



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

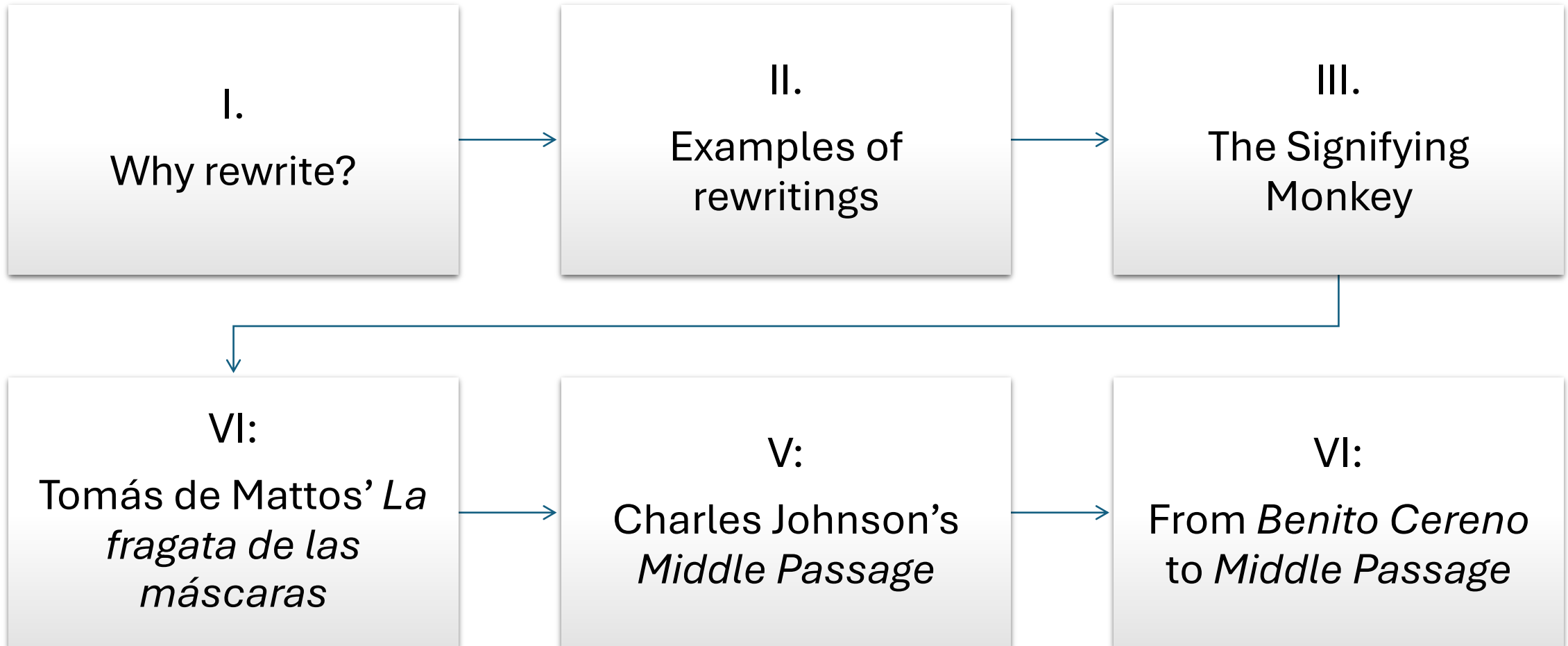
SHAPING NEW REPRESENTATIONS: FROM *BENITO CERENO* TO *MIDDLE PASSAGE*

ANGLO-AMERICAN LITERATURE
2023/2024

PRADEL GIADA

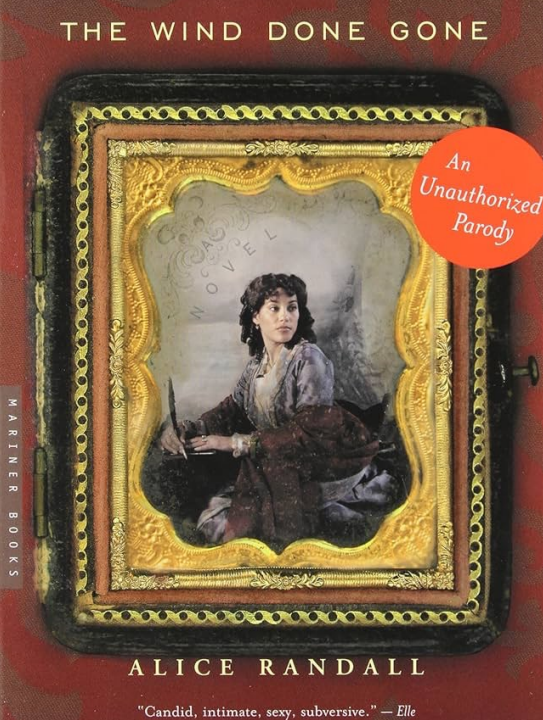
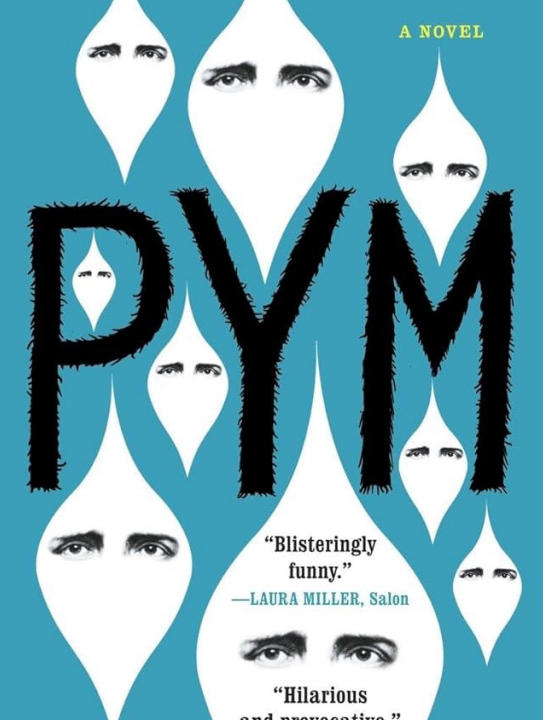


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WHY REWRITE?



EXAMPLES OF REWRITINGS

- *WIDE SARGASSO SEA* (1966), Jean Rhys - *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charlotte Brontë
- *WICKED: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE WICKED WITCH OF THE WEST* (1995), Gregory Maguire - *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900)
- *THE WIND DONE GONE* (2001), Alice Randall - *Gone with the Wind* (1951), Margaret Mitchell
- *MY JIM* (2005), Nancy Rawles - *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Mark Twain
- *PYM* (2011), Mat Johnson - *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), Edgar Allan Poe
- *HAG-SEED* (2016), Margaret Atwood - *The Tempest* (1611), William Shakespeare

