Critique

Although Deck concludes that no consistent image of elderly Afroamericans dominates in American literature, she has clearly demonstrated a dichotomy between black and white authors in its portrayal. This dichotomy might well be termed white myth versus black experience, and it is illustrated by the contrast between Uncle Remus and Uncle Julius. In her discussion of both characters, Deck has pointed out that critical distinction between structure, i.e., the "outer frame," and content, i.e., authentic Afroamerican folklore. Deck states that the legends told by Uncle Remus reflect a black world view. They were not, however, perceived as such until recently by most whites, who preferred the superficial and amusing interpretation suggested by an innocuous context and reinforced by productions like Walt Disney's *Song of the South*.

Br'er Rabbit is a trickster figure. Uncle Remus and Uncle Julius represent what Joseph Boskin has described as Sambo, "a figure which existed mainly in the inner reaches of the white mind as a put-on by the black man."[1] Boskin argues that there were in fact two Sambos: the white conception of the black man as Sambo, and the black utilization of Sambo, a complex role involving a conscious manipulation of his relationships with his white adversary. This style of confrontation resulted from "a folk tradition of incredible power and latitude."[2] While Faulkner's Dilsey and Welty's Phoenix are shown as helpless to alter an inexorable outcome, Uncle Julius exercises power through, in the words of Gilbert Osofsky, "puttin' on ole massa."[3] So, too, do Bontemp's Jeff and Jenny give witness to a kind of personal empowerment. Rather than passively waiting to die, they seize control of their deaths and transform them into a positive celebration.

An even more pervasive theme in Deck's analysis, to which she draws attention, at several levels, is that of reconciliation. Using Giovanni's "Alabama Poem" and Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident* as examples, Deck shows the conflict between formal knowledge as acquired by the young and experiential wisdom as represented by the old. Other works cited discuss differences in generational standards and religious values. In all instances, the process of reconciliation with the heritage embodied in the old is critical to the development of identity and wholeness. The young do not incorporate without change the values of the old but come to terms with them positively. Those, like Morrison's Sula and Toomer's Kabnis, who are unable to engage in this process remain crippled and incomplete.

In *Praisesong for the Widow*,[4] Paule Marshall describes the tranforma-

tion, strength, and development of an authentic identity in the character of Avey Johnson. Marshall has given us a powerful and moving portrait of an older Afroamerican woman that is truly, in Deck's term, multidimensional. May she be a model for many others.

— Helen MacLam
Middletown, CT

Notes

[1]Joseph Boskin. "The Life and Death of Sambo: Overview of an Historical Hang-Up." *Journal of Popular Culture*. Vol. 4, No. 4 (Winter 1971) 648.

[2]Ibid., 650-651, 655.

[3]Gilbert Osofsky, comp. *Puttin' on Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northrup*. (N. Y.: Harper & Row, 1969).

[4]Paule Marshall. *Praisesong for the Widow*. (N.Y.: Putnam, 1983).

Critique

Deck's critical essay is a thoughtful and welcome commentary on the interrelationship between age, generational conflict and changing social standards as portrayed in literature about or by American blacks. The author discusses several important ways in which elderly are represented as mythic figures who embody personal experiential wisdom and a community's cultural and historical heritage; as advisors, story tellers or sages who have acquired an air of reverence, the ability to endure and the means to impart the wisdom of the ages, and as the sometimes difficult, infirm or hostile representatives of another generation who would impose different, if not conflicting, social or moral standards upon the young. While these characteristics are attributed commonly, if not

31