

## The Slave Trade in the Work of Fox, Johnson, and Spielberg

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**Ya-Huei Lin,**

**"The Slave Trade in the Work of Fox, Johnson, and Spielberg"**

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Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 14.5 (2012)***

Special issue ***New Work about the Journey and Its Portrayals***

**Ed. I-Chun Wang**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss5/>>

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**Abstract:** In her article "The Slave Trade in the Work of Fox, Johnson, and Spielberg," Ya-huei Lin analyzes perspectives politics and ideology in Paula Fox's *The Slave Dancer* (1973), Charles R. Johnson's *The Middle Passage* (1990), and Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997). Lin's intertextual examination is based on Walter Benjamin's historical materialism and Louis Althusser's thought on art and ideology and she explores how Fox's, Johnson's, and Spielberg's texts make one see aspects of ideology including the authors' politics of representation. Taking into account the portrayals, as well as the portrayed, Lin discusses the "journey" as a prominent aspect of slavery.

Ya-Huei LIN

### The Slave Trade in the Work of Fox, Johnson, and Spielberg

As recorded by the U.S. Supreme Court, the Spanish slaver *Amistad* was brought into the District of Connecticut for salvage by the United States brig *Washington* in 1839. This occurred thirty-one years after the abolition of the slave trade in the United States in 1808. Such a controversial event concerning *Amistad* — together with the notorious journeys of slavers like *Trouvadore* and *Pons* in the 1840s — exposes not only the inefficiency of that law of abolition, but also the intentions of the slave traders and their explicit and implicit supporters. According to the U.S. Supreme Court, the Black slaves in the Spanish schooner *Amistad* were "Natives of Africa, and were kidnapped there, and were unlawfully transported to Cuba in violation of the laws and treaties of Spain, and of the most solemn edicts and declarations of that government" ("United States" <<http://supreme.justia.com/us/40/518/case.html>>). The Supreme Court thereby declared the Black people in *Amistad* to be free and that they should be sent back to Africa based on the act of Congress of 3 March 1819.

In the above mentioned document of the U.S. government, two matters invite critical attention. First, the official report points out that the African slave trade was abolished according to the laws of Spain and that the dealing in that trade was deemed "a heinous crime." Thus said, it not only pays its due respect to the government of Spain but also paves the way for the final decision of the U.S. Supreme Court. Further, it notes that it is upon "the invariable principles of justice and international law" that the court settles on the conflict of rights between Spain and other parties involved. This statement is at once broad and deep. Besides its international concern with the government of Spain, the resolution of the court is supranational in the sense that it appeals directly to justice, namely that "the first requisite of civilization" is to assure that "a law once made will not be broken in favor of an individual" (Freud 49). At the same time, while arguing in resounding reason, this verdict of the U.S. Supreme Court nevertheless bares unwittingly an inconvenient fact in US-American history — the fact that the "heinous crime" of trading slaves was still endorsed in the United States, especially in the southern states where it remained legal for two more decades until President Abraham Lincoln finally signed the Emancipation Proclamation on 1 January 1863. Thus, in my opinion, the righteous language of reason adopted by the U.S. Supreme Court turns out to be questionable because the slave trade continued in the U.S. South. Second, the U.S. Supreme Court also points out that "the treaty with Spain never could have been intended to take away the equal rights of all foreigners who should assert their claims to equal justice before the Courts of the United States, or to deprive such foreigners of the protection given to them by other treaties or by the general law of nations" ("United States" <<http://supreme.justia.com/us/40/518/case.html>>). Endowed with the promises of equal justice and protection, this grand official gesture of hospitality toward "all foreigners," however, cannot but stop short before the divide that separates them from the born slaves in the South of the United States. The latter, obviously, fails to fit the category of "foreigners" since they were actually born in U.S. The Supreme Court thereupon bypassed conveniently the controversy surrounding the born slaves' claims to equal justice and protection.

The film *Amistad* presents the forced journey of Cinqué and his people — the Mende from Sierra Leone — as well as the ensuing judicial processes of justice. The film transforms vividly the words of the official report of the U.S. Supreme Court into pictures from the kidnapping of Cinqué and his people in their own country, their involuntary voyage to the Lomboko Slave Fortress by *Tecora* (a Portuguese slave ship), the purchase by Spaniards in the auction, their transportation to *Amistad* and their munity. The cinematic portrayal of the true historical event of *Amistad* aside, two features in this film are noteworthy. In the first place it is in his own unique language that John Quincy Adams, former U.S. president, addresses the U.S. Supreme Court and defends Cinqué and his people successfully. A mixture of wisdom, staunch moral strength, and sanguine sharpness, Adams appeals to the innermost of his audience directly and to the conscience of the individuals, as well as to the essence of a true democratic country. Unlike the somewhat evasive rhetoric of justice adopted by the U.S. Supreme Court, Adams's speech confronts society and defies even the political preference of Martin Van Buren, the President of the United States at that time. Adams dares a new interpretation of the law and