THE SIGNIFYING MONKEY BY HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

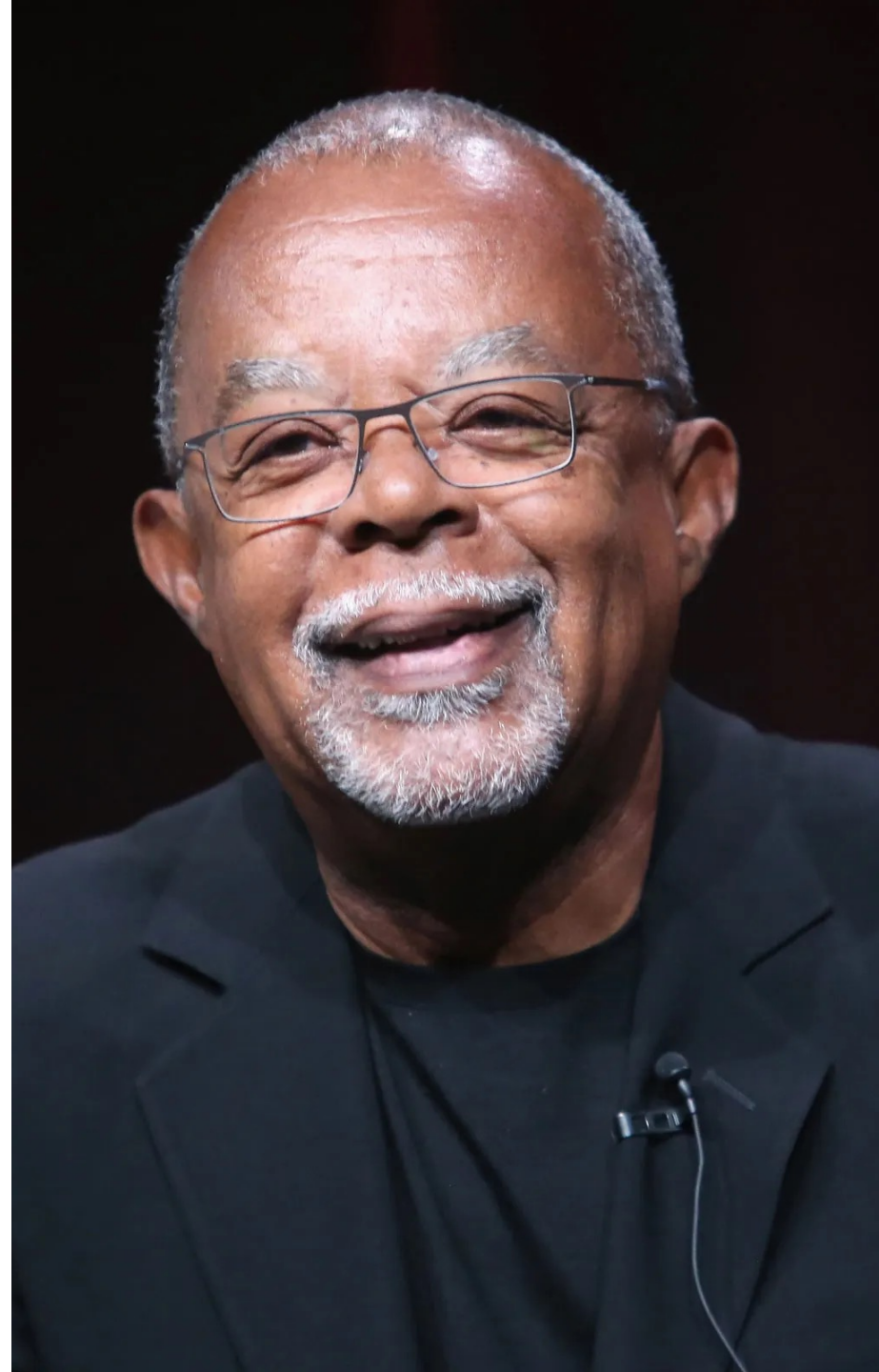
Text: *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988)

Signifying monkey:

- trickster figure > Esu-Elegbara, the Yoruba deity

Signifyin(g):

- representing an idea indirectly, with techniques such as irony, allusion, and wordplay in order to explain difficult terms and challenge dominant narratives



Examples of signifyin'

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1973)

What happens to a dream deferred?

Langston Hughes, *Harlem* (1951)

suit of a pirate. In writing to a dear friend, immediately after my arrival at New York, I said I felt like one who had escaped a den of hungry lions. This state of mind, however, very soon subsided; and

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845)

You better not never tell nobody but God. I'd killyour. mammy.

