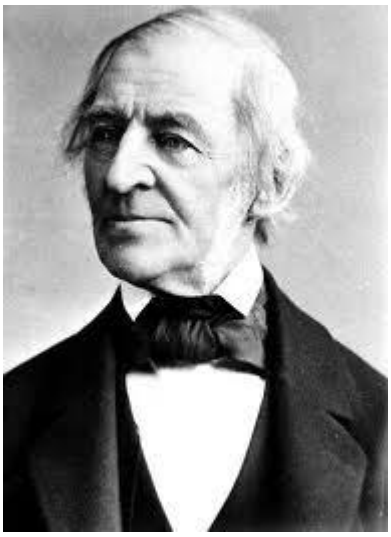
Tuesday, March 1, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON ON RALPH WALDO EMERSON

The following 500-word essay on Emerson is a piece I was commissioned to write for the Study Unit on the Transcendentalists in *Prentice Hall Literature: The American Experience* (2007*),* a 1,378-page high school textbook presently in use in our nation's schools. It appears on pages 386-87. Among the other authors who contributed introductions for different Study Units are Arthur Miller, Nell Irvin Painter, Gretel Ehrlich, and Tim O'Brien. See also my longer introduction for *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* Signet Classic edition, 2003.



RALPH WALDO EMERSON

At age 16, when I was an Illinois boy trying to figure out where my place might be in the tempestuous, rapidly changing decade of the 1960s, and long before I became a black American novelist and philosopher, my teachers at Evanston Township High School placed the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson in front of me. I'm thankful they did.

In grand fashion, "Self-Reliance" gave me permission to be a free-thinker and to rigorously question *every*thing around me---from the status quo to social cliques in my school, from neighborhood gangs to 80-year-old social "conventions" that enshrined racial segregation in the South and North. Emerson gave me the courage to resist the pressure to conform to things that were unreasonable, to always trust myself, to dream "impossible dreams," and value my own individual voice and vision, even if doing so resulted in disapproval and being unpopular with the hip "in crowd."

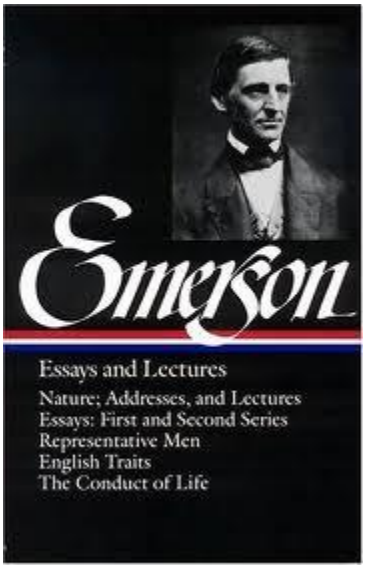
Just as he served me well in my teens, Emerson's belief in "the infinitude of the private man," and his identification with all forms of life, proved to be reliable guides during my adult years. First, because he defined so beautifully the values that eight generations of Americans regard as

the basis for our national character and core beliefs, particularly his devotion to what he called "the republic of Man."

He condemned the institution of slavery, championed the right of women to vote, and spoke out against the "wicked Indian policy." In his journal of 1848, Emerson dreamed of an America that would one day be an "---asylum of all nations, the energy of Irish, Germans, Swedes, Poles & Cossacks, & all the European tribes---of the Africans, & of the Polynesians (who) will construct a new race, a new religion, a new State, a new literature, which will be as vigorous as the new Europe which came out of the smelting pot of the Dark Ages…"

He truly believed, and made *me* see, how "It is our duty to be discontented, with the measure we have of knowledge & virtue, to forget the things behind & press toward those before."

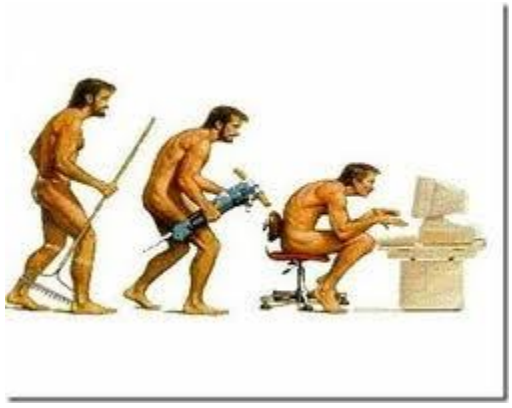
Secondly, Emerson has long inspired me---as he does anyone with an adventurous spirit---because he challenges us to be flexible and resourceful, like the "sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who in turn tries all the professions, who *teams* it, *farms* it, *peddles*, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township, and so forth, in successive years, and always, like a cat, falls on his feet." All those *are* our possibilities. There is nothing, Emerson says, that we cannot achieve if we believe in ourselves. As a Transcendentalist, he was a restless and superbly civilized man who went beyond (or transcended) the ordinary, the outdated, and the unoriginal for, in his own words, he chose "to unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred, none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at my back."



Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 2:38 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/03/charles-johnson-on-ralph-waldo-emerson.html

Wednesday, March 2, 2011

JOHNSON COMMENTS ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY



A good portion of my hope for the human species these days rests with developments in science and technology. This new century (and millennium), now entering its second decade, is undeniably a period of phenomenal change, of new things arising and familiar things falling away. Very often these things perishing or undergoing change, as all impermanent things must (including ideas), bring equal amounts of pain as they do pleasure in their passing. That anguish is greatest for those who cling to the past because they have invested so heavily (their livelihoods, careers, even their sense of identity) in things that are at best transitory, particularly during intense historical periods that compress (social) paradigm shifts and technological developments so far-reaching one is tempted to compare them to the movement of tectonic plates that alter continents and reshape the surface of the earth. Old and often cherished ideas and ways of life die; new experiences arise and require a new vocabulary, a new grammar, and a new vision.

For example, a glance at the thirty years between 1895 and 1925 discloses a startling shift from the horse-and-carriage world of my great-grandparents (who lived a hairsbreadth from slavery and when the average life expectancy was forty-seven years in 1902) to one in which the era of the Victorians ended, quantum mechanics provided a deeper understanding of matter than Classical or Newtonian physics, and new forms of art emerged----poetry's free-verse movement, the revolt against formalism, the paintings of Picasso. New philosophical and conceptual models took hold.

During a very short time 100 years ago, our lives filled with the all too familiar "furniture" of the 20th century. Just three dizzying decades produced such forms as the airplane, radio, modern naval submarine, diesel engine, typewriter, electric iron, talking pictures, television, x-rays, zippers, and the calculating machine; all this and more came into being and restructured the possibilities of our lives.

However, even *that* period of accelerated change seems lethargic when compared to the tempestuous moment we find ourselves immersed in at the beginning of this new century. Given the sequencing of DNA, and the exponential progress in such fields as biotechnology, robotics, nanotechnology and the remarkable development of bio-printing, our grandchildren may live in a world as experientially different from the 20th century as our time is from, say, the 18th. As a species, we have sent probes to Mars, Venus, comet Tempel 1, and to objects in the outer solar system like Saturn's moon Titan---all with the aim of clarifying the origins of our universe and delivering knowledge unknown to our predecessors. (A company with the wonderful name Genetic Savings and Clone, sadly now defunct, once offered to duplicate your cat for only $50,000). "Chimeras," creatures genetically engineered with the traits of two species---florescent animals, for example---are already among us. Three years ago, scientists achieved "quantum teleportation," the transfer of physical characteristics between atoms. Scientists working with the Large Hadron Collider have crashed proton beams, one step toward recreating the conditions in the universe just after the Big Bang. And President Obama has promised a manned mission to Mars in twenty years as well as calling for ramping up our nation's investment in education devoted to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics). Scientist Greg Wray describes the situation well when he says, "People have this sense that as twenty-first century humans we've gotten as high as we're going to go. But we're not played out as a species. We're still evolving…"

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:28 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/03/johnson-comments-on-science-and.html

Friday, March 4, 2011

IN SEARCH OF THE MIRACULOUS

I've lectured (or read my fiction) in cities across Germany, Czechoslovakia (in 1989 during their revolution), Portugal, France, England, the Netherlands, Indonesia, Japan, Spain, and in 1997 I spent two weeks in northern Thailand researching an article on "The Asian Sense of Beauty" for Microsoft's now-defunct on-line travel magazine, "Mungo Park."

Generally, when I've traveled overseas it was for the U.S. Information Agency (now merged with the State Department) as part of their programs that enlisted artists and writers for purposes of international goodwill. In other words, all my journeys away from America have been working trips---lecturing on black American literature, multiculturalism, and my own writing. Away from home, I always saw myself as a guest in those countries, one who needed to be grateful to his hosts for the privilege of spending time in their world, a traveler whose behavior had to be impeccable and gracious because in a small way I was representing the United States.

More than anything else, I felt the American traveler should avoid being like those boorish individuals described by W.E.B. Du Bois in his essay “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926). When visiting the lake in Scotland immortalized by Sir Walter Scott’s 1810 poem, “Lady of the Lake,” he witnessed people who “were mostly Americans, and they were loud and strident. They poured upon the little pleasure boat---men with their hats a little on one side and drooping cigars in the wet corners of their mouths; women who shared their conversation with the world. They all tried to get everywhere first. They pushed other people out of the way. They made all sorts of incoherent noises and gestures so that the quiet home folk and the visitors from other lands silently and half-wonderingly gave way to them. They struck a note not evil but wrong. They carried, perhaps, a sense of strength and accomplishment, but their hearts had no concept of the beauty which pervaded this holy place.”

In the non-English-speaking, non-Western countries I've been to, I always experienced a liberating and pleasantly humbling form of displacement. This was especially true in the East, where whites are in the minority and people I visited in a weaving village near the Laos border in Thailand had never seen a black person before. (I have read that only 17% of the world is white; the other 83% are people of color.) Not being fluent with the language or possessing any expertise on the everyday lives of people in Indonesia, Japan or Thailand, I realized I had to *work* to unkey the meaning of things.

