

**READING, INSTRUCTION, AND PLURALIST DEMOCRACY:  
THE CRITICAL PRAGMATISM OF CHARLES JOHNSON**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper offers a philosophical interpretation of the work of Charles Johnson, an award-winning African-American author of novels, short stories, critical reviews and philosophical essays. It highlights the pragmatist leanings that can be identified in his work by tracing a genealogy of black, cosmopolitan pragmatism from William James to W. E. B. DuBois to Alain Locke to Ralph Ellison to Charles Johnson. Johnson's unique views on reading, instruction through fiction and pluralist democracy, when fused together, result in what has been termed his "critical pragmatism." The paper concludes with a demonstration of such pragmatist themes in two short stories from Johnson's collection, SOULCATCHER.*

"...there is more engagement with philosophy—Western and Eastern—in my work than you will find anywhere in the history of black American literature."<sup>1</sup>

Charles Johnson

Charles Johnson is an award-winning American novelist, illustrator, reviewer, screen and teleplay writer, essayist, short fiction author, professor, literary scholar and philosopher—in short, a rare Renaissance man for our age. Among his four novels, *Middle Passage* won the 1990 National Book Award for Fiction, making Johnson the first African-American male to win the award since Ralph Ellison in 1953 for his *Invisible Man*. Johnson has, also, authored three collections of short stories, two books of cartoons, a scholarly work on aesthetics, a children's story, and a textbook for introductory philosophy. His work has been translated into eight languages, and has been the subject of a half dozen scholarly and critical studies. He was a 1998 MacArthur Fellow (genius award) and a 2002 recipient of an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award for Literature. Johnson holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from

Stony Brook University (New York), where he studied American and continental philosophy, and is the Pollock Professor for Excellence in English and Writing emeritus at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Readers of Charles Johnson have readily identified spiritual and idealistic leanings in his work. Such emphases may, at first glance, seem removed from the themes and concerns of pragmatism. For sure, philosophically astute scholars have analyzed in considerable detail the influences of Marxism, existentialism, phenomenology, the ancient Greeks and Buddhism on the thinking and writing of Johnson. But three recent black studies scholars—William Gleason, Linda Furgerson Selzer, and Gary Storhoff—have all argued convincingly that the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism, while present, has remained largely unexplored in Johnson's work. All three are literary specialists well versed in philosophy, and thereby appreciate the essential role philosophy, including pragmatism, plays in all of Johnson's writings, fiction and non-fiction. While all three have influenced the shaping of this paper, Gleason's exploration of what he calls Johnson's 'critical pragmatism' has had the greatest resonance with me and will be examined in some detail following brief citations from Selzer and Storhoff.

Selzer helpfully reminds us that continental philosophy, Eastern thought and pragmatism all gained new or renewed prominence in the post-war twentieth century academy "...specifically as alternatives to the entrenched dominance of analytic philosophy."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, such traditions enjoyed special importance to African-American philosophy students and scholars, all being philosophies "...whose insights seemed directly applicable to the economic, historical and psychological status of marginalized groups" (27). In the case of Johnson, Selzer contends that in phenomenology,

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<sup>1</sup> William Nash, "A Conversation With Charles Johnson" in McWilliams, Jim, *Passing The Three Gates: Interviews With Charles Johnson*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004, p. 222

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<sup>2</sup> Linda Furgerson Selzer, *Charles Johnson in Context*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009, p. 21. Page numbers for quotations from Selzer will be hereafter indicated in parentheses in the text following the quote.

Marxism and pragmatism he discovered ‘alternative epistemologies’ that provided “...a method for exploring the repressed subject position of African-Americans and a justification for practicing black philosophical fiction” (49). Taken together these philosophies merged in such a way as to enable Johnson to create his own, original contribution to a critical moment in the history of philosophy in America and to American philosophy more particularly. Accordingly, with regard to themes dear to pragmatism, Selzer directs readers to Johnson’s essay, “Philosophy and Black Fiction,” wherein he defines philosophical black fiction as “art that interrogates experience,” with the further claim that “philosophical hermeneutics and the exploration of meaning are native to all literary production.”<sup>3</sup>

Storhoff adds to an emerging portrait of Johnson’s pragmatism by pointing out that his view of history is fundamentally pragmatic in the sense that “Knowledge of the past is important primarily as a means toward a greater end: improving the health of the present. Johnson stresses the freedom and power of the present to use the past, recognizing that the past is always, like the nation itself, a continuous and evolving creation in the present moment.”<sup>4</sup> This insight applies to individuals as well.