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982)

And although it seems heaven sent

We ain't ready, to see a black President

It ain't a secret, don't conceal the fact

The penitentiary's packed, and it's filled with blacks

Tupac Shakur, *Changes* (1998)

Two types of literary Signifyin(g)

Cooperative (unmotivated) > revisitation done out of respect

Oppositional (motivated) > revisitation that wants to criticize dominant cultural narratives

25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

THE SIGNIFYING MONKEY

A THEORY OF
AFRICAN-AMERICAN
LITERARY CRITICISM
WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY THE AUTHOR
HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

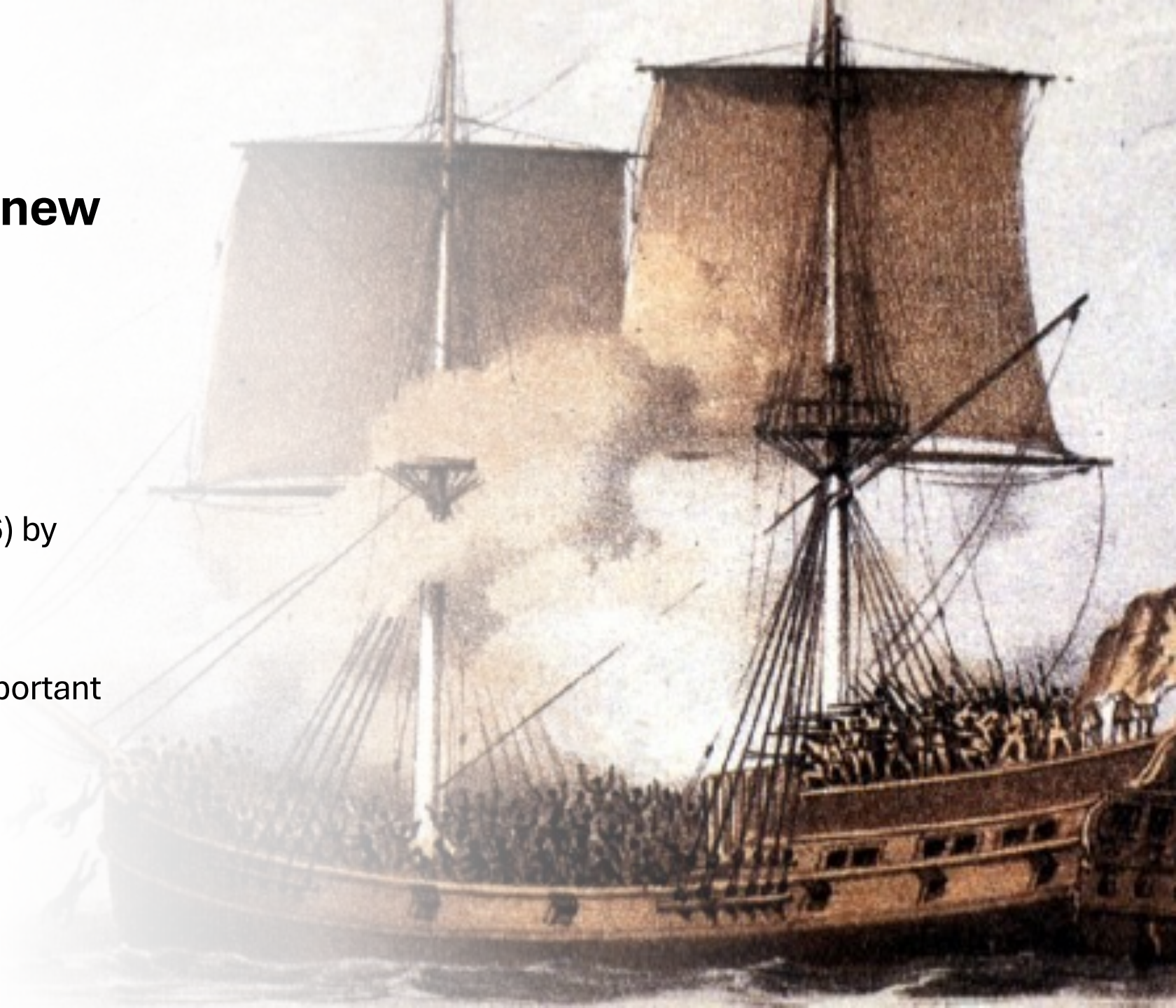


***BENITO CERENO*: Two new interpretations**

- *Middle Passage* (1990) by Charles Johnson
- ***La fragata de las máscaras*** (1996) by Tomás de Mattos