Nothing could be taken for granted since I was unable to completely "read" the events and experiences taking place around me with any degree of nuance or subtlety. My confidence was happily shaken by the different culture now enveloping me, where even the simplest things---getting directions, finding a meal---required a good deal of mental effort: alertness and mindfulness. Moment by moment, I could *assume* nothing, because my assumptions and presuppositions had no purchase in those countries.

In other words, the stance of the traveler away from the provincial, limited and Eurocentric Western fishbowl in which he (or she) normally lives on automatic pilot contains its own built-in phenomenological *epoché* (the familiar is "bracketed") and it favors the position of consciousness described by Edmund Husserl when he said, "Initially I am lost and forgotten in the world, lost in the things, lost in ideas, lost in the plants and animals..."

I strongly recommend this occasional shaking up of one's *weltanschauung* or cultural world view for everyone.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 4:35 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/03/in-search-of-miraculous.html

Sunday, March 6, 2011

THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH: Suffering exists. THE SECOND NOBLE TRUTH...

In Buddhism, we find it useful to distinguish between pain and suffering. As my friend writer Candace Robb says, "Pain is something that comes in life, but suffering is voluntary or optional." Let's try to unpack that very compressed and succinct statement.

The second Noble Truth states that the cause of suffering is *trsnaa,* which is usually translated as "thirst." This thirst is desire, especially selfish desire based on ignorance (*avidya*) of the nature of things, which is impermanence and emptiness (*shunyata*), *i.e.*, things possess no enduring substance or essence or independent existence. In *The Buddhist Vision,* Alex Kennedy rightly says, "All things, whether subject or object, are processes linked together in an intricate network of mutual conditions...The ordinary man is distracted by the bright surface of the world and mistakes this for reality."

Our society, a capitalist one that bombards us with 3,000 product messages a day, depends on citizen consumers constantly feeling desire or thirst (that is, feeling incomplete in themselves, that they "need" something beyond themselves for their happiness); and, as members of the Marxist Frankfurt school pointed out, so many of those desires are *false*. They are part of our social conditioning, and the relentless work of advertisers and the media. But if you can't make yourself happy, no one can.

So in my novel *Oxherding Tale,* we have the character of Reb the Coffinmaker, a spiritual advisor for the book's protagonist, who goes to public market, looks around, and "rejoices at all the things he *didn't* need." With characteristic profundity, the Buddha said, "Man's sensual desires are only attachments to concepts." Think about that, please. It is the *idea* of something you are desiring and chasing, its name (nama) and form (rupa), a product of your own mind. Whatever it is, it is *you.*

But pain is something we all will experience. Pain is a part of life. Sooner or later, we all will become sick, know old age, and die. But pain becomes suffering when (1) within ourselves we (or society) create a feeling of *lack* that we imagine some external thing can satisfy; or (2) when we allow the natural pains and aches of life to become something the mind dwells on or is attached to. Thus, that form of suffering is voluntary and optional. We *choose* it. We nurture it.

We let the mind return to it again and again, for very often the ego enjoys its own suffering--it's "*my* suffering," you see? Everything is still about "me, myself, and I."
For this reason, Shakyamuni Buddha said, "Perfect peace can dwell only where all vanity has disappeared."

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 11:56 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/03/first-noble-truth-suffering-exists.html

Monday, March 7, 2011

ENGAGED BUDDHISM

During the course of its 2600 year history (at one time a third of humankind were the Buddha's students or followers), this religion has settled in many countries and cultures, Eastern and Western, and been transformed by them all. This is as it should be, because the Dharma (teachings) makes clear that everything is impermanent and subject to change, including Buddhism. Although the *sangha* (community of Buddhists) in the United States is still small and growing, practitioners in our country have made a very American contribution to the teachings, one that is not at all surprising in a nation that gave rise to the social gospel over a century ago and states in one of its most sacred, secular documents, the "Declaration of Independence," that everyone has the right to "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." Concern with social justice is as American as apple pie and jazz. This progressive concern---the American flavor of the Buddhadharma---is known as "Engaged Buddhism."

Engaged Buddhists are inspired by that outstanding teacher, Thich Nhat Hahn, who was nominated by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for a Nobel Peace Prize, and who says the *sangha* includes all sentient beings. In his workshops, he distributes a page containing what he calls, "The Five Mindfulness Trainings." The first of these declares, "Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn to protect the lives of people, animals, plants and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life." The third vow goes farther: "I will respect the property of others, but I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on earth."

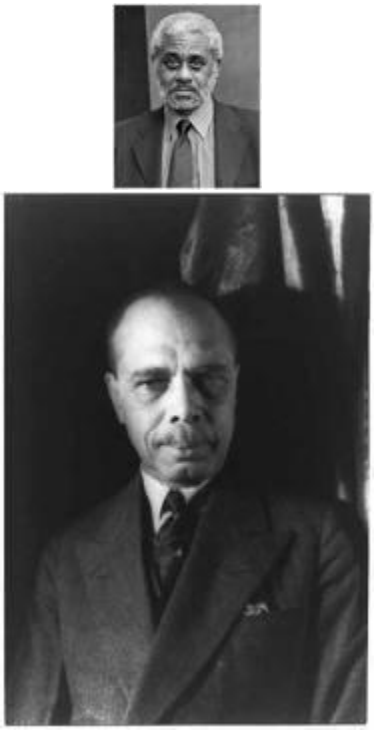
To put this another way, followers of the Buddhadharma, fully aware of impermanence and the illusion of dualism, yet also aware of the ubiquity of suffering, feel obliged to oppose the origins of *duhkha* in the social world. They will, I believe, share the dreams stated by Dr. King in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1964, where he said, "Civilization and violence are antithetical

concepts…Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral question of our time…The foundation of such a method is love…I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down men other-centered can build up." (From my essay "Reading the Eightfold Path" in *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing*, p. 26.)

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 3:00 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/03/engaged-buddhism.html

Tuesday, March 8, 2011

JOHNSON AND JOHNSON



When we look at a life as luminous as that of James Weldon Johnson's, there are countless ways we might discuss his enduring contributions to the literary culture and political life of this nation, but perhaps one appropriate starting point for describing this multi-dimensional man straddling the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the place that will help us most at the dawn of a new millennium, is by acknowledging that he was in the truest, the noblest, and purest sense of the phrase an American "Renaissance man." (The pun is intentional, of course, given the pivotal role he played during the Harlem Renaissance.) But how *does* one become a Renaissance individual? Does his capacious life and character contain some truth about the art of living in a multi-racial world that is useful to our children and ourselves?

In other words, what was there about this man, born just eight years after the Emancipation Proclamation, that enabled him to create so prolifically and serve so widely during the era of Reconstruction, then in the most entrenched period of American apartheid---the 1920s and 1930s---when the opportunities for black people were so painfully circumscribed, when a Great Depression fueled European fascism, the rise of racial eugenics, and black lynchings throughout the South? How in such a racially restrictive world could Johnson confess that he once had an "unconscious race-superiority complex"?

Happily for us, Johnson provides in his *oeuvre* a few tantalizing clues from which we might coax an answer. Surely it helped that while he had friends of many races, he was "reared free from undue fear of or esteem for white people as a race," and possessed a profoundly felt spiritual faith, as revealed in the words of his best-known creation, "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing." Added to which, and of equal importance, when he was a student at Atlanta University, "The ideal constantly held up to us was of education as a means of living, not of making a living. It was impressed upon us that taking a classical course would have an effect of making us better and nobler, and of higher value to those we should have to serve. An odd, old-fashioned, naïve conception? Rather."

But perhaps the wisdom at the heart of this pedagogical model that urged students to be life-long learners so that they could unselfishly serve others, to value the contributions of those who came before them, and to see themselves as being capable of similar achievements, is not as odd or naïve as Johnson claims. In his time, as well as ours, anyone belonging to a racial and ethnic minority in a predominantly white, Eurocentric society must learn at a very early age to "read" all manner of phenomenon from the nuanced and polyvalent standpoint of a bi-fold consciousness. Lately, I have been calling this an "Aleph consciousness." I borrowed this term from Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Aleph," where he describes the *aleph* as "the place where…all the places of the world, seen from every angle, coexist." It is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and of its shape Borges says that it "is that of a man pointing to the sky and the earth, to indicate that the lower world is the map and mirror of the higher." From its vantage point, Borges says, one can see "simultaneously night and day."

JORGE LUIS BORGES

The biographies of our most preeminent and intellectually impressive black predecessors---"Race" men like Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Martin Luther King Jr.---disclose how they developed this expansive vision and catholicity as their existential posture before the world. It is an antidote to everything that racism, intolerance and bigotry represent: the narrowly parochial, the culturally provincial, and at its core this posture is unabashedly integrationist, implicitly honoring the interconnectedness of all life.

Those who embraced an Aleph consciousness were determined that nothing of significance in our world would be lost on them. Despite racial discrimination, they saw all endeavors as their real possibilities, and the global achievements of the past as their inheritance. Never complaining about their studies not being "black" enough or relevant to the lives of African Americans, they learned how to absorb the products of the Greek and the Judaic, the Roman, French, British and, unlike their white counterparts, the black American and African as well. To emotionally empathize and project themselves behind the eyes of ancestors as diverse as Homer and the Beowulf poet, Goethe and Synge, Olaudah Equiano and Paul Laurence Dunbar. (Little wonder, then, that Johnson briefly had a "race superiority complex.") For children of color, an Aleph consciousness has always been not only necessary for daily survival in a predominantly white country, enabling them to navigate successfully through America's institutions---schools, jobs, social situations---but also for a broadly humanistic path to personal and professional excellence. In it there is something delightfully Emersonian, a feeling that, "It is our duty to be discontented with the measure we have of knowledge & virtue, to forget the things behind & press toward those before." It is difficult for me to believe that anyone can encounter Johnson's biography, which reads like the life story of two or three men, and not immediately recall Emerson's celebration in "Self-Reliance" of the distinctly American character represented by "the sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who in turn tries all the professions, who *teams* it, *farms* it, *peddles*, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township, and so forth, in successive years, and always, like a cat, falls on his feet."