Storhoff further characterizes Johnson’s vision as broadly ecological and melioristic, noting that American pragmatism is clearly one “...philosophical branch that becomes a thematic structure in Johnson’s work,” though “treated with subtlety and qualification” (16). Even further, he suggests a possible link with contemporary pragmatism, such as Cornel West’s

‘prophetic pragmatism,’ in which humanist ethics, democratic liberalism, and an Old Testament sense of justice are conjoined. But perhaps his most salient point resides in the contention that Johnson’s work adds to an “...American pragmatism that insists that all theoretical systems must begin with the actual, historically concrete, temporal experience of a person living through an ordinary life” (72). No wonder then that Johnson, the philosopher, became a writer of fiction.

I have thus far used the phrase ‘black philosophical pragmatism’ while my title refers to Johnson’s ‘critical pragmatism.’ What do these terms mean in the context of the present inquiry? In seeking an answer, we will be aided by the work of Princeton University scholar, William Gleason, and by brief, suggestive interpretations of some of Johnson’s critical reviews and two of his short stories. After summarizing Gleason’s basic argument and reflecting interpretively on two samples of Johnson’s short fiction, I will discuss further the terms in the title of this paper, drawing them together as a way of hopefully offering a persuasive case for Johnson as pragmatist.

In various of Johnson’s critical essays, book reviews and fictional works, such as his last novel, *Dreamer*, and the short story collection, *Soulcatcher*, Gleason finds his pragmatic vision emerging in its full complexity. Such historical fictions, he claims, “...advance Johnson’s pragmatic program for a contemporary politics of reading by imaginatively representing—often through explicit scenes of directed readings and practical instruction—the pluralist democracy he sees struggling to be born.”<sup>5</sup> Gleason, thereby, detects ways in which Johnson’s work resonates, for instance, with a particular strain of American pragmatism, “...cosmopolitan and

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Johnson, “Philosophy and Black Fiction,” in Byrd, Rudolph, ed., *I Call Myself An Artist: Writings By and About Charles Johnson*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999, pp. 80, 84.

<sup>4</sup> Gary Storhoff, *Understanding Charles Johnson*. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2004, p. 149. Page numbers for quotations from Storhoff will be hereafter indicated in parentheses in the text following the quote.

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<sup>5</sup> William Gleason, “‘Go There,’ The Critical Pragmatism of Charles Johnson,” in Connor, Marc C. and Nash, William R., eds., *Charles Johnson: The Novelist as Philosopher*. Jackson, MISS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007, p. 83. Page numbers for quotations from Gleason will be hereafter indicated in parentheses in the text following the quote.

pluralist in its leanings, that has had an ongoing significance for many black cultural workers” (83). In effect, he sees Johnson (over the past four plus decades) becoming increasingly committed to certain blueprints— suggestions for reading, thinking and living in contemporary America— which, in turn, represent what might be considered Johnson’s strategic interventions in vital historical and cultural debates that show surprising debts to a certain revised lineage in philosophical pragmatism. While Gleason does not claim that pragmatism is the only, or strongest, philosophical influence on Johnson’s work, this newly conceived lineage, placing him in an evolving strain of pragmatist concern and thought, amplifies our understanding of Johnson’s robust philosophical imagination. A brief look at this proposed line of development in pragmatist thought follows.

While a common shorthand version of the development of early pragmatism correctly draws a line from Emerson to James to Dewey, Gleason identifies another branch of the genealogical tree of particular importance in the context of African-American literary, cultural and philosophical history. This expanded lineage begins with James but extends to DuBois and Alain Locke. While noting important differences between these two figures (particularly in their studies of philosophy), Gleason claims that both embraced a central feature of James’s philosophical method, namely his ‘pragmatic pluralism.’ He then contrasts pragmatic pluralism with the better known earlier call for ‘cultural pluralism,’ a strategy of recognizing and preserving multiple and discrete ethnic groups in a celebration of what might be called identity logic. Gleason asserts that black philosophers like Locke followed James’s pragmatic pluralist lead and called for a deracialized and universalist approach to culture, perhaps best captured by the term, ‘cosmopolitanism.’ It is through “...the figure of the cosmopolitan...the person who belongs to the whole world---that African-American pragmatists of the early twentieth century projected their complex view of international human identity and

human creation, summed up in Locke’s credo that ‘culture has no color’ “ (84).

In critically interrogating ‘identity logic’, Gleason adds two additional figures to this expanded line of pragmatist evolution—Ralph Ellison and Charles Johnson. He appropriates a useful, though perhaps puzzling, phrase from scholar, Ross Posnock, namely, ‘antirace race men and race women,’ and applies it to both Ellison and Johnson, whom he characterizes as pluralist, democratic pragmatists. Such figures “...do not believe in essential racial identities (thus they are ‘antirace’) and yet...act in what they perceive as the best interests of the race, instead of sitting idly by” (85). Such literary artists vigorously assert the freedom of art from a binding racial representativeness while simultaneously rooting their work deeply in black history, experience and culture, seeking, if you will, a form of race uplift. This sort of pragmatist legacy, of course, resists the separatism (racial, cultural and philosophical) explicit, for example, in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960’s and 70’s, a movement to which the young Charles Johnson was initially attracted.