highlighting the fear of civil war as the real cause of this judicial dispute over the case of Cinqué and his people. By invoking the strength and wisdom of the ancestors, Adams encourages his people to honor that tradition of justice in the common pursuit of freedom. Concurrently, he urges the U.S. Supreme Court to judge and rule the case of the *Amistad* with courage and open-mindedness and to do what is right without fears and biases. Adams's voice of anti-slavery, in the cinematic text of *Amistad*, corresponds in an interesting way to the chorus of abolitionists singing "Amazing Grace" and the story-telling about Jesus Christ by a comrade of Cinqué. The feel of Christianity, I argue, imbues to a great extent the portrayal of the US-American social context under the reign of President Van Buren (1837-1841). Significantly, it brings into light the incompatibility between the belief in Christianity and the on-going practice of slavery. The former advocates the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself or, put differently, the ideal of harmonious oneness while the latter often gives rise to more prejudices, hostility, and antagonism thus making almost impossible the Christian concept of love, especially loving the racial or social "other." In essence, they contradict each other so much so that, more often than not, they turn out to be mutually exclusive. What function then does this artistic device of simultaneity to achieve in the film *Amistad*? What implication, if any, does it carry?

The same questions stand for an anonymous counterpart — *La Rochelle Slave Ship Le Saphir 1741* from the Cathédrale de La Rochelle (see, e.g., Deveau; Isham; Parker). This painting of a slaver ship catches the particular status quo in 1741, with "ex voto" written on the upper left-hand side as Howard F. Isham explains in his examination of the sea in folk art: it refers to "a painting commemorating the rescue, or salvation, at sea of someone who had vowed, before embarking on a dangerous sea voyage, to give thanks for his or her safe arrival; the depiction is usually of the specific disaster survived through the help of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, St. Christopher, or some other source of Christian salvation" (Isham 22). *La Rochelle Slave Ship Le Saphir 1741* exhibits not only the slave ship, the sailors, and worshipers it carries, but also, appearing in the cloud, a greeting divinity with a big cross behind. Seemingly blended into a harmonious whole, they give the impression that the trade of slaves is indeed "God-granted," as entertained in Paula Fox's *The Slave Dancer* (24). And thus more questions arise: whose viewpoint does the painting bespeak? Whose ideology contributes to this cultural representation? Put differently, could the presumably tacit "endorsement" of god betray the one-sided interpretation and the thinking of the slave traders or whoever wants to profit from the trade? Immersed in their pursuit of more slaves and hence more gains, do they sometimes grow conscious of their own crimes and henceforth their guilt in the face of god so much so that their "ex-voto," given in fulfillment of a vow or devotion, literally turns out to be their sinner's prayer, too? If the answers to the above questions are affirmative, the appearance of the greeting divinity on the upper right-hand side of the painting becomes even more intriguing. A simulacrum of rich interpretations, it may give of grace for the salvation of sinners or/and the authoritative pretexts of permission and protection for them to sin again and again — somewhat like the "gilded, ornamental Bible" of greedy Captain Falcon in R. Johnson's *The Middle Passage* (27).

Before the first entry of *The Middle Passage*, an epigraph starts the journal of the *Republic* with its praise to God: "Laud Deo. Journal of a Voyage intended by God's permission in the *Republic*, Africa from New Orleans to the Windward Coast of Africa." The alleged permission by god in Johnson's narrative, however, proves a futile attempt, merely the self-assertive wishful thinking on the part of its invoker(s). The end of the text finds the *Republic* shipwrecked and most people aboard drowned. It is Davy Jones, not their homes, who waits for them. Only the narrator (Rutherford Calhoun), the cook, and three children survive the ordeal (Johnson 185). God, ironically, turns out to be not on the side of the people on the *Republic* when it comes to the trading business of African slaves. Hence, the final catastrophe epitomizes not only the invalidity of that professed consent from god in the epigraph but also the tremendous risk of putting words in the mouth of god. If compared with Spielberg's *Amistad* and Fox's *The Slave Dancer*, Johnson's *The Middle Passage* enjoys to an even greater extent interrogating humanity's relationship with the god they imagine, especially when involved in the practice of slavery. In addition to the ironic gap between the final shipwreck and the presumptuous pretext of god's permission in one of the opening epigraphs, Johnson's text stands out most prominently in his portrayal of Captain Falcon's audacity. Exceedingly bold and arrogant, Falcon