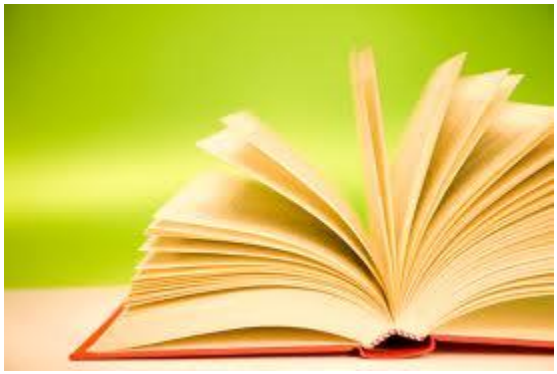
In all his works, James Weldon Johnson, that sturdy lad from Jacksonville, Florida, prodded us to reflect deeply on how we, as Americans, might bring the wisdom and rich legacy he has left us into a dangerous yet promising new century.

(The above is my foreword for *The Essential Writings of James Weldon Johnson*, edited by Rudolph P. Byrd, The Modern Library, 2008.)

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 12:27 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/03/johnson-and-johnson.html

Thursday, March 10, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON ON THE NOVEL



The garden variety novel is quite easy to create, and that, of course, is the reason why so many people can write them, especially formula fictions such as murder mysteries, second-rate horror and science fiction, and romance novels. I once had a student who made a decent living writing romance novels, and she explained the very strict rules of plotting and characterization required by her publisher; readers of those kinds of novels, she informed me, whip through three a day (one after breakfast, another in the afternoon, and a third before going to bed) since the boilerplate for the stories varies little from book to book. John Gardner once wrote that in order to write good junk fiction one has to have a good junk mind. My friend writer Fred Pfeil (author of *Goodman 2020*) once referred to novels of this kind as "industrial fiction." They pay a publisher's electric bills, and help writers put their kids through school so they do have some value.

In my case, I wrote six novels in two years before *Faith and the Good Thing* (1970 through 1972), one every ten weeks, ten pages a day, five days a week. The basic tools for writing a novel are really just a few---characters, plot, (dramatic) scenes, description and narration. These tools can be learned by anyone in a short period of time, and over the course of three decades I taught them to undergraduate and graduate students. One of the great virtues of the novel, as a literary form, is that a writer has room to create an entire fictional universe and people it with as many characters as he or she pleases. (My unpublished, pre-*Faith* novels 4-6 were actually conceived and composed as a trilogy intended to be 1,000 pages, about the childhood, young manhood and middle-age of a black musician, and over three academic quarters I wrote 949 pages on it before bringing it to an end because I got bored with it. The 1,000-page novel is, obviously, a young man's folly, driven more by his ego than the aesthetic demands of the story itself.) Another virtue is that the novel is capacious enough to contain other, shorter literary forms within itself. Indeed, it can contain whatever you want. As Ishmael Reed once said, "a novel can be the 6'o clock news."

So the garden-variety novel is not much of an intellectual or artistic challenge. Again, this is why we have so many of them. (Clarence Major once said one meaning of "novel" in French is a "new thing," and, yes, I believe each novel should be that---something we have not exactly seen before.) But even the "literary" novel runs the risk of what the French call *remplissage* or "literary padding" to fill up pages. There's almost nothing more boring that I can think of than seeing a novelist pad out a work that has a slim premise, not much of a story, and no artistic or intellectual surprises. Oh, wait, there is something more boring: spending 300 or 400 pages with characters you don't enjoy hanging out with and for whom you couldn't care less about "what happens next" to them.

By contrast, a well-wrought short story demands---like a poem---a rigor, discipline, compression and economy not always found in the garden-variety novel, where padding, the lack of careful plotting, verbosity, thin or stereotypical characters, and poor pacing can be absorbed and made (barely) acceptable simply by the novel's length. (Or the length can cause us to not see that lack of rigor.) The flaws of excess and slippages in focus that we forgive in the novel are simply not permitted in the finely-crafted short story, a form capable of creating in its unique format, where every paragraph and sentence is as essential as elements in an equation, the perception-altering insights and lasting emotional impression that most novels strive for but usually fail to achieve. And, as Edgar Allen Poe (who just about single-handedly invented the modern short story) pointed out in essays such as "The Aim and Technique of the Short Story" (1842), it can be experienced in a single sitting.

So, in my view, both novels and short stories, as forms, have their strengths and weaknesses. Clearly, for either to be effective they must have a compelling, original *story* as their foundation. There's no reason to write in either literary form unless one has a special story worthy of an intelligent, learned and sophisticated reader's time and attention. Without such a story (one that is *burning* to be told) for either the novel or short fiction, you (and a reader) are better off spending your time working out, having a little quality time with your children or spouse or other loved ones, practicing meditation, or just enjoying the beauty of Nature during a walk in the springtime in the afternoon.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 8:46 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/03/charles-johnson-on-novel.html

Saturday, March 12, 2011

KWOON BY CHARLES JOHNSON: An Explanation of a short story.

I've been a martial arts practitioner since I was 19-years-old, and my sense of who I am--and what I can do---was shaped early on by the demands of martial arts training. So inevitably that side of my life crops up in my stories and novels. In *Middle Passage*, Rutherford Calhoun learns a version of *capoeira* from the African (Allmuseri) tribe during their voyage on a slave ship; in *Dreame*r, Chaym Smith teaches the narrator Matthew Bishop a short, Yang-style Tai Chi Chaun form (one that I do every day). The first of the six unpublished novels (1970-72) I wrote before *Faith and the Good Thing* was about my teenage experience in a rough, Chicago *kwoon* in 1967 during that city's Dojo Wars. It had the working title *The Last Liberation*, first because Asian martial arts in China and Japan are infused with Buddhist principles; and, secondly, because even in 1970 I saw a Buddhist life of *ahima* or harmlessness to all sentient beings, and the transcendence of dualism and the "self" as being the logical, final stage of the black liberation struggle (and of all human struggles).

Nevertheless, I've always found the writing of martial art-based stories to be challenging, and so have published only two, "China" and "Kwoon," which are among my most reprinted and anthologized short stories. What makes this kind of story challenging, at least for me, is that a writer needs to find in the world of the Asian martial arts "the human heart in conflict with itself," as William Faulkner put it in his 1950 Nobel Prize for Literature acceptance speech. The story can't just be about fighting. Ang Lee's film, "Pushing Hands," does a good job, I believe, of showing us the heart of an elderly China man transported to America, who just happens to be a deadly, Tai Chi master.

In "Kwoon," the young martial arts teacher David Lewis is running the best kind of kung-fu studio, one where his clients learn to fight, yes, but the true objective he wants to achieve for his younger students is character-building. In other words, the not-so-hidden agenda of martial arts training is for a good life based on discipline, self-control, confidence, maturity, responsibility, and the fulfillment of one's duties to others. There is no whining in the *kwoon.* No self-indulgence. You go out on the deck in, say, a school for Japanese or Korean karate, just wearing

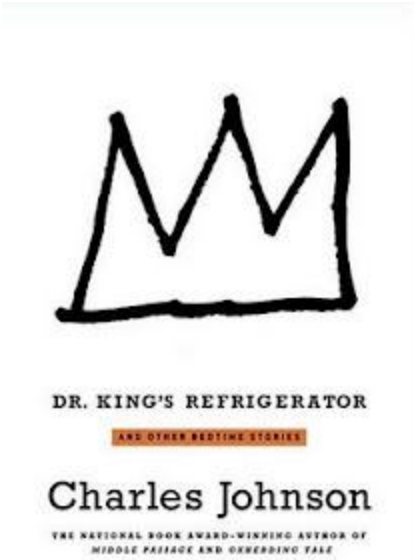
your clean coat and pants and present to the world your hard-earned, individual skills, which are represented simply by the color of the belt you are wearing. (One meaning of "kung-fu" or gung fu" is *hard work*.) Out there on the deck as you face your opponent, your family's history or pedigree are unimportant. Your economic class or bank account is unimportant. Your race and gender or cultural background are unimportant. Your academic degrees or any awards or prizes you've received or books you may have published are unimportant. Your job outside the school is unimportant. Whether you are tall, short or average in height, beautiful or ugly (as the world outside the *kwoon* judges things) is unimportant.

Your past accomplishments and failures are unimportant. Whether you feel healthy or sick that day doesn't matter. Your personal problems don't matter. All that matters is what you can *do.* Right *here*, right *now*. Nothing else matters. The ultimate opponent you are facing on the deck is yourself. For as the famous passage says in Chapter VIII, verses 104-105 in *The Dhammapada*, "If one man conquer in battle a thousand times a thousand men, and if another conquers himself, he is the greatest of conquerors…One's own self conquered is better the conquest of all other people."

That's the kind of school David Lewis is trying to run. But into his life comes a "student" named Ed Morgan whose martial arts background is not only vaster than David's, but Morgan is a killer. He's killed many men. He knows how easy that is to do. The story's external or surface conflict, then, centers on the vicious drubbing Morgan gives David in front of his own students, most of whom decide they now want to study with Morgan. David has to find a way to redeem himself and the civilized values he's tried to teach in his studio, to "save face," and also save his school, which is his only livelihood. More importantly, he must learn to overcome his own arrogance, ego, pride, and---as a good teacher---find a way to be of service to even a cynical, misanthropic man like Ed Morgan, who believes everyone in America is a phony, a fraud and a charlatan.

Among those who stick by David's side during this trial is Elizabeth, his beautiful and most advanced student, whom he achingly desires, though he will not reveal that to her because "unlike some teachers he knew, his policy was to take whatever he felt for a student---the erotic electricity that sometimes arose---and transform it into harder teaching, more time spent on giving them their money's worth." As one might guess, this was my approach during my more than 30 years of teaching, for all around me in the academic and art worlds I saw professors, male and female, sleeping with their students, a practice I could not morally (or professionally) approve.