Similar to *Benito Cereno* but with important changes



NATIONAL BESTSELLER

MIDDLE PASSAGE

A Novel



WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY STANLEY CROUCH

CHARLES JOHNSON

AUTHOR OF *THE WAY OF THE WRITER*

CHARLES JOHNSON'S *MIDDLE PASSAGE* (1990):

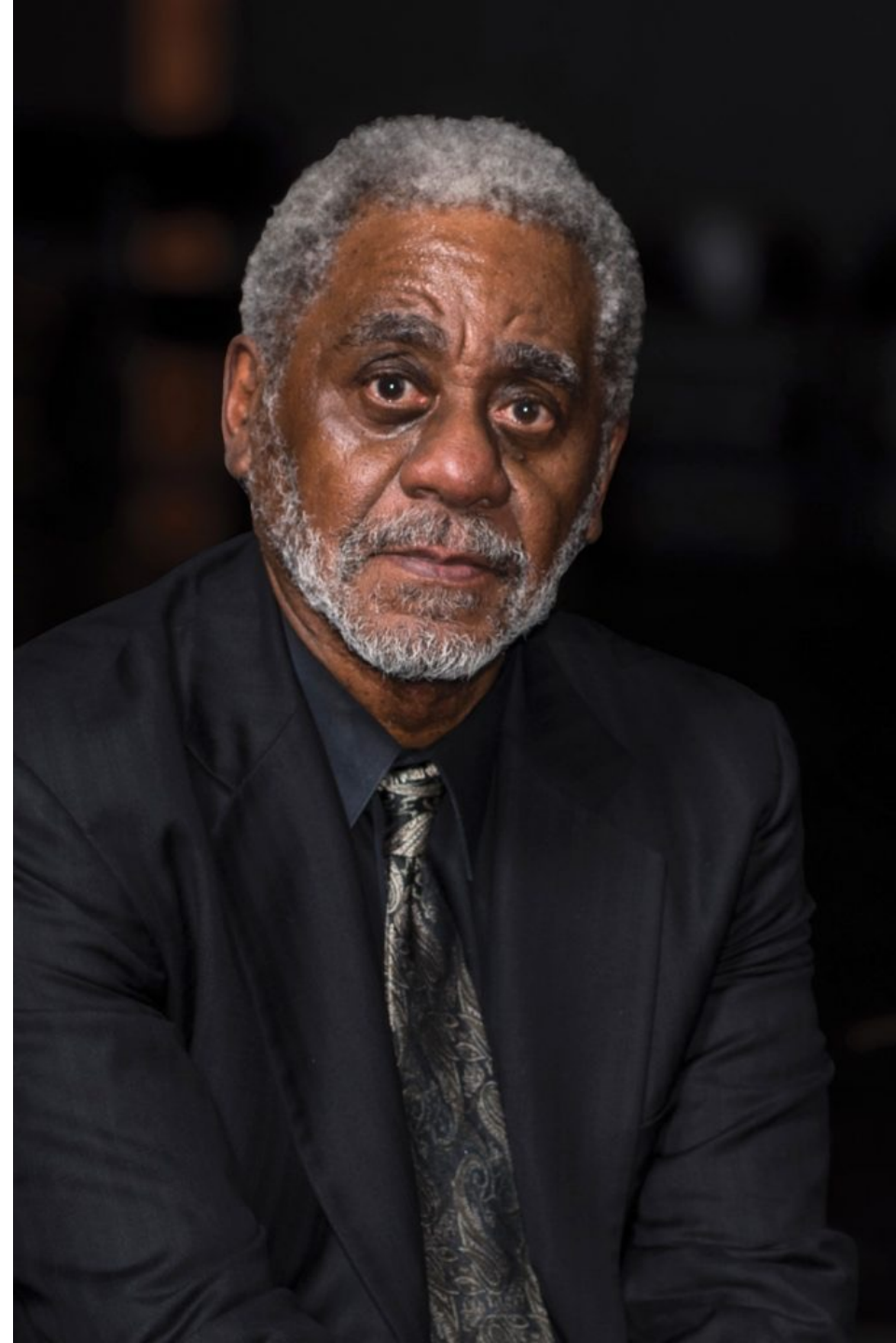
The plot

- Main character: Rutherford Calhoun, a free slave
- Other characters: Isadora Bailey, Philippe 'Papa' Zeringue, Josiah Squibb, Ebenezer Falcon, 40 Allmuseri tribesmen (Ngonyama)