ignores the normal restraints and oversteps the divide between humanity and god, not to mention his tenacious and desperate pursuit of the lucrative profit of slave trading. In secret he confesses to the narrator that "we've captured an African god" (Johnson 100). That is to say, the captain — as he maintains — has kidnapped not only African slaves but also, presumably, the divine keeper of their souls. He holds sway over his victims, both body and soul, venturing to further enmesh them in slavery, which he deems as "the social correlate of a deeper, ontic wound" (Johnson 98). Slavery as a social phenomenon or that "Peculiar Institution" (Johnson 8, 111) should thereby stand "as natural as it is inevitable" as inferred in *Amistad* by Adams to be John Calhoun's words (see Franzoni <<http://www.filmsite.org/bestspeeches58.html>>).

In addition to humanity's relationship with god, *The Middle Passage* also inquires into the significance of unity in the context of "The Republic" — both as the name of a ship and, metaphorically, as a society. As pointed out by the ship's cook, Josiah Squibb, to the narrator, a ship is a society, a "commonwealth" (Johnson 175). The wealth of this society, accordingly, belongs to all people for the common good. A lame argument on the part of Squibb for stealing rations reserved for the children, it nevertheless brings into light a prominent theme of the text, namely the significance of being a member in the so-called "commonwealth" or "the Republic." It further corresponds to how Rutherford Calhoun, the narrator, examines his own situation in society: "the 'I' that I was, was a mosaic of many countries, a patchwork of others and objects stretching backward to perhaps the beginning of time. What I felt, seeing this, was indebtedness" (Johnson 162-63). More specifically, Rutherford Calhoun sees his own connection — perhaps also as natural as it is inevitable — with society, the world, and the whole universe in terms of time, as well as space. He deems himself as a tiny part or particle of the immense oneness in a symbiotic community, "the Unity," as advocated in the epigraph by Brihad-aranyaka Upanishad in *The Middle Passage*: "who sees variety and not the Unity wanders on from death to death." Underscoring unity in variety, the epigraph from the Upanishad reinforces the pursuit of common humaneness or universal brotherhood in Johnson's narrative of the slave trade. Perhaps the indebtedness to the sense of unity with the world that Calhoun feels applies also to other individuals in "the Republic," including masters and slaves.

The Upanishad's appeal to unity in *The Middle Passage* coincides in nature with *e pluribus unum*, the national motto in the Seal of the United States, which was adopted by an Act of Congress in 1782. It is to unite all states into one great nation of democracy. This ideal of unification also accords with the pursuit of unity in Sigmund Freud's mapping of human civilization. It is "a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, people and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind" (Freud 81). The road to Unity, however, often turns out to be bumpy and challenging, as depicted for example by Steven Pinker in his observations on humankind's processes of civilization characterized by both hostile and kind intentions and actions (59-128). In his examination of the potential causes of war, Albert Einstein maintains that humanity has within itself "a lust for hatred and destruction" (Freud and Einstein 201). Similarly, Freud pinpoints that destructive lust as "the constitutional inclination of human beings to be aggressive towards one another" (Freud 108). He further contends that "the inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man, and ... it constitutes the greatest impediment to civilization" (Freud 81). It is through the suppression of such an aggressive impulse that the beginning of conscience arises (Freud 92). For Freud humanity's instincts, aggression, and conscience thus confront and compete with each other. This contention of Freud seems to find its further reinforcement in the analyses of Pinker, who explains the decline of violence in human history by identifying the changes in our cultural and material milieu which have given our peaceable motives the upper hand.

If applied to the economy of slavery, Freud's scenario bespeaks also the constant conflicts between humanity's inclination to aggression and the very suppression of that aggressive impulse, namely conscience. Johnson's portrayal of Reverend Peleg Chandler in *The Middle Passage* is such an example: it contains at the same time the conflicts between the aggressive nature of "the Peculiar Institution" of slavery and, presumably, the much troubled conscience of Chandler who is not only Rutherford's religiously stern master, but also a slaveholder who hates slavery. Fox's portrayal of Jessie Bollier, the thirteen-year-old Creole boy in *The Slave Dancer*, serves as another example.