By the end of "Kwoon," both David Lewis and Ed Morgan are transformed, "reborn" (one might say) as new people.



Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 11:43 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/03/kwoon-by-charles-johnson-explanation-of.html

Tuesday, March 15, 2011

BEHIND THE WALLS WITH CHARLES JOHNSON

Since my days as an undergraduate, I've corresponded with black men who were incarcerated. (I had fellow student friends from Chicago and St. Louis who'd been in prison and were trying to turn their lives around.) They write to me about the dreams they hope to realize when they are released. And ask me to comment on their poetry. This correspondence began in 1970 when I was still primarily working as a professional cartoonist and my PBS series "Charlie's Pad" was first on the air.

I don't remember who invited me, but I drove to Marion Prison in southern Illinois, the highest maximum security prison in America, built to replace Alcatraz. I will never forget that evening---the series of heavy, metal doors that locked with a clang and echo behind me as I made my way inside, and the way the young, black prisoners came through a tunnel-like corridor (so low they had to walk stooped over) to the conference room where I sat waiting to meet them with my drawing pad and black marker. During my time with them, I gave them what cartoonists call a "chalk talk," *i.e.,* I gave them a few drawing lessons. They asked me to draw pretty women for them, which I did.

Thirty years later in Seattle, and in my role as a writer, I went to a lock- up facility for offenders under the age of eighteen who were awaiting trial. All the kids wore different colored jumpsuits and soft slippers. I remember one young man who approached me before my talk to say that he read that I kept a diary as a kid. He said that inspired him to do the same during his time behind bars so that one day his baby son could read it and not make the same mistakes he did.

I've been told my work is popular with young men behind bars. When I receive their mail (You can always tell the letters from prisoners because of the way the envelope looks; they've been "processed" or checked in some way by the prison administrators), I always try to write them

back, but I do so with a heavy heart because “there but for the grace of God go I,” and I know the difficulties they will face once they are back in the social world: the restrictions placed on their lives by the criminal justice system, the uphill struggle to find employment after being in prison and the lure of temptation that former friends can offer. So, yes, I always try to write back to them and offer encouragement. I have to.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 5:01 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/03/behind-walls-with-charles-johnson.html

Thursday, March 17, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON AT HOME IN SEATTLE

How does an artist find a place that he (or she) can call home? In my case, I found home purely by accident. I was hired in 1976 to teach at the University of Washington, and so made the long cross country drive to Seattle from Long Island where I'd been a doctoral student in philosophy at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. At the time I'd never been west of the Mississippi, but as soon as I caught my first glimpse of the city gleaming in the distance I knew this was where I was meant to be.

Seattle, I discovered, was peopled with every sort of American I could imagine: Native Americans, whites who sprang from old Scandinavian and German stock, Chinese, South Koreans, and Japanese, Hispanics, Senegalese, Eritrean, Hindu and Sikh, Jewish, gay and lesbian, and blacks whose families settled in the territory in the late 19the century. It was a liberal city remarkably similar in texture and temperament to San Francisco (both are built on seven hills, have burned to the ground and have steep streets), and in the 1980s was selected as the most literate city in America.

Former UW president William Gerberding once referred to the northwest as "this little civilized corner of the world," and he was right. The "spirit of place" here is civility, or at least the desire to appear civil in public, which is saying a great deal. The people--and especially artists--in this region tend to be highly independent and tolerant. My former student David Guterson, author of *Snow Falling on Cedars,* is a native northwesterner, and once told me that the people who first journeyed this far west, so far that if they kept going they'd fall into the Pacific ocean, mainly came out this way to escape other people. Predictably, their descendants are respectful of both the individual and different cultural backgrounds, and at the same time protect their privacy. They acknowledge tradition but don't feel bound by it. As physically far removed as they are from cultural centers in New York, Boston, D.C. , and California (the distance from those places is both physical and psychic), they are not inclined to uncritically follow fashions or the opinions of others, and instead pursue their own singular visions. I'm thinking right now of people like Jimi Hendrix, Kurt Cobain, Ray Charles in 1947, Bruce Lee, playwright August Wilson; artists

like Jacob Lawrence, George Tsutakawa; and highly esteemed, award-winning writers such as Raymond Carver, Ken Kesey, Sherman Alexie, Octavia Butler, Timothy Egan, Theordore Roethke and his student David Waggoner, and Jonathan Raban, an immigrant from England who captures the ambiance of this polysemous, book-hungry city perfectly when he says:

"It was something in the disposition of the landscape, the shifting lights and colours of the city. *Something*. it was hard to nail it, but this something was a mysterious gift that Seattle made to every immigrant who cared to see it. Wherever you came from Seattle was queerly like home...It was an extraordinary soft and pliant city. If you went to New York, or to Los Angeles, or even to Guntersville, you had to fit yourself to a place whose demands were hard and explicit. You had to learn the school rules. Yet people who came to Seattle could somehow recast it in the image of home, arranging the city around themselves like so many pillows on a bed. One day you'd wake up to find things so snug and familiar that you could easily believe that you'd been born here."

In other words, this is an ideal environment for nurturing innovation, individualism, and the creative spirit. Here, we find a pre-given poetry in the lavish scenery right outside our windows, which dwarfs, predates, and no doubt will outlive by millennia everything we write about it. The mountains rise 12,000 feet above the sea. There are magnificent, rain-drenched forests, treeless desert lands, three thousand kinds of flowers, glacial lakes, and hundreds of islands in Puget Sound: an enveloping landscape as plentiful and prolific on its enormous canvas as I suppose we as artists would like to be on our smaller ones. Thus, it has always struck me as fitting that Sea-Tac was one of the first airports in America to set aside for its travelers a room specifically for meditation.

The Pacific Northwest's geographic diversity, its breathtaking scale, and our Lilliputian niche in the shadow of such colossi as Beacon Rock on the Columbia River or the majestic Mount Rainier, humble in the healthiest way a person's ego with the ubiquity and antiquity of the pre-human. It reminds me of my place as but one among uncountable creatures in a vast commonwealth of beings that include western bobcats, the Canadian lynx, white-tailed ptarmigan, and quail. It never fails to deflate my sense of self-importance. It tips me easily

toward an almost ineffable feeling of wonder and awe at this overly-rich and inherently mysterious world in which I so fortunately find myself thrown. If you're standing, say, on Orcas Island, you can see whales cavorting in viridian waves, and the air out there on the islands is so clear, so clean, each breath you draw feels like some sort of blessing. These Northwest experiences always help me take the long view on life's ephemeral problems. Need I add that this opportunity to step away from the hectic pace and cares of city life whenever one wishes is a fine stimulus for art, philosophy, and spiritual contemplation? And all those inward activities are enriched by the misty, meditative mood invoked by the Northwest's most talked about feature---rain---and the wet evening air that causes portions of the geography to gleam, and hazes other parts, *sfumato,* from November through February, in an atmosphere that is a perfect externalization of the brooding inner climate of the creative imagination. With weather like this, it's easy to stay inside until the springtime and just read and write.

Being a transplant like Raban, and a lay Buddhist practitioner, an *upasaka,* means that even after living here for more than half my life, I don't take the gift of this beauty for granted, nor the existential room given to a Seattleite to stretch out his spirit and body. My wife and I happily raised our children here. They can truly call this place, accurately described as a "city of neighborhoods," home. Our daughter Elisheba, a conceptual artist who graduated from Cornish College for the Arts, especially can make that claim. On Capitol Hill five years ago she opened Faire Gallery/Cafe, which features two jazz performances a week, occasionally a play or open-mic poetry night as well as each month a new art show and comedy performances by young, local talent. Faire is where I hang out these days, doing my local appointments there in a vibrant atmosphere - straights and gays, students and Goths --that recalls the free-wheeling creative vitality of Berkeley in the late 1960s.

For Seattle is, whatever else, a place where the young, single, iconoclastic and open-minded seem to thrive. On March 12, 2007, the county where I live, King county (originally named after the obscure vice president William Rufus de Vane King), changed its official logo from an imperial crown to the image of that great civil rights leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate; he joins Duwamish Indian chief Sealth (Seattle), who represents the city, and George Washington, avatar on the state's logo. If he were alive today, King might not describe the Pacific Northwest as exactly the Promised Land, but I believe he would be pleased by how the Seattle people I know and work with, however imperfect we all may be, do strive to realize in ways both

quotidian and grand his dream of a "beloved community" here in a city poised at the edge of the nation's western end.

(The above is excerpted from my essay "Northwest Passage" in *Smithsonian* magazine, September, 2008.)
Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 12:27 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/03/charles-johnson-at-home-in-seattle.html

Friday, March 18, 2011

SWEET DREAMS AND THE CREATION OF STORIES

"Sweet Dreams," a satirical, science fiction story about a future dystopia, was the first story I wrote for Bedtime Stories, the most exciting literary experience every year in Seattle. This literary event began quietly in 1999 when Margaret Ann Bollmeier, then director for Humanities Washington, asked me to serve on the board of that organization. With that membership, there came a duty---people on the board served on different committees, and so I needed to select one. As it turned out, the board was thinking about having local authors read their fiction at a fund-raising event that would help Humanities Washington's outstanding activities devoted to encouraging literacy in Washington state, for example, Mother Read/Father Read, a program that empowers parents to learn how to read, and then to do so with their children.

Now, I have nothing against authors reading their published work, which at the time was something I'd done for twenty-seven years; and since the late 1960s, I'd been to literally hundreds of poetry and fiction readings like the one board members were naturally thinking about. The format was commonplace. But I confessed to Margaret Ann how weary I was, personally, of reading my own stories written years ago. Try to imagine what it's like for me to read today a chapter from my National Book Award-winning novel *Middle Passage,* which was published in 1990. It may be fresh for a new generation of listeners, but for this author twenty-one years later, it's a work I've progressed far beyond in my life. Where, I wondered, was the artistic *challenge* in reading old material? Furthermore, I said, the writers who I hold in highest esteem are, first and foremost, *storytellers*. I have always envisioned my ideal writer to be a raconteur with a robust imagination, a man or woman capable of conjuring on demand a spirited entertainment on *any* subject he or she is asked to dramatize. " Can we do something like that?" I asked. "Have all the participants this year create a new story?" And Margaret Ann, bless her, said okay.

