have had panels at the ALA every year since 2002. Society members have given papers, written articles, and published several books on Johnson. We have a tidy version of a "beloved community," and we look forward to future activities. —John Whalen-Bridge, President



“Celebrating the African American Novel,” the conference at Penn State University

“The panel will focus on Johnson’s relationship with the West, writ large, and also with his own adopted region, the Pacific Northwest.”



Charles Johnson and Marc Conner in Faire Gallery Cafe, Seattle

CJ Society Panel at Penn State Conference

The Charles Johnson Society sponsored a panel, “The Philosophy of Form: Charles Johnson’s Experiments with the Novel,” at Penn State University’s conference on the African American Novel, April 1-3, 2005, at University Park, PA. Marc Conner of Washington and Lee University was Chair and Organizer. Herman Beavers, University of Pennsylvania, spoke on “Bondage and Discipline: Charles Johnson’s Pedagogy of Emptiness.” William Nash, Middlebury College, presented a paper entitled, “Is

My Experimental, Experiential Blackness Black Enough?: The Chicago-style Black Aestheticism of Clarence Major and its Relation to the Work of Charles Johnson.” Gena Chandler, from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, presented “Dreaming and Waking in Wonderland: Charles Johnson’s Fairy Tale Fictions.” Finally, William Gleason, Princeton University, presented “Fiction, Form, History: Charles Johnson and the Work of the Past.”

The Penn State Conference

was a major interrogation and re-evaluation of the state and history of the African-American Novel, and we were delighted to feature such a strong panel that focused on the experimental and philosophically challenging fictional forms of Johnson. The panel was well attended and very well received.

—Linda Selzer

Charles Johnson and the West

The CJ Society is busy planning a major Society event at the Western Literature Association Meeting in Tacoma, Washington, which will be held October 17-21, 2007. The Western Literature Association is a thriving organization that focuses on the literature and culture of the American West. Its annual meeting attracts hundreds of scholars, and this will be the first such meeting in Tacoma. Since Charles Johnson has lived and worked in the Seattle region for the past thirty years, this is a marvelous opportunity to examine Johnson’s work in the context of his adopted region.

The CJ Society plans at least one panel, and possibly two, that focuses on “Charles Johnson and the West”—and, not surprisingly, we mean to treat “the West” in every conceivable way: from the specific region of the Pacific Northwest, to the function of “the American West” as metaphor and reality for African-American writers, to the very concept of “The West” as the origin of philosophy and

thought in the Greek moment. The panel will focus on Johnson’s relationship with the west, writ large, and also with his own adopted region, the Pacific Northwest.

In addition to the scholarly panel, the Society is co-sponsoring a reading by Johnson on Friday, October 19th, to be followed by a reception and a book-signing.

The conference is being organized by the President of the Western Literature Association, Professor Ann Putnam of the University of Puget Sound. In addition to Johnson, the conference is featuring such major western authors as Sherman Alexie and David Guterson, as well as a host of panels on various aspects and elements of Western American Literature. The Conference will be held at the Tacoma Sheraton Hotel, located in the heart of downtown Tacoma, nestled between Commencement Bay and Mount Ranier. (Contact information: 1-800-325-3535.) Professor Putnam may be reached at aput-

nam@ups.edu. Full conference details will be made available through the WLA web site as well as the Charles Johnson Society web site. CJ Society panels are being organized by Marc Conner. Send proposals and abstracts to: Professor Marc C. Conner, Department of English, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, VA, 24450 (connerm@wlu.edu).

This gathering promises to be a memorable event in the CJ society work, and a great opportunity to study Johnson in his own region.

Conner and Nash edited volume forthcoming, 2007

Marc Conner and Will Nash, founding members of the CJ Society, will see their edited collection of essays on Johnson's work appear this coming winter of 2007. The book, titled *Charles Johnson: The Novelist as Philosopher*, is forthcoming from the University Press of Mississippi. Its central focus is on Johnson's self-described category of "philosophical black fiction," and the essays seek to engage and interrogate this category as Johnson uses it and as its implications inform Johnson's work.

The contributors to the volume amount to a virtual Who's Who in Charles Johnson studies: Conner and Nash co-author an Introduction, titled "Charles Johnson and Philosophical Black Fiction"; then essays follow by Linda Selzer, Gena Chandler, Herman Beavers, William Gleason, Marc Conner, Gary Storhoff, John Whalen-Bridge, and William Nash.

"The essays aim," the editors state, "to engage Johnson's work from the critical perspectives offered by the philosophi-

cal, cultural, and political implications of his writings. We seek especially to understand this category of 'philosophical black fiction' that Johnson claims to have largely invented, and to interpret the meaning and implications of this new literary and cultural category." (MC)



Johnson and Kingston, with society members Nash, Selzer, Storhoff, and Conner, San Francisco 2004 (JWB took the picture!)

