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Interrogating Identity: Appropriation and Transformation in *Middle Passage*

"My final prayer: O my body, make of me always a man who questions!" (Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*)

Staging an inquiry into the nature of origin, experience, and meaning, Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* scrutinizes the structures of identity and the role writing plays in the re-configuration of the self. *Middle Passage* confronts fundamental assumptions about human and literary identity and problematizes these assumptions by means of allusion and appropriation, which subvert—and, through subversion, re-vitalize—textual authority. Examining "how race . . . figures into how we give form, in literature and life, to our experience," the novel is what Johnson calls "art that interrogates experience" ("Philosophy" 55). Referencing Melville's sea-adventure, Homeric peregrination, Platonic parable, and Cartesian dualism, *Middle Passage* simultaneously and contradictorily acknowledges its debt to preceding Western writing and defines itself against it. As it narrates Rutherford Calhoun's evolution from unreflective lassitude to an awareness that enables him to cross the "countless seas of suffering" forgetful of himself, the novel maintains a primary focus on its own status as text, its own textuality (Johnson, *Middle* 209). It exposes the roots of human "being," complications of African-American experience, and the position that writing occupies in relating experience, enacting consciousness, and performing its own self-consciousness. Standing at the crossroads of these questions of identity and the difficulties such questions present, Johnson's phenomenological re-configuration of writing—formulated in *Being and Race* and other essays—supplies the theoretical framework for his fiction and provides the critic valuable insight into the methods and meanings at work in *Middle Passage*.

As the title *Being and Race* suggests, and as Johnson makes explicit, the intersection of consciousness and experience is identity. For Johnson and for *Middle Passage*'s protagonist, Rutherford Calhoun, that identity is the precarious "middle" experience of the African-American: offspring of the middle passage, refugee from an uncertain origin, subject to the marginalization of his experience, searcher for meaning. Situating his work within the tradition of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Johnson notes that "each new story teaches us what a story can be, which underscores for a serious artist the necessity of approaching racial and social phenomena in a humble, patient spirit of listening and letting be whatever the world wishes to say to us" (*Being* 122). Johnson writes in order to approximate what Husserl calls the "question [of] what cognition can accomplish,

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the meaning of its claim to validity and correctness, the meaning of the distinction between valid real and merely apparent cognition" (*Idea* 20). Such a project depends upon the analysis of the tensions between structures of being, a delving into the status of subjectivity (and objectivity); such a project demands an active, dynamic, fluid re-interpretation of that which seems to be stable and established (that which is "real"). Johnson questions the structures of human and literary identity by testing the capabilities of binary opposition, dualism, and abstraction to contain meaning and experience: "Our faith in fiction comes from an ancient belief that language and literary art—all speaking and showing—clarify our experience" (*Being* 3). By situating this questioning within the sphere of African-American experience, he radicalizes this faith and makes innovative demands on writing to show and speak the complexities of experience, consciousness, and change. As Jonathan Little has noted, Johnson's "phenomenological and metafictional techniques work to deform and defamiliarize experience (spiritual or literary) to achieve revelation and transcendence" (148-49). Taken in this light, Johnson seems to take the expansive and yet tentative epigraph to *Middle Passage* (attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas) literally: "*Homo est quo dammodo omnia*"—"In a way, man is everything." In a way, Rutherford Calhoun is Everyman. In a way, *Middle Passage* is every text: It echoes Homer's *Odyssey* and Melville's *Moby-Dick*; it pays homage to the picaresque, the confession narrative, and the adventure-story; it owes much to Daniel Defoe and Frederick Douglass. And, yet, it grows out of the soil of a particularly African-American experience.

Johnson's examination of identity (human and textual) depends on appropriation for its literal and philosophical method. At once embracing and rejecting, appropriation stands in for the writer's anxiety and sincerity when faced with the weight of written

tradition, the protagonist's equivocation when faced with the conundrum of America (American-ness and the slave trade), and for the text's problematic stance vis-à-vis its own narrative pretensions and aspirations. The contradictory position of celebration and confrontation, embrace and rejection motivates the action of the novel (Rutherford's rejection and embrace of the Reverend Chandler, his brother Jackson, his father) and the procedure by way of which the narrative inscribes itself between the cracks: across the middle of tradition and innovation. By alluding to preceding narratives, Johnson locates his text both within and outside of the tradition of Western fiction. The contradictory space of allusion and appropriation, in turn, opens up the space of transition (neither/nor) into which Calhoun's transformation and Johnson's fiction appear and disappear. The "middle" passage is the ontological and epistemological material that gets locked out of binary oppositions and dualisms—or the matter of experience and consciousness that exists not in pure allegiance with one or another extreme, but rather in those Heraclitean regions in between where an abstraction fades and blurs into its exact opposite.

"What I am outlining here," Johnson writes in *Being and Race*, "... is the enduring truth that if we go deeply enough into a relative perspective, black or white, male or female, we encounter the transcendence of relativism; in Merleau-Ponty's terms, 'to retire into oneself is to leave oneself'" (44). The novel certainly does not reject the tradition of the West and of Western dualism out of hand, but *needs* to keep it in play in order to erect a set of alternative responses and possibilities. To open the tradition up to the infinitely vast material caught in between any set of binary oppositions, any structure of dualistic thought, the novel not so much asserts the middle as it opens it upon itself, expands it—by indicating the limits of absolute existence—to include abstraction and

extreme. By charting the journey of Rutherford Calhoun through his Blackness, through his male-ness, through his status as an American, Charles Johnson—"an archaeologist probing the Real for veiled sense"—crosses boundaries of textual containment; the rules of fiction (This is Not True; This Has No Claim On The Real; Just Kidding! This "Lie" Speaks To The Highest Truths) are exposed and examined ("Philosophy" 58).