That first year the theme or topic was simple “Bedtime Stories.” And what a happy choice that was, for in every child’s life, during those early years of innocence and trust, the magical story filled with mystery and wonder told at the end of the day---by parents or perhaps grandparents---to help us sleep and seed our dreams pre-dates all the other kinds of stories we experience in life. Or think of this in terms of our ancestors spinning tales around a campfire, holding the other members of their tribe enthralled for hours on end, there in the darkness where the story and its characters---and the question “What happens next?”---was as brightly lit in their minds as the embers of the campfire itself.

Just before this first fund-raiser, I had paid my quarterly taxes and was feeling---ahem---a bit raw. I dutifully pay my taxes because that’s the law, not because I enjoy doing so. I'm not interested in winding up like Wesley Snipes. But for me to say I enjoy it would be for me to tell a lie for the sake of political correctness. And, as a philosopher who is obliged to always value the truth, I don't like lying. So “Sweet Dreams” depicts a not-too-distant future society in which the government taxes people’s dreams in order to raise revenue. Quite possibly people in the Tea Party Movement might enjoy this tongue-in-cheek tale, but it pre-dates that grassroots phenomenon by a decade and wasn't intentionally written for them or their political agendas. Later, “Sweet Dreams” was reprinted in an anthology devoted to black science fiction, *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones*, edited by Sheree R. Thomas (Warner Books, 2004). It is also the first story in my third short story collection, *Dr. King's Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories* (Scribner, 2005).

With that first Bedtime Stories fund-raiser a tradition began. Every year since 1999, the board has selected a topic---always a surprise for the writers who participate--- related to the nocturnal. Some years they have caused this writer to dive deep into the well of my imagination, finding depths I never knew were there. For these themes have been nothing if not diverse from year to year: “Insomnia” (2000), “A Kiss Goodnight” (2001), “Midnight Snack” (2002), “In the Wee Hours” (2003), “Dreamland” (2004), “Moonstruck” (2005), “Night Watch” (2006), “Night Light” (2007), “Night Hawk” (2008), “In Your Dreams” (2009), and “Night Flight” (2010).

The most recent, 2010 event raised $110,000 in a single evening for Humanities Washington's programs for encouraging literacy and the humanities. As daunting an enterprise as it has been every year to create a new story for that wide-ranging list of topics, I must say that this rare opportunity to do so has been a creative blessing for me, demanding but also deeply rewarding (and full of self-discovery) as few assignments have been in my forty-six years of publishing fiction. Over the span of a decade, the Bedtime Stories event has nudged me to create an expansive range of short fictions that I simply would never have dreamed of doing on my own. Never! Furthermore, all the stories I've written for this event have been published, several of them reprinted and anthologized often, broadcast on radio station KUOW in Seattle, and one ("A Kiss Goodnight," which I renamed "Cultural Relativity") was made into a short film by David S. DeCrane and shown at the Newport Beach Film Festival on April 17, 2004. Five of the stories are in *Dr. King's Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories* (the title story sprang from the topic "midnight snack"), and four appear in the philosophy textbook I co-authored in 2010 with Michael Boylan, *Philosophy, An Innovative Introduction: Fictive Narrative, Primary Texts, and Responsive Writing.*

My friend, the late playwright August Wilson, also greatly enjoyed creating fiction for Bedtime Stories when his always demanding schedule allowed him to be in Seattle during the fall. Like medieval troubadours, we both relished the chance to test anew our storytelling process and see what the other had managed to come up with. During our conversations before the event (We receive our theme from the board in spring and have until October to get the story done), August would ask me (or vice verse), "You got *yours* done yet?" and in this playfully asked question there was always a poke of the elbow to one's ribs, a gauntlet thrown down, a twinge of the competitive delight that two veteran artists experience when they are handed the exact same problem to solve (or two kids daring each other to do something), and the immense pleasure they have when the other stands at the microphone and delivers for the first time a job well done (which the rest of the world will only learn about later)---but not for money. Or even publication. No, all the writers have created their Bedtime Stories for free, and in the spirit of generosity and giving of themselves that jazz musicians enjoy when they sit down for an after-

hours jam session, trading off riffs on a single musical theme (“Yeah,” one might say, “That was good, but can you top *this*?”), and learning from each other during a festive evening of good food, good fellowship, and good fiction.

Thanks to Humanities Washington, you can read some of the best Bedtime Stories in *Nightlights: Stories & Essays from Northwest Authors*. Twenty-one authors are represented in this book, which you can order through Amazon. (Sales support Humanities Washington's many programs.) You are certain to enjoy it, for these are entertainments that sprang from the purest creative impulse, from the pleasure skillful literary artists enjoy when they are given the chance to just do their thing---like world-class athletes relaxed and at play, performing not for a gold trophy but simply because exercising their hard-won skills feels so danged good.

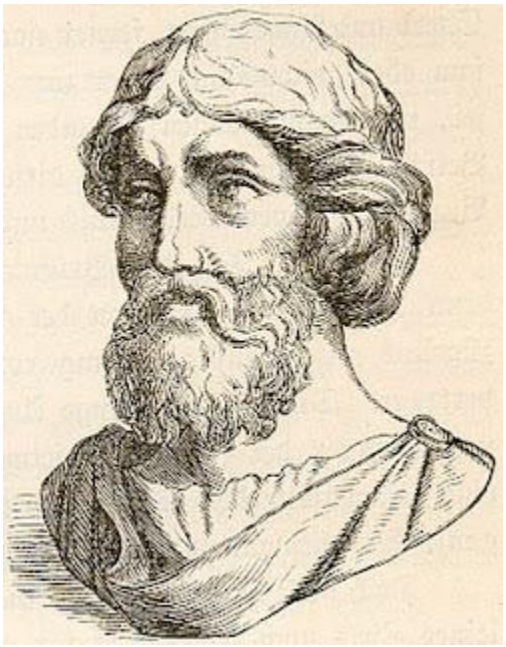
(The above is my introduction for *Nightlights: Stories and Essays by Northwest Authors.)*

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 9:28 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/03/sweet-dreams-and-creation-of-stories.html

Saturday, March 19, 2011

PHILOSOPHY, SCIENCE AND CHARLES JOHNSON

Philosophy: (Gr. *philein*, to love---*sophia*, wisdom)

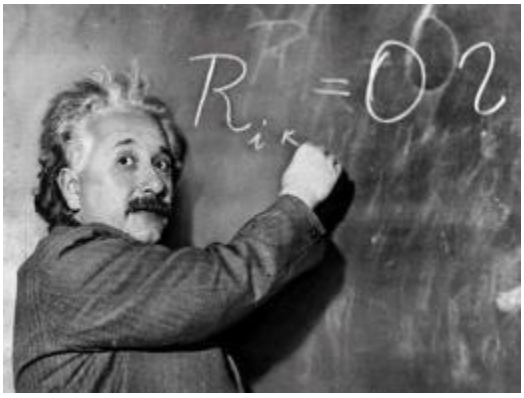


PYTHAGORAS

The most general science. Pythagoras is said have called himself a lover of wisdom. But philosophy has been both the seeking of wisdom and the wisdom sought. Originally, the rational explanation of anything; the general principles under which all facts could be explained; in this sense, indistinguishable from science. Later, the science of the first principles of being; the presuppositions of ultimate reality. Now, popularly, private wisdom or consolation; technically, the science of sciences, the criticism and systematization or organization of all knowledge, drawn from empirical science, rational learning, common experience or wherever. Philosophy includes metaphysics, or ontology and epistemology, logic, ethics, aesthetics, etc. (From *Dictionary of Philosophy*, edited by Dagobert D. Runes, Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1962.)

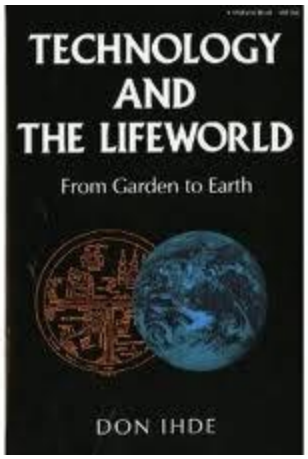
Science has been an integral part of Western philosophy from its beginnings. The great concern of the pre-Socratic philosophers was an effort to understand nature. For example, Democritus presented nature as consisting of atoms, that is, entities differing only in shape and size and being qualitatively indistinguishable. Like Plato, Aristotle affirmed the existence of an objective, public knowledge---the goal of science---and laid the foundations for the natural science of biology. (That goal of a shared, public knowledge has never changed, only the methods we deem appropriate for achieving that goal.) Aristotle gave us even more: logic, political theory, a

psychology and theory of perception, a poetics (or aesthetics), and metaphysics. Put another away, all the intellectual disciplines were originally part of the enterprise we call philosophy. It is only in the modern era that various fields of inquiry broke away, specializing and establishing themselves as separate fields, but the intimate relationship between science and philosophy has endured. Typically, as philosophy students immerse themselves in intellectual history, they must absorb the positions taken and discoveries made by Ptolemy, the Pythagoreans, Francis Bacon, William Gilbert, Nicholas Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, Johann Kepler, Galileo, Isaac Newton, Thomas Hobbes, Rene Descartes, Benedictus Spinoza, John Locke, George Berkeley, Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, and numerous other philosophers and scientists throughout history.



ALBERT EINSTEIN

Once upon a time, back in 1914, 75% of American colleges made an introductory course in philosophy mandatory; by 1993, only 4% made it a requirement. As you might guess, I consider this decline to be tragic. I fondly remember that during my graduate study at SUNY-Stony Brook, the Philosophy and Physics Departments were located in the same building, and one of our former chairmen had a Ph.D. in physics, as did one of the philosophy graduate students with whom I shared an office when we were teaching assistants. I also fondly recall discussing the relatively new (at the time) discovery of black holes in the early ‘70s with one of the physics professors as we both hurried from our shared building across campus to teach our classes. My dissertation advisor Don Ihde has been at work for forty years interpreting, as one of this nation’s leading phenomenologists, the meaning of technology for our lives. I highly recommend his *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (Indiana University Press, 1990).