Kidnapped on his way home by two sailors from the slaver *The Moonlight*, Jessie finds himself involved in Captain Cawthorne's pursuit of his "God-given trade," the trade of Black gold (78, 34). He is forced to witness and live with the dirty and tricky business of the slave trade to realize that greed is its real cause (94) and, perhaps most unexpectedly, to experience how hatred begets hatred in uncanny ways. Helpless and hopeless in his involuntary engagement in the slave trading business, Jessie has undergone a tremendous change and he discovers that he hates slaves: "I hated their shuffling, their howling, their very suffering! I hated the very way they spat out their food upon the deck, the overflowing bucket, the emptying of which tried all my strength. I hated the foul stench that came from the holds no matter which way the wind blew, as though the ship itself were soaked with human excrement. I would have snatched the rope from Spark's hand and beaten them myself! Oh, God! I wished them all dead! Not to hear them! Not to smell them! Not to know of their existence!" (92). When cornered by the abuses from his oppressors, Jessie collapses under piled-up pressure and resentment and realizes that "it's the kidnapping of these Africans that turns everyone round!" (69). His rising rage turns blind when the kidnapping business becomes too much for him to bear. Still a fragile young boy, his hostility toward the slaves surges forth, taking the place of his original natural curiosity about the Black slaves back in his hometown of New Orleans. Thus, his hatred that grows and grows in Jessie's mind seems to echo the jungle of hatred in Robert Hayden's depiction of the slavery era and the Afro-Americans' historic condition: "what port awaits us, Davy Jones' or home? I've heard of slavers drifting, drifting, playthings of wind and storm and chance, their crews gone blind, the jungle hatred crawling up on deck" (249). Jessie's hatred further resonates with the endless vicious circle of aggression between victimizers and victims in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*:

White people believe that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. In a way, he thought, they were right. The more colored people spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own. (198-99)

Stamp Paid's contemplation in *Beloved* traverses from the jungle myth created by White people, perhaps all too unexpectedly, to its invasion and transformation of its creators. The evil hence rebounds upon the evil-doers. The jungle planted becomes the jungle that grows by itself, inducing "the cannibal life" (Morrison 151) from the masters, as well as the slaves, from the Whites as well as the Blacks. Like having a life of its own, the jungle of hatred expands, enmeshes, and changes everyone it touches, thereby converting more documents of civilization into documents of barbarism.

In an interview, Johnson expounds how change, in a like manner, falls on every character in *The Middle Passage* during the long sea voyage of the triangular trade, the Atlantic slave trade: "*Middle Passage* takes a step back from slavery to see what happens from the moment Africans leave the slave forts and barracoons on the west coast of Africa and board those ships. One of the things implicit in the novel is that a change happens to the Africans aboard the ship because of the horrors they are subjected to" (Johnson and Rowell 544). Tracing back to the origin of the slaves' forced journey, Johnson enumerates in the interview how his characters encounter their changes during passage. Run by the ruthless captain of the ship, the kidnapped Blacks are forced to depart from their own cultural worldview into another cultural universe and they are changed by this. Thus, everyone on the ship is changed. Like the jungle of hatred in *Beloved* and Jessie's resentment in *The Slave Dancer*, the horrors all the characters are subjected to in *The Middle Passage* leave no one untouched and unchanged. *Amistad*, *The Slave Dancer*, and *The Middle Passage* portray turbulence, each exhibiting its own politics of representing the history of the slave trade. Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" makes a clear distinction between historicism and historical materialism. The former presents the eternal image of the past while the latter — a given experience with the past — is an experience that is unique (262). In dialectical cultural history Benjamin calls for each of the above mentioned narratives offers a unique experience with the past. They could also converge and open up

a chance for a more solid view, if not necessarily the only true image, of the past they examine. In his analysis of Benjamin's theses, Ronald Beiner maintains that "for Benjamin, history is radically fragmented; the task of the angel of history is to establish a redemptive relation to the fragments (thesis IX)" (424). Should such a redemptive relation to that turbulent past of slavery be possible, it is perhaps fair to argue that *Amistad*, *The Slave Dancer*, and *The Middle Passage* could help perform the task proposed by Benjamin. The three texts I analyze here exert their "retroactive force" (Benjamin 255) and make the readers perceive more clearly the reality they allude to despite the possible effect of ideologies which might have held them and contributed to their appearances in culture.