Overall I tend to concur with Gleason’s judgment that Johnson is arguably the best example of a contemporary black writer who belongs to and extends this important and influential branch of the pragmatist tradition. Put more concretely, Gleason identifies Johnson as “...the most salient contemporary practitioner of the cosmopolitan pragmatism articulated by DuBois, Locke and Ellison” (86). However, unlike other artist/scholars of his generation, Johnson’s participation in the pragmatic turn of the twentieth century reveals itself on several levels and in very public ways. Through his many critical essays, op-ed pieces, and book reviews for leading publications,<sup>6</sup> along with his award winning fiction, he

<sup>6</sup> Gleason champions Johnson’s critical essays and book reviews, in particular, as powerful loci for his philosophic and pragmatist concerns, claiming that his reviews “...

has positioned himself as a very public antirace race man. Given all these factors, Gleason concludes, "Johnson stands as the most important late-twentieth/early twenty-first century black practitioner of the Jamesian pragmatic pluralism of DuBois, Locke and Ellison. " Moreover, "Johnson is the inheritor, and also necessarily the updater, not only of their democratic cosmopolitanism, their suspicion of identity logic, and their sense of 'overlap as the condition of culture,' but also of their roles as public intellectuals" (87). In sum, Gleason proposes a genealogy of black, cosmopolitan pragmatism leading from James to Dubois to Locke to Ellison to Johnson. The most significant and recurring pragmatist themes, linking these figures together, appear then to be, 1) pragmatist pluralism, 2) a focus on relations and intersubjectivity, 3) democratic cosmopolitanism, 4) abiding suspicion of essentialist identity logic, and 5) exploration of the role of public intellectual.

Johnson's life experience and philosophical leanings align him with the social and political dimension of pragmatist thought, rather than strictly the metaphysics, epistemology or logic of the pragmatist tradition. As such, we note something distinctive in his work, namely, a complex relationship between writing and reading, instruction (non-didactic), democracy and prospects for

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evince a similar [to his fiction] interventional and instructional pragmatics"(88). In his very first review (1977) of Richard Wright's *American Hunger*, Johnson invokes William James in the first paragraph, proceeding to challenge both the segregatory impulse of much reviewing and solipsistic aesthetics of recent works of fiction. His main point in the review is that Wright is a deeply gifted 'archeologist of consciousness,' a 'dramatist of an open black consciousness.' As such he revitalizes our perceptions and values, our ways of seeing others and our world. In numerous other reviews, Johnson emphasizes the move to intersubjective communication as a pre-condition for change in the world. In a pragmatist spirit, he often returns to the themes of interconnection, the priority of relations over isolated things and beings, the communicative and pedagogic functions of language, and the role of interpretation as an opening to the other and the world.

social change. This returns us to the terms employed in the title of this paper. In brief, his fiction and non-fiction writings frequently offer an educational and democratic critique in which Johnson subtly guides his readers through the crucial questions of what, how and why to read. His goal is always exploration of ideas and liberating instructional insight rather than sheer dogmatism, as he seeks to provide active and practical directions to readers. He presupposes a basic and necessary relationship between good writing (literary art), responsible reading, and clear (critical) thinking for the health of a democratic society. As pragmatists like Dewey have insisted, democracy requires the capacity for, and practice of, critical reasoning if it is to resist the enemies of the democratic process itself. Johnson's 'aesthetic instructions' (e.g., writing in different styles, developing the wholeness of characters), therefore, are never strictly for the sake of aesthetics or culture in isolation, but rather for an invigorated democratic practice. His own very personal aesthetic stance is, thus, cast in a language recalling the cosmopolitan and universalist concerns identified earlier in James, Dubois, Locke and Ellison. Such a perspective entails that each of us as persons, as well as each society, is best understood in terms of what Johnson likes to call interdependent cultural mongrels (consider, for instance, his story, "Dr. King's Refrigerator"). A pointed example of this perspective is reflected in a somewhat reluctant Johnson gradually evolving from early criticism to a place wherein he fully appreciates and praises Ellison for his integrative, pluralist, democratic pragmatism.

Reading, instruction and pluralist democracy, as conceived and practiced by Johnson, are, when fused together, what Gleason describes as Johnson's 'critical pragmatism.' Johnson himself once stated. "I read for three reasons: to laugh, to cry, and to learn something."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Johnson, "A Symposium on Contemporary American Fiction," *Michigan Quarterly Review* (1987), p. 755.