In my late teens and early twenties I found it inconceivable that anyone (including fiction writers) would hope to write significantly about culture, ideas, and the human experience and *not* have a solid background in philosophy---its methodologies---or Western intellectual history. A strong background in philosophy empowers one to write and think well (*i.e.*, systematically) about almost anything. It is, indeed, "the science of sciences."

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 3:11 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/03/philosophy-science-and-charles-johnson.html

Tuesday, March 22, 2011

A CHARLES JOHNSON REFLECTION: WHEN FRIENDS AND FAITH ARE GOOD THINGS

The intellectual world of my time alienated me intellectually. It was a Babel of false principles and blind cravings, a zoological garden of the mind, and I had no desire to be one of the beasts. Philosopher George Santayana

I cannot say that there has ever been an incident or moment in my life when I questioned my religious faith. But my faith in American literary (and academic) culture was tested in the late 1970s and early 1980s when over-simplified political agendas of one kind or another trumped artistic and intellectual concerns in contemporary black (and American) fiction.

JAMES BALDWIN

Back in 1974, I remember a friend of James Baldwin telling me that Baldwin didn't like my first novel *Faith and the Good Thing* because, according to him, it wasn't "political." Baldwin, who I'd long admired, gave no explanation of what he meant by that. (That novel appeared the same year as his *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and got generally better reviews, which was ironic because I got the idea of using a female protagonist for *Faith* after reading an interview where Baldwin said he was going to use one in *Beale Street*). I also remember giving a reading in Detroit in the 80s, and my white host for that event telling me he saw novelist David Bradley and myself as the "pariahs" of black literature. These were years when writing by black women---along with tribal, ideological, Afrocentric and black cultural nationalist books influenced by the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s---were heavily promoted and embraced by soft-headed, well-meaning but naive whites who didn't know any better, often regardless of the intellectual and artistic

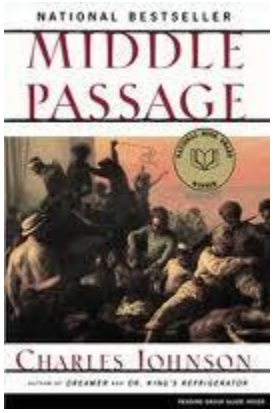
quality of those works; years when black male writers (and black men in general) were relentlessly vilified simply because of their gender. Of course, there's nothing new about that, as writer John McCluskey Jr. once pointed out to me---black men have been demonized since the Colonial period. (But those denunciations of black men had, I knew, absolutely nothing to do with the way my morally exemplary father lived and how he taught me to conduct myself.) Even my good friend Ethelbert Miller, a wise Elder who created this E-Channel and kindly posts these brief essays I'm writing each week, told me that if I'd lived in Washington D.C., instead of Seattle, black nationalists back east (the same people who attacked Ralph Ellison and poet Robert Hayden) would never have let me publish my doctoral dissertation, *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970* (1988).

But two or three things restored my faith. One was the loyalty of my agents Georges and Anne Borchardt (the best literary agents in America) who stuck by me; Anne once remarked that finding a home for *Oxherding Tale* was one of the great achievements of her long career. Something else that shored me up were the readers of my books who wrote to me, like the young, talented black woman poet who recently sent me this message:

> Dear Dr. Johnson:
>
> I don't think I ever told you this and something's pushing me to say it now before I forget. Here it is:
>
> Do you remember the B. Dalton bookstore chain? They went out of business, but they were really popular in American malls in the 80s and early 90s. Anyway, I remember being 12 and 13 years old and going to B. Dalton at Livonia Mall just outside Detroit. And in their super small African American lit section, I would just stand there sometimes and look at those few books and get so frustrated. It seemed the vast majority of those books (almost all of which were fiction) were written by black women who had a grudge (legitimate or not) against black men (*The Color Purple, Beloved, The Women of Brewster Place, For Colored Girls Who've Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf,* etc.), or vice versa. And I remembered wondering why there was no novel dealing with the transport of enslaved Africans to the Americas. Even then, I sensed somehow that the Middle Passage and subsequent enslavement of those millions of African people lay at the root of all the hurt, hatred and bitterness that black female and male writers were slinging at each other. And it seemed to me that if some author would just come along and deal with the original sin, horror and pain of the Middle Passage, then African Americans (or at least African American writers) could lay their weapons down, and (although while never forgetting) move on and be happy and at peace and love each other again.
>
> And then, a few years after I stood in that black book section of B. Dalton pondering my thoughts, I came across a novel by an author named Charles Johnson that addressed all the things I had wondered about the Middle Passage, and answered for all time my

question about if *any* author in this world believed in writing about the romantic love between a black man and a black woman.

MIDDLE PASSAGE is one of those novels that changed me on a cellular level: so deep and quiet I had no idea it was happening, but profoundly and permanently. Thank you for that, Dr. Johnson. I don't know why, but I just thought you ought to know.



And a third source of renewal that restored my faith in the possibilities for American literary culture was the take-no-prisoners courage of the nonpareil cultural critic Stanley Crouch, who wrote for *The Village Voice* a two-page review of *Oxherding Tale,* originally published by a university press, that led directly to its being leased by Grove Press (It has never been out of print since its publication in 1982, and has been translated and taught and written about widely). Crouch, whom I fondly call the "Hanging Judge" was our H.L. Mencken, John Gardner (see his controversial work *On Moral Fiction*) and Albert Murray (See his *Omni-Americans* and must-read essay "The Hero and the Blues") all rolled into one street-wise, two-fisted, and morally incorruptible champion of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Read his *Notes of a Hanging Judge.* Or *The Artificial White Man.* Or *Always in Pursuit.* If you pick up these works, you will find yourself in the presence of a truth-teller, a *very* hip, cosmopolitan black man (and authority on black music, literature and culture) who, if necessary, will knock the stuffings out of you if you doggedly persist in thinking poorly, if your ideas do violence to the common good, or if you cowardly cave in to literary and political fashions and polite foolishness that have no foundation in reality: a man who is a patriot because he *knows* America could not have come into existence without the countless contributions---cultural, political, and economic---of the Negro since 1619. (Believe me, we desperately need clear-thinking men and women like this in 2011.) Judge Crouch has served this nation very well since the early 1980s, and does so in his writing today. Every day. Always at work to correct the dumbing down of our cultural discourse. He was born with one of Hemingway's "built-in shit detectors." He signs off his email messages to me with the letters VIA, meaning, "Victory Is Assured," for truth crushed to the ground *must* rise again. He gave me (and countless others) the courage to resist in the early 80s the mind-dulling,

unquestioning conformity and lazy, ideological thinking involved in socially "going along to get along."

STANLEY CROUCH

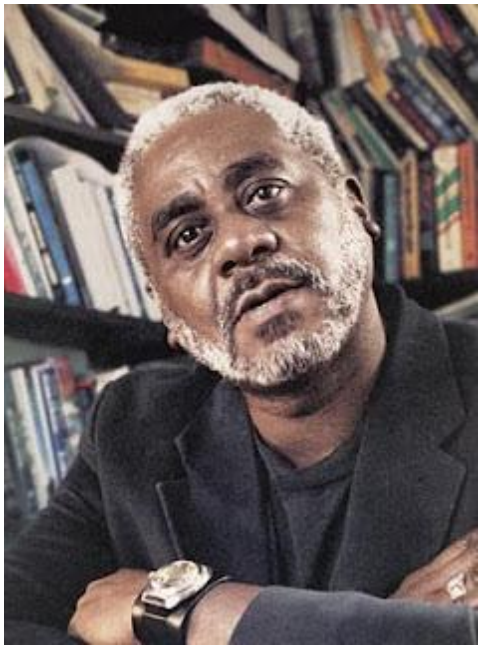
And that is a debt, a gift of personal and professional integrity, I shall never in this lifetime be able to repay. Thank you, Judge. You've won your wings and a seat in heaven.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 12:52 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/03/charles-johnson-reflection-when-friends.html

Friday, March 25, 2011

WHAT IS THE E-CHANNEL?

Are you new to the E-Channel?



The E-Channel presents the words and wisdom of the writer Charles Johnson. It's Charles Johnson LIVE! It was created by E. Ethelbert Miller (that's what the E stands for) in January 2011. It's a one year project in which Miller will interview Johnson about his books, beliefs, and various matters of the heart and mind. The E-Channel presents Johnson's own voice. Every word is his. They are responses to questions asked each week by Miller.

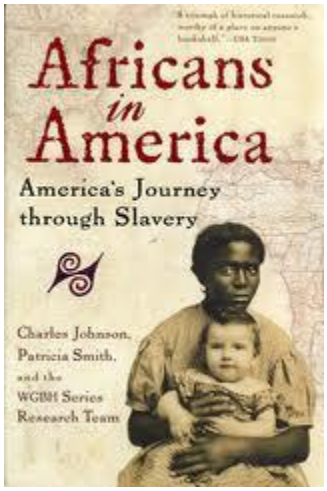
E. ETHELBERT MILLER

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:18 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/03/what-is-e-channel.html

Friday, March 25, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON TALKS ABOUT SOULCATCHER AND OTHER STORIES

If I'm not mistaken, *Africans in America* is the only history book to ever contain original short stories, 12 in all, composed by a contemporary writer to dramatize the historical record on American slavery. Looking back at this companion book for the PBS series in 1998, I'm pleased with these stories and feel privileged that I had the opportunity to write them. But doing the stories was psychologically and spiritually difficult---even slightly damaging---for me.