New Scholarship in Charles Johnson Studies

There is a plethora of scholarship on Johnson's work forthcoming or recently published. For a superb overview of recent work on Johnson, see the Review Essay by John Whalen-Bridge in the new issue of *ME-LUS* (31.1, Spring 2006). Major recent work includes Gary Storhoff's *Understanding Charles Johnson* (U of South Carolina P, 2005) and Rudolf Byrd's *Charles Johnson's Novels: Writing the American Palimpsest* (Indiana UP, 2005), as well as the forthcom-

ing volume of essays edited by Conner and Nash (see above). These books complement and respond to the other book-length studies of Johnson, Will Nash's 2003 volume, *Charles Johnson's Fiction* (Illinois) and Jonathan Little's 1997 study, *Charles Johnson's Spiritual Imagination* (Missouri). Another major recent book is founding member Jim McWilliams's collection of Johnson interviews, titled *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson*

(U of Washington P, 2004, below). Scholars also respond in significant ways to the outstanding essays of Ashraf H.A. Rushdy (who recently joined the Society). Johnson's own latest book is the short story collection, *Dr. King's Refrigerator and Other Stories* (Scribner 2005). Marc Conner reviewed this book in the Fall 2005 issue of *Shenandoah* (55:2, 157-160).

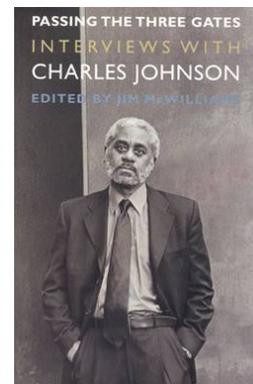
"Critical attention to Johnson's work increased markedly in the last few years, so the time may be apt for a reconsideration."
John Whalen-Bridge

McWilliams's Interviews an Invaluable Resource

When Jim McWilliams published his collection of interviews with Charles Johnson, scholars expected a helpful and intriguing collection. But the true value of McWilliams's work is only now being understood. *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson*, published by the University of Washington Press as the first volume in their prestigious V. Ethel Willis White Series, has proven itself an absolutely invaluable resource for anyone

doing serious work on Johnson. In my review of this book, published in *African American Review* 39:3, I emphasize the signal contributions of McWilliams's work: this book "offers essential material for the reader interested in Johnson's life and work, and also interested more broadly in contemporary American literature"(481). Of particular value are the new insights into Johnson's biography that these interviews offer, as well as the *development* of

Johnson's thought over time. What strikes me in particular is the remarkable coherence to Johnson's thought: much like Ralph Ellison, Johnson seems to have worked out certain essential philosophical positions early in his career, and though his thought has certainly developed, these bedrock positions have remained in place. Anyone seeking a deeper understanding of Johnson as author, philosopher, and man should consult this book. (MC)



Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE CHARLES JOHNSON SOCIETY

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Founding Members: Professors Keith Beyerman, Marc Conner, James McWilliams, William Nash, Linda Selzer, and John Whalen-Bridge

Membership information

The Charles Johnson Society invites all scholars interested in the work of Charles Johnson, as well as in the category of philosophy and literature in American culture, to join the Society. We are an affiliate of the American Literature Association and the Modern Language Association. To join, just go to our web site, at <http://charlesjohnson.wlu.edu>, and print up the membership form there. Membership dues are \$20 per year (\$10 for students). Inquiries can be made to Professor Linda Selzer, Department of English, Penn State University, 116 Burrowes Building, University Park, PA, 16801 (lfs1@psu.edu).

Charles Johnson's Latest . . .

Johnson's productivity continues, to say the least! Here's his latest work, from the 2006 year: "Dharma for A Dangerous Time" in the September issue of *Shambhala Sun*; a new essay (yet untitled) responding to Paul Tillich's critique of Buddhism, forthcoming in the November issue of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*; review in the *Wall Street Journal* (July 1-2, 2006) on James A. Colaiaco's *Frederick Douglass and the Fourth of July*; the keynote address at last year's Steinbeck Conference will appear soon; gave the keynote address for the first University of Washington Libraries "Literary Voices" event, forthcoming in a UW Libraries limited print edition; CJ's most recent "Bedtime Story" for Humanities Washington, entitled "Gizmo," will be published in the forthcoming 10th anniversary issue of *Remarkings*; Introduction for a new edition of John Gardner's *The Sunlight Dialogues* forthcoming in November's *Boston Review*; intro for Michael Boylan's novel *The Extinction of Desire*; essay on Emerson for the Prentice-Hall text, *Literature: The American Experience*; delivered the commencement address at Lewis & Clark College in May and received a Doctor of Humane Letters degree; several stories and writings were re-issued in new translations and other editions; and over the winter Johnson fulfilled speaking engagements at Bowdoin and Colby Colleges in Maine, at Dickinson in North Dakota (where Jim McWilliams teaches), and gave the Bauder Lecture on April 7 at Marygrove College as the 18th Contemporary American Authors Lecture Series guest artist.

Whew! No wonder we're all so busy!

The Society in Perspective, by Will Nash

(Will Nash served as the CJ Society's first president. He offers here his reflections on the founding of the society and its importance) In May of 2003, a small group of scholars came together at the American Literature Association meetings to organize the Charles Johnson society. This meeting marked the fruition of discussions that began when John Whalen-Bridge and William Nash spent some time brainstorming at the IAPL meetings in 2001. From the start, the founders of this organization (Linda Selzer, Marc Conner, James McWilliams, and Whalen-Bridge and Nash) have shared an interest in Charles Johnson's fiction and the relations of literature and philosophy. As the society has grown, that initial commonality has blossomed into the foundation for full and interesting explorations of the interplay of philosophy, religion, history, and black fiction. We have all benefited from this association, both individually and collectively--and we even got a book dedicated to us! (see *Dr. King's Refrigerator*)