In reference to what could be termed a contemporary politics of reading, he reminds us that reading (and writing, of course) can be a radical, ethical act of critique and catalyst for change. In this he echoes Camus or the Sartre of *What Is Literature?* If undertaken with critical evaluation, reading can and should be at times focused on social problems and directed toward social change. Indeed, authors can, through their art, offer practical instruction. Such instruction is implicit to fictions that teach. For Johnson, fiction or, better literary art, is never simply for entertainment or temporary distraction from life. Fiction must involve vital engagement with lived experience and interpretation, and, in the best examples, stimulates critical insight and breakthrough learning. Pluralist democracy, as noted earlier when articulating a plausible black pragmatist genealogy, is then for Johnson a cosmopolitan reality, or better yet, a prospect, struggling to be born or fully realized.

This complex, multi-layered relationship between reading, instruction and thought, and democracy is what yields, in its highly unique mixture, Johnson's 'critical pragmatism.' This particular sensibility is on display in numerous of Johnson's short stories, including those found in *Soulcatcher and Other Stories*.<sup>8</sup> Some brief, interpretive suggestions concerning two of the stories should help to illustrate Johnson's outlook on reading, instruction and democratic social change.

In "Poetry and Politics" artistic freedom is the cherished goal, while interwoven with racial and gender issues. In the narrative, Johnson stages a conversation between celebrated African-American poet, Phyllis Wheatley, and her mistress about Phyllis's latest poem, a rather poor attempt at protest art. In this scene, says Gleason, "Johnson dramatizes what are surely his own concerns about the perceived necessity for African-American artists to speak truth to power rather than to beauty"

(97). In truth, for Johnson there need not be an either-or choice. Speaking truth to power and beauty can and should occur simultaneously. The racial and aesthetic ambiguity of the narrative is captured in a final scene wherein the mistress reads Phyllis a letter from non-other than George Washington, who thanks and praises her for an earlier poem celebrating his virtues. He applauds her genius as a poet (not as a woman or African-American), while revealing that he resisted having the poem published for fear it would bring accusations of vanity upon him. For Phyllis the confounding lesson of the letter is highlighted when Washington signs off with an expression of his great respect, referring to himself as her obedient and humble servant. The word, 'servant,' causes Phyllis to ask her mistress, "This is a complicated time, isn't it?, a multi-layered question to say the least. So, what instruction are readers to take from the overt reversal of the racial and gender power dynamic that ends the story? What might it suggest about intellectual and artistic freedom that triumphs over stereotypes, hostility and socially structured role expectations? What might it imply about open-mindedness and respect for integrity in artistic production? What does it reveal about interconnection, dialogue, and democratic respect for diversity? The story provokes questions, but does not give firm or final answers.

In "The People Speak" Johnson creates a fictional newspaper article to reveal to his readers the unanimous vote taken by roughly three thousand black Philadelphians to reject a proposed African colonization plan promoted by prominent black leaders. In "Poetry and Politics" Phyllis Wheatley had resisted becoming a pamphleteer for the purpose of redressing injustice. In her thought, while such writings, including news articles, may stir people for a moment, in the long course of history they will be forgotten just as the injustices they assailed will be forgotten. At best, such items may be preserved as historical documents, but never carry the power of art or philosophical argument. Johnson himself

<sup>8</sup> Charles Johnson, *Soulcatcher and Other Stories: Twelve Powerful Tales About Slavery*. New York: Harcourt, 1998.

is a former journalist, and taking both short stories together one can envision a lively debate ensuing over the primacy of poetry or art over journalism and propaganda, or vice versa. Which form induces a growing public discussion and broad-reaching social change? What varied roles do each play in the life of democracy? Which brings instruction that carries an impact? When considering all the *Soulcatcher* stories, we witness Johnson's gradually intensifying embrace of Ellison's pragmatic pluralist aesthetics, accompanied by an evolving political vision requiring a measure of flexibility and growth over fixedness. As Gleason proposes, "...by dramatizing critical thinking and authorial choice...Johnson's virtuosic stories instantiate, at the level of form [and content], the complex decisions and debates necessary for a pluralist democracy to thrive"(99).

I would hope that what has been at least suggested here may provide some impetus for further examination of Johnson as perhaps the premiere inheritor of the Jamesian pragmatic pluralism practiced by key black intellectuals and artists in the twentieth century. Without question, Johnson's writing equally embraces politics, culture, philosophy and history. Given this synthesized, mongrel mixture of interests and concerns, we may well be left to wonder, following Gleason, whether his prime contribution to contemporary literary and philosophical discourse "...is his pragmatist--and quite political--interest in the enabling and inherently integrative processes of democracy, processes that for Johnson are best understood and assessed through acts of reading, thinking and critical interpretation" (99-100). In his deep and abiding care for the world--and changing, revitalizing the world via the agency of the writer/critic/philosopher--perhaps we can see glimmers of why Johnson adopted the role of 'critical pragmatist' in the first place.