One of the producers for the PBS series told me that the goal was to make viewers of the four programs and readers of the companion book feel what it must have been like to be either a master or a slave. With that directive, I knew I was about to begin a very painful, imaginative experience. I deliberately put it off for a full year, partly to complete my novel *Dreamer* after seven years of working on it, and to do two weeks of research in Thailand for an article Microsoft requested for one of its on-line travel magazines.

Tired from those experiences at the end of 1997, I almost backed out at the last minute from doing the stories in early 1998, because looming ahead of me was six weeks of book promotion away from home for *Dreamer* starting in April. But I couldn't back out. I'd made a promise and signed a contract. In my study were boxes of primary research provided by historians at Harvard and other universities. Furthermore, if I didn't deliver those 12 stories, the companion book for the PBS series would not be completed by the time the series aired in the fall of 1998, and that would damage a decade of work that executive producer Orlando Bagwell, an old friend from my days of working on film projects at WGBH in the 1970s, had invested in making this powerful series on slavery a reality.

When a writer creates a character, he (or she) must *fully* enter into that fictitious person, feeling the character's life and emotions from within. This process is identical, psychologically, to what

an actor must do when playing a role. In order to do this for the characters who were slaves, I knew I would have to make myself experience in the depths of my imagination and soul the full gamut of negative emotions: anger, outrage, even murderous hatred. All the things that Buddhists work to eliminate from their minds. Worse, I suspected that these emotions---so necessary for writing about slavery---would, to some degree, remain with me long after the stories were done.

So I decided to write all twelve during the month of January, 1998, mainly to shorten the time I would have to dwell emotionally, night and day, on the horrors of the hate-inducing Peculiar Institution. On all that centuries-old violence that I would have to make come alive within me. I told my wife and children that I would be physically at home for the coming month, yes, in case they needed anything; but they had to understand that in his head Daddy would be living in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries.

When I began to write I had no idea what the 12 stories would be---only an idea for the first one, "The Transmission," which would dramatize the Middle Passage. I did have a list, though, of literary forms and different viewpoints I wanted to use to aesthetically diversify the stories. (You should expect that from someone who taught creative writing for 33 years.)

I tentatively began "The Transmission," not using the style I'd employed for my novel *Middle Passage*, but instead one of strict naturalism. I wrote about two brothers in the hold of a slave ship; they'd lost their world and were on that nightmare journey to the New World. I had to imagine and feel *every* detail of their terror and dehumanization. But, then, as I began to ask myself questions about who they were in their village before they were captured, it occurred to me that the older brother might be a *griot*, a living library containing all the history, culture, knowledge, and rituals of his people. A human book. It was then I realized that he, dying, would use that terrible voyage to orally transmit to his younger brother a detailed vision of the world they had lost. This transmission, from brother to brother, saves them both from going mad in the belly of that boat. In other words, that knowledge and cultural experience were things of tremendous value the white man could never take away from them. And after the older brother

dies, the younger one knows that he is the new keeper of their culture and history, and that he is obliged to add new stories to it when he reaches America. Yin and Yang: in the midst of the worst experience imaginable, I mercifully stumbled upon some light in the darkness, an approach that could show the human capacity to snatch something good out of evil. The "Transmission" took about two and a half days to write. Once it was done, I saw how I could do three stories a week for four weeks, working night and day, pausing only to sleep and hastily eat a meal. (I have no recollection whatsoever of events happening in the world outside my study during the month of January 1998.) And even better, I saw how I could portray strength, dignity, and personal agency in the slave characters I had to write about, and not present them as helpless victims.

Today, those twelve fictions comprise my third short story collection, *Soulcatcher and Other Stories*, which is used in classrooms every year for students ranging from middle school through college. Some years ago, I was delighted during a radio interview when the host for that show told me that she at first thought all twelve stories had been written by different people, that I'd only served as the editor who assembled them. That was exactly the affect I wanted to achieve through artistic variations. "The Transmission" uses authorial omniscience (third-person limited) viewpoint. "Confession" shaped itself as a third-person monologue (until the very end of the story, only the slave Tiberius speaks). "Poetry and Politics" is a single scene entirely in dialogue (no narration or description) because I heard rather than saw this exchange between Phyllis Wheatley and her mistress. "A Soldier for the Crown" is cast in second-person viewpoint (which prevents readers from knowing an important fact about the protagonist until the story's end). "Martha's Dilemma" is written in traditional first person, and "The Plague" is rendered as fictitious diary entries by Rev. Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal church (AME) that I was raised in as a child. An epistolary approach (letters) felt best for "A Report from St. Dominique," and in "The People Speak" I could not resist (being an old journalist) the mock-newspaper article as the story's vehicle. By contrast, "Soulcatcher" uses full authorial omniscience as it switches from the viewpoint of a slave hunter to perching on the shoulder of his prey (I've only done this approach once before, in the story "Kwoon"). In "A Lion at Pendelton," mixed prose and verse (George Moses Horton's poem "The Slave's Complaint") structure that narrative. The dominant feature of "The Mayor's Tale" is, obviously, the "Once upon a time" narrative voice usually heard in folk-and-fairy tales. And the final story, "Murderous Thoughts," is composed of alternating first-person monologues, each with a different voice and diction, delivered to an off-camera reporter.

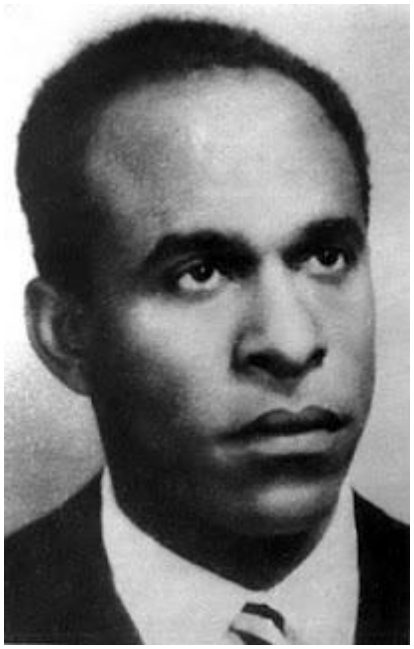
So those are the inter-connecting slavery stories. If I had my druthers, and could do an assignment like this again, I'd pick the period between Emancipation and the legalizing of racial segregation ("separate but equal") in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, because those thirty-one years of American history (they produced people like James Weldon Johnson, boxer Jack Johnson, and W.E.B. Du Bois) have not often been dramatized, years during Reconstruction and after it when life and the possibilities for black Americans were (relatively and briefly) more fluid, and richer in possibilities before Jim Crow became law.

But, yes, as I feared, my month-long immersion in the experience of slavery for the *Africans in America* stories (which was rather like going on an extended meditation retreat) *did* leave in me a residue of "murderous thoughts" whenever I think about this subject (or any matters pertaining to race). The stories took a lot out of me. But for a writer, even a black, practicing Buddhist, that was just part of the territory this assignment demanded that I traverse, and ultimately a small price to pay for bringing those stories to the page.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 6:00 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/03/charles-johnson-talks-about-soulcatcher.html

Monday, March 28, 2011

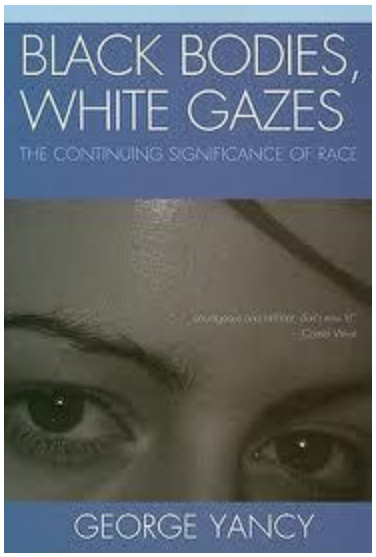
A PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE BLACK BODY



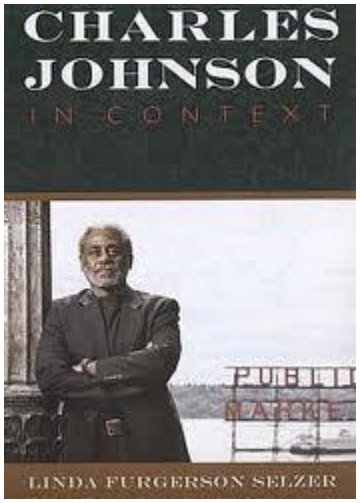
FRANTZ FANON

"The Negro suffers in his body quite differently from the white man." Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks.*

During my years of graduate study at SUNY-Stony Brook campus, all Ph.D. students in Philosophy were required to submit for the faculty's approval an essay using the methods of one of the three major schools of twentieth-century philosophy----Anglo-American (analytic), American (pragmatism), or Continental (phenomenology). Because my background was in the visual and literary arts, and because aesthetics was my field of concentration, I chose the German and French phenomenological traditions, writing during the summer of 1975 "The Primeval Mitosis: A Phenomenology of the Black Body." It is one of the early examinations of the lived-experience of black embodiment in a Eurocentric and racist society that objectifies the black body as a site of stain, uncleanliness, all the "dark things," and denies to black people a life rich and complex as subjects. Over the years, this essay---simply re-titled "A Phenomenology of the Black Body"---has been reprinted and anthologized often, though my own existential choices, personal and professional, progressively moved me away from Western philosophy to Buddhism and Eastern thought.



But that old essay is merely a prolegomenon to the bold, systematic and thorough examination of the lived experience of black embodiment in Dr. George Yancy's *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008). In his phenomenological archaeology of this nearly uncharted territory---the region of the black body as the mediation for consciousness and an epidermalized world---Yancy guides us through the daily construction of whiteness and racial privilege in a fashion no white thinker can achieve, reminding us of Mircea Eliade's insight that "he who reveals to us the meaning of our mysterious inner pilgrimage must be a stranger of another belief and another race." His book is born of struggle, written in America's existential and racial trenches.



In her outstanding literary study, *Charles Johnson in Context* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), Dr. Linda Furgerson Selzer at Pennsylvania State University notes that "A 1974 report published in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*…found that

only thirty-five blacks with the terminal degree in philosophy could be identified nationwide: 'one black Ph.D. in philosophy for every million black citizens'."