- Setting: New Orleans, the *Republic* (illegal slave ship)
- Main event: Slave revolt

Why Johnson wrote *Middle Passage*

« Artists do not stem from their childhood, but from their conflicts with the achievements of their predecessors; not from their formless world, but from their struggle with the forms which others have imposed on life. »

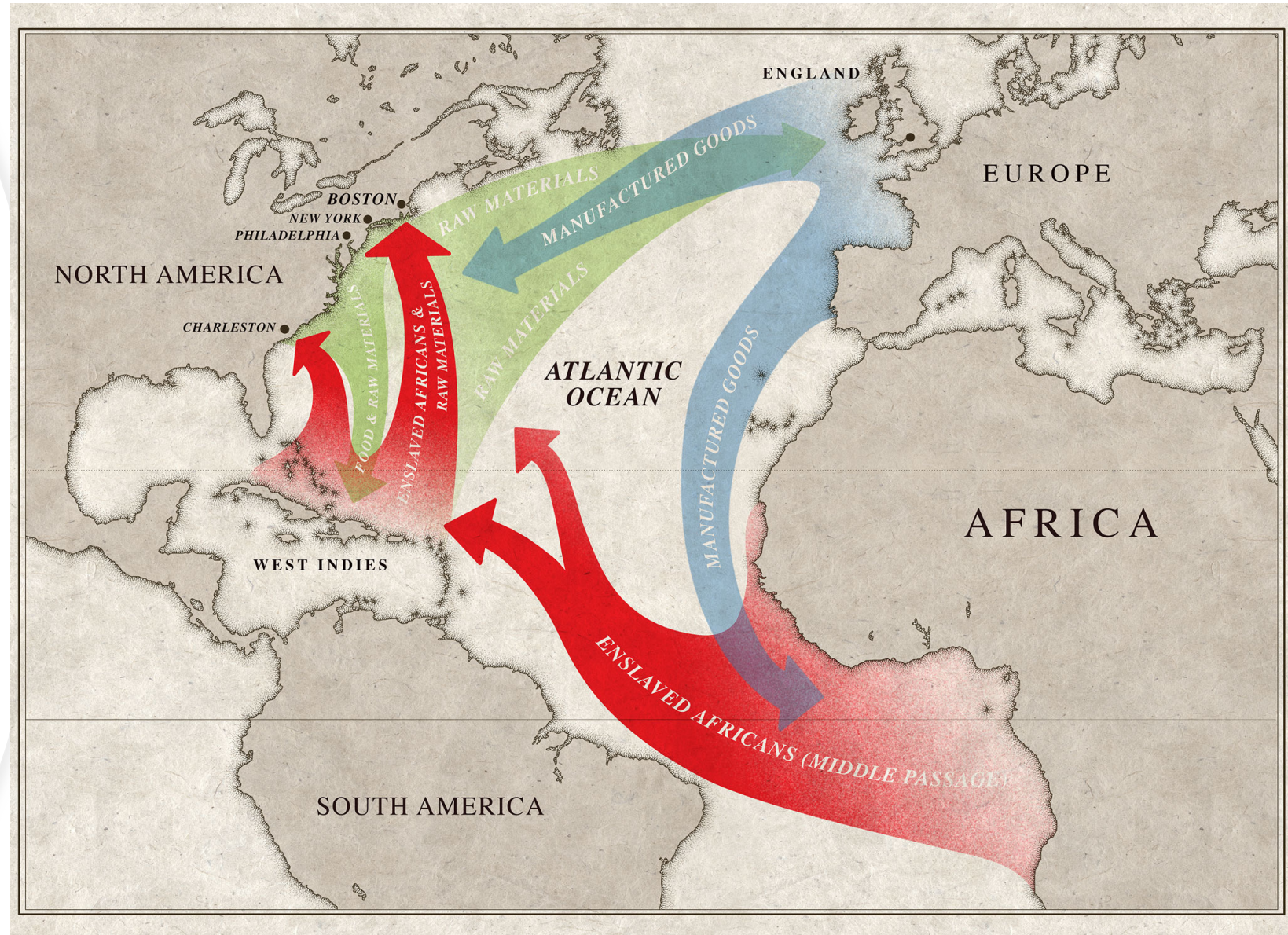
André Malraux, *Voices of Silence*, 1951.