In "A Letter on Art" Louis Althusser acknowledges a particular and specific relationship between art and ideology. He asserts that "what art makes us see, and therefore gives to us in the form of 'seeing,' 'perceiving' and 'feeling' (which is not the form of knowing), is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes" (223). Regarding ideology as the "lived" experience of human existence itself, Althusser therefore calls for a critical view which requires as an antecedent "a retreat, an internal distantiating" (223) from the very ideology from which the works of art emerged. It corresponds, in a sense, to the task of the historical materialist in Benjamin's philosophy: Althusser dissociates himself from documents of civilization as far as possible and regards it as his task to brush history against the grain. In other words, both Benjamin and Althusser alert us not only to the work of ideology, which "slides into all human activity" (Althusser 224) but also, as a result, to the problems of mishandling or/and misrepresenting the past in historical texts. In his critique of Althusser's theory of ideology and interpretation, Steven B. Smith manifests Althusser's contribution to the understanding of the texts: "more than any other recent interpreter of Marx, Althusser has raised the level of methodological self-consciousness of what it means to read a text" (494). Smith underscores the similarity between Freud's interpretation of dreams and the Althusserian notion of a "symptomatic reading" and calls attention to the silent discourse a text conceals: the "problematic" of the text (Smith 495-96). In light of the findings by both Freud and Althusser, the "explicit discourse" of the official report of the U.S. Supreme Court hence becomes intriguing for the "silent discourse" it conceals. Yet, it is a pity to find that the discourse of slaves born in the U.S. remains silent again in the cinematic production of the historical event of *Amistad*.

In terms of the politics of representation, Cora Kaplan's and John Oldfield's collected volume *Imaging Transatlantic Slavery* contains rich readings concerning the interpretations of the slave trade and its aftermaths. Catherine Hall's article, for instance, foregrounds the analysis of Barnor Hesse, who argues that the legacy of slavery in Spielberg's *Amistad* becomes the historical record of abolitionism, but not the contemporary agenda of racism (199). While both were salient factors in the first half of the nineteenth century in US-American history, the discourse of the latter, namely the simultaneous agenda of racism, turns silent. Similar to the South in Hannah More's "Slavery, a Poem," the US-American South is left out in Spielberg's *Amistad*. The triumphant "explicit discourse" of cinematic *Amistad*, when put in a larger and stricter sense, thereby sounds self-limiting, self-celebrating, and self-defeating: it fails to register the contemporary existence of Black slaves in the US-American South, not to mention their struggles against the inhumanity of the slave trade, which, nevertheless, stands as a major concern of abolitionism in Spielberg's film. David Brown and Clive Webb, in *Race in the American South*, examine how the official closure of the international slave trade to the United States in 1808 brought about a transformation in US-American slavery: "slaves moved from the Upper to the Lower South in huge numbers. The decline of tobacco in the Chesapeake and the subsequent switch to grain farming left a surplus of slaves coveted by traders for the high prices they fetched in the Southwest" (120). Steven Deyle, in *Carry Me Back*, notes a similar relocation: "between 1820 and 1860, a minimum number of 875,000 slaves relocated from the Upper to the Lower South. Between 60 and 70 per cent were sold via the domestic slave trade, the rest migrating with owners or being sent to plantations owned by their master in the Deep South" (288-89). And as Ira Berlin argues in *Generations of Captivity*, the expansion of slavery in the antebellum period was "a mighty torrent," no less than a second Middle Passage (163). Thus, like the Transatlantic Crossing, this "Middle Passage" in the US-American South is still awaiting literary imagination and artistic representations.

Is there any *quid pro quo* involved in the politics of representation in Spielberg's *Amistad*? Is it fair to demand traces of the born slaves in the US-American South while the film perhaps intends only to focus on the rescue of Cinqué and other "foreigners"? Possible answers to both questions, I am afraid, will eventually turn out to be matters of opinion. One thing for sure is that the cinematic *Amistad* partakes of an act of expediency, somewhat like that of the U.S. Supreme Court in the freedom suit in 1841. When put together with *The Slave Dancer* and *The Middle Passage*, however, the narratives of abolitionists and Cinqué, Jessie Bollier, and Rutherford Calhoun not only compete with but also complement one another. The message they send tells not only the evil of trading slaves, but also the tenacity and voracity of that evil. In "The Pain of Being Black" Morrison suspects that *Beloved* would be the least read of all the books she has written for its subject of slavery: "it is about something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember. I mean, it's national amnesia" (120).

In conclusion, the three texts I analyze here presume amnesia and they point to the first half of the nineteenth century in US-American history, the era that has witnessed the rivalry between aggression and conscience, between the slave trade and the courageous efforts which helped to abolish them. This complex history of both enslavement and enfranchisement is recognized by the authors as one of their own concerns. The message they impart in terms of the future of human civilization, accords with Pinker's observations with regard to the decline of violence, as well as the theory of Freud that "the fateful question for the human species seems ... to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction" (111). And to master the self-destructive instinct of aggression requires the exercises of conscience (Freud 92). Be it through political activism or social critique, the future commonwealth of human beings lies in conscience in action — like the courageous acts of justice which have once helped curb and redress slavery.

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