That was my era in Philosophy, a field that for 2500 years has been dominated by white men. Dr. Yancy, who belongs to a new generation of black philosophers and teaches in the Department of Philosophy at Duquesne University, courageously and brilliantly continues the "struggle" to liberate American academic philosophy from its racial, sexual, and cultural myopia in book after book: *The Philosophical I: Personal Reflections on Life in Philosophy; African-American Philosophers: 17 Conversations; Cornel West: A Critical Reader; Philosophy in Multiple Voices; White on White/Black on Black; What White Philosophy Looks Like: African American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question; Narrative Identities: Psychologists Engaged in Self-Construction*; and, most recently, *The Center Must Not Hold: White Women Philosophers On the Whiteness of Philosophy*. He has just completed the editing of a book on African American and Latin American philosophical perspectives; and, with his wife Susan, the editing for a book on rap, hip hop and therapy.

GEORGE YANCY

Dr. Yancy's contribution to Philosophy is original, long-awaited, seminal, and crucial for our understanding of race and culture at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Read the following review and you will see what I mean.

White Gazes as an Embodied
Philosophy of Race
John T. Warren
Yancy, G. (2008). Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. 267 pp. ISBN-10: 0742552985. $29.95 (paperback).
Perhaps the hardest lesson to teach my graduate advisees is the art of naming, with clarity and specificity, what it is that they are trying to address in their research and writing. Often, they seem to circulate around an idea, dance right up the edge of an argument, only to stop without actually saying it. It is hard to teach, this art. George

Yancy (2008), in his remarkable book Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race, provides an exemplar extraordinaire of what is possible when, with precision, one names the stakes and makes the case for how and why social systems remain so fixed in our imagination. In this review, I hope to capture what I find to be the real payoff in Yancy's latest book (see also Yancy, 2002, 2004, 2005); simply put, he creates what I have come to see as an embodied philosophy of race. In the end, his book is not just a primer for good writing that names the mechanisms of race's persistence on our collective imaginations, but also a powerful example of how body-centered writing complicates our very conception of race in America.

The cover of Yancy's text offers an endorsement from Cornel West: ''courageous and brilliant; don't miss it.'' I agree. However, more significant than the brilliance of the volume is Yancy's unyielding courage. Indeed, a book that situates the Black body as subject to the White gaze (always, all the time, as a result of our collective historicity) is courageous in that when naming such systemic and material acts, Yancy cuts against the academic tendencies to skirt the issue. In other words, when talking about race and power, academics tend to fall into the trap of niceness, reducing racism and white supremacy to talk of ''systems'' and ''discourses.'' Such work, while important, sidesteps the immediacy of racism's felt effects, leaving individuals relatively untouched by their own racist acts. I find this often in my own writing and teaching--if I talk of ''patterns'' or ''systems of power,'' I can often avoid feeling like I'm naming people, calling them out. Yancy's text troubles the very distinction between individuals and systems by writing from an embodied location--his ''I'' in this book is not abstracted nor simply a standpoint from which he writes. Rather, he is a body, a Black body, who encounters racism in and through his everyday communicative interactions. By implication, Whites who enact the gaze, who embody racism, are also individually implicated (although not solely responsible) for their/our actions. This is not a radically new idea, but the careful crafting and powerful naming Yancy employs is surely insightful.

The text pivots around the argument that the White, racist gaze on Black bodies ''is itself a performance, an intervention, a violent form of marking, labeling, as different, freakish, animal-like'' (p. 93). He makes this case by offering several contexts to see this White gaze at work on Black Bodies. In Chapter 1, Yancy examines the ''elevator effect,'' conducting a phenomenology of what happens communicatively when his body enters an elevator that is occupied by a White woman. This analysis examines how his body is rendered, is produced communicatively as the stereotypical predator, regardless of his own actions:

Although I do not feel my body image slip away from me, pushing me toward the precipice of epistemic violence, ever closer to living in the state of self-hatred, it is

precisely within the context of various racist social spaces that I feel as if I become ‘‘Black’’ (read: evil, sexually rapacious) anew within the context of each encounter with the generative dimensions of the white gaze/imaginary. (p. 23)

From his own encounters with whiteness in the academy (Chapter 2) to his careful reading of textual constructions of whiteness in literature and autobiography (i.e., Toni Morrison in Chapter 6 and Frederick Douglass in Chapter 5), the book proceeds to detail the effects of the White gaze on the Black body. The White gaze is exposed as a performative act that enacts violence and works to obscure its own production. In this way, because the body is always a central concern, the philosophic take on racism's production is always an embodied form of argument, naming the ways real bodies are implicated in these lines of argument.

In what I find to be the most innovative claim in the book, Chapter 7 examines the production of whiteness as ambush, as a reproductive and insidious form of cultural dominance and power enacted even by those who strive against racism. From the dangers of well-intentioned theorists to the explosive rants of Michael Richards (Seinfeld's Kramer), Yancy details how racism ‘‘is embedded within one's embodied habitual engagement with the social world and . . . is weaved within the unconscious, impacting everyday mundane transactions’’ (p. 230). As an almost mystical force, whiteness is seen here as a deeply engrained part of our collective world--Yancy cautions that Whites need to be careful of imagining that they/we have arrived. Building from communication research examining whiteness as a performatively constituted identity, he reminds us that one does not individually own the ways whiteness has been constituted; rather, whiteness is produced in ways that individual subjects may not even be aware of. Yancy here makes two important links to bring the themes together. First, he argues that whiteness cannot be examined solely by Whites--as White constituted subjects, there are inevitably gaps they/we cannot see; the White scholar is always in danger of being ambushed by the very whiteness she/he seeks to disrupt. Second, he concludes by tying the system and the individual back together as mutually constitutive parts of the whole, arguing that we'd do well to remember that whiteness ‘‘makes tyrants out of human beings’’ (p. 247). This link of the individual to the system is one of the most convincing cases I have read, arguing that to separate the individual from the system is to deny the effects of whiteness--the bodily consequences and privileges that we all experience each and every day through our pigmented skin. Here, Yancy notes the ethical imperative that we all share to do the work of challenging the normative status of whiteness.

I end here by reiterating why I think this is a courageous book. Constantly in danger of being charged with being ‘‘angry’’ or being ‘‘too sensitive’’ or ‘‘making too

much'' of his experiences or his readings of events, Yancy dismisses those charges in two significant and, quite frankly, brave ways. First, he does careful and systematic research. His phenomenology of his body in the elevator (Chapter 1) alone stands as a sophisticated piece of philosophic writing. His research is well-argued and carefully reflexive in order to present a cogent and critical take on the relationship between the disciplinary gaze from White folks and the effects that gaze has on Black bodies. Second, Yancy consistently names the practices that constitute White gaze as a violent performance of producing a ''technology of docility'' that produces the dark body as fixed (p. 141), all while engaging the reader as an ally. In this way, I feel implicated in Yancy's work while never feeling blamed. As a White reader, I found myself both convinced of Yancy's claims while also energized to renew my dedication toward challenging the ways whiteness works within and through my own gaze. In this way, I am both an instrument of the system and also individually implicated in that system's work.

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Tuesday, March 29, 2011

AT HOME INSIDE THE MIND OF CHARLES JOHNSON

For all of 2011, poet and arts activist E. Ethelbert Miller is pitching questions my way. From week to week I never know what he'll ask me next, but all his questions are thought-provoking, like this one:

"What are your definitions of Hope, Sin and Forgiveness? How have these ideas affected your life and work?"

Well.
Long ago, I read that in the New Testament the Greek word for "sin" is hamartia, meaning "to miss the mark, to err." I've always been fond of this meaning because of the image it suggests, that of an archer who tries his best to hit a target, but his arrow goes astray. Being human we are naturally prone to err, as C.S. Lewis expressed so well in his often quoted statement: " Five senses; an incurably abstract intellect; a haphazardly selective memory; a set of preconceptions and assumptions so numerous that I can never examine more than a minority of them---never become conscious of them all. How much of total reality can such an apparatus let through?"

Given our perceptual and epistemological limitations, it seems to me that we can be forgiven for occasionally "missing the mark" or falling short of whatever one might mean by "perfection." In other words, as the popular saying goes, "We all have the right to be wrong."

As for "hope," that's something every Buddhist feels every day since the Dharma makes clear that we, as individuals, create our own happiness and suffering. This is nothing more than cause and effect (or karma, if you like). With each positive, selfless action we establish the basis for future happiness. An old formula goes like this: We work to nurture the good that exists, and create new possibilities for the arising of the good in the future; we work to eliminate the evil that exists, and eliminate the conditions for the arising of future evil. And because one of the marks of existence is change or impermanence, we know that even a "bad" situation must change. And so will "good" ones, for those terms---"good" and "bad"---are relative. Thus a follower of the Dharma never feels too sad when experiencing a "bad" moment or too ecstatic when undergoing a "good" one, for neither will last for very long. Generally, though, Buddhists are happy because we know we are free---moment by moment---to change, improve, get better, and make progress on the Path.

But a few more words must be said about the relativity of "perfection" and "imperfection." In Japanese Zen Buddhism we encounter the term *wabi-sabi*, i.e., art that provides a direct, intuitive insight into truth. Far different from Western theories of the beautiful, in *wabi* (things fresh, simple and quiet) *sabi* (things radiating beauty with age), which covers arts as diverse as Zen gardens, flower arrangement, the tea ceremony and poetry, we find a preference for such features as imperfection, impermanence and incompleteness (along with the idiosyncratic, modesty and humility), for these things too capture the beautiful.

Early in my study of Sanskrit 13 years ago, I had to translate this sentence in my workbook:

भ्रन्तिररिर्न अभवत

The translation? “The error was not an enemy.”

Needless to say, coming on that sentence so early in my learning this language brought me a sense of relief (and laughter).

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 10:51 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/03/at-home-inside-mind-of-charles-johnson.html