The setting

Benito Cereno: Pacific Ocean

Middle Passage:
Atlantic Ocean →
Middle Passage



The representation of slaves

negro Babo was he who traced the inscription below it; that the negro Babo was the plotter from first to last; he ordered every murder, and was the helm and keel of the revolt; that Atufal was his lieutenant in all; but Atufal, with his own hand, committed no murder; nor did the negro

Benito Cereno, p. 97.

Middle Passage, p. 160.

open the mate's throat. And they had reason, good reason, for seeing the last of the Republic's officers dead. Akim, a wide, dark-fired man who was short but had the strength of three, squatted on his hams; he made them relive his sister's death five days after we set sail. Ghofan, a black who had been gelded, and then suffered the torture of the brand, pulled his shirt down to show them how Falcon had burned in the initials ZS not once but three times until the impression was as clear as stigmata, or the markings on cattle. Each man had his atrocity to tell. If not brutality to them then a beadroll of humiliations the midshipmen had inflicted upon the women, two of whom had been raped, or on their children, and to this list Diamelo added the small but nonetheless violent assaults on their spirit—parading them naked for bathing before their own children, forcing them to eat by ramming fingers down their throats, answering their wild clawing from the hold with gales of laughter. On and on the charges came, and with each

Black people as «simple»

unlikely, perhaps. But if the whites had dark secrets concerning Don Benito, could then Don Benito be any way in complicity with the blacks? But they were too stupid. Besides, who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguering in against it with negroes? These difficulties recalled

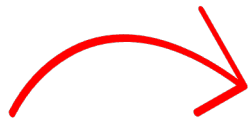


Benito Cereno, p. 63.

Middle Passage, p. 8



In plain English, I was a petty thief.



Middle Passage, p. 222

why they did not commit suicide. The voyage had irreversibly changed my seeing, made of me a cultural mongrel, and transformed the world into a fleeting shadow play I felt no need to possess or dominate, only appreciate in the ever extended present. Colors had been more vivid at sea, water wetter,

The master-slave relationship

As master and man stood before him, the black upholding the white, Captain Delano could not but bethink him of the beauty of that relationship which could present such a spectacle of fidelity on the one hand and confidence on the other. The scene was heightened by the contrast in dress, denoting their relative positions. The Spaniard

Benito Cereno, p. 45.

another self? What then? As long as each sees a situation differently there will be slaughter and slavery and the subordination of one to another 'cause two notions of things never exist side by side as equals.

Middle Passage, p. 117.

The endings

“You generalize, Don Benito; and mournfully enough. But the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, you bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves.”⁸

Benito Cereno, p. 101

Middle Passage, p. 147

release either of us needed. Rather, what she and I wanted most after so many adventures was the incandescence, very chaste, of an embrace that would outlast the Atlantic’s bone-chilling cold. Accordingly,

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