One can situate *Middle Passage's* examination of human and literary identity by focusing on a few "arenas" of identity: the body, culture, and text. These fundamental fields of discourse operate throughout the novel, variously constructing explanations of origin, motive, and meaning as the text frequently confronts its own contradictory claims to accuracy, inaccuracy, mimesis, and imagination. By way of allusion, appropriation, and narrative self-consciousness, these arenas stage and foreground the text's contingent, constructed status—the text's essential and enduring allegiance to the author's interrogation of self. "Philosophical Black fiction—art that interrogates experience—is, first and foremost, a mode of thought," writes Johnson ("Philosophy" 56). *Middle Passage* situates this textual self-awareness and struggle around the interrogation of the status of body as well as cultural and textual positions. These three arenas focus and order sets of identity factors (man versus woman, Europe versus Africa, truth versus falsity) that are problematized by Johnson's textual process. All are embedded in the contexts of appropriation and transformation that frame and contain the transitional, "middle" space of Johnson's ontic search, his writing.

The body occupies an especially pivotal position in *Middle Passage*, from small moments like Rutherford's hiccupping whenever he is caught in a

philosophical dilemma (125-26) to the momentous but casual enfolding of death and unconsciousness that marks the moment of Rutherford's most profound transformation:

Then I fainted.
Or died.
Whatever. (171)

The boundaries between body and that which is not the body, between individual experience and universal process, break down in the novel's attempt to loose the self's reliance on the body for its identification. This slippage of identity anchors Rutherford's shifting perspective on gender relations, the novel's documentation of the encounter with the Allmuseri, and motivates the text's self-conscious, self-disruptive lurches towards ontological depths.

It all had to do with an old Allmuseri belief (hardly understood by one Westerner in a hundred) that each man outpictured his world from deep within his own heart. . . . As within, so it was without. More specifically: What came out of us, not what went in, made us clean or unclean. Their notion of "experience" . . . held each man utterly responsible for his own happiness or sorrow, even for his dreams and his entire way of seeing. . . . (164)

Reality is relative. Perception defines the real. And, most importantly, each man is ultimately responsible for that reality.

Middle Passage traces over the length of the text the line of race and gender in a similar breakdown and restructuring of what it means to be a man, what it means to be Black, what it means to be human. Like the body's involuntary response to untruth or the loosening of Rutherford's grasp on the boundaries of life and death, gender undergoes a shift from the more automatic and involuntary (uncritical) assertion of social givens—"Of all the things that drive men to sea, the most common disaster, I've come to learn, is women" (1)—to confounding those regulated borders by gaining access to the validity of particular experience and awareness: "... my memories of

the Middle Passage kept coming back, reducing the velocity of my desire, its violence, and in place of my longing for feverish love-making left only a vast stillness that felt remarkably full, a feeling that, just now, I wanted our futures blended, not our limbs, our histories perfectly twined for all time, not our flesh" (208). These transformations leave Rutherford outside of the system of sexual battle and conquest and with the strangely fraternal identification with woman at the novel's close: "... she lowered her head to my shoulder, as a sister might" (209). They mark his and the novel's movement away from the empirical, physical limitation of the body as essential and oppositional object and toward an idea of the body that is just as expressive, infinite, and flexible as spiritual reality. The accident of Rutherford's genitals, the color of his skin, the desperate clinging to life at any cost are set aside one by one and replaced by an investment in the contradiction of a body wedded as much to what one *is* as to what one *does*—a body that acts, responds, and loves not by reflex, but out of consideration, with care and awareness. Certainly, Rutherford's sex and race and life are not inconsequential in the end, but they have been reconfigured according to more complex, less oppositional strategies of identification and—once identity has been well-considered—living.

Thieving and lying (one might write "appropriation and writing") both belie and betray Rutherford's "middle" position—neither European nor African, neither man nor woman, neither American nor anything else. The crew perceives him as neither/nor (or both/and), a trickster, a shyster, fluid: "... Calhoun'll go his own way, like he's always done, believin' in noth-

in', belongin' to nobody, driftin' here and there and dyin', probably, in a ditch without so much as leavin' a mark on the world—or as much of a mark as you get from writin' on water" (88). Johnson consciously links Rutherford's thieving with the status of the African-American—"Theft, if the

truth be told, was the closest thing I knew to transcendence" (46)—and resolves this criminality once Rutherford's existence has undergone the tests of confrontation, reflection, and transformation. Johnson fashions these transitions and transformations into a text that, like its thief/liar narrator, appropriates and wanders through the storehouse of culture, looking for (it)self:

... I felt culturally dizzy, so displaced by this decentered interior and the Africans' takeover, that when I lifted a whale-oil lamp at my heels it might as well have been a Phoenician artifact for all the sense it made to me. Yet in the smoking debris, there was movement, a feeble stirring of Icarian man, the creator of cogs and cotton gins, beneath contraptions that pinched him to the splintery floor. (142-43)

**Middle
Passage
asserts
racial
identity as a
hybrid,
active
process of
being that
reads and
interprets
itself and
the culture
that
surrounds
it.**

All the while, though, this process of allusion, imitation, and appropriation (whether metaphorical or referential) never claims completion or absolute values; it is always particular, tentative, dynamic as it shifts noiselessly from ancient Phoenicia to Eli Whitney, from the storehouse of cultural plunder to an encounter with the Allmuseri god. Appropriation signals cultural critique, historical transgression, and an aggression toward the sanctities of mimetic poetics.

Appropriating Western "civilization" from Thales to Johannes Kepler to Albert Einstein into its apparently linear and referential narrative, *Middle Passage* mixes and matches, and frames the history of Western thought within

and against the backdrop of a black man's encounter with the European values around, within, and beside him and the Africa that he encounters. The novel structures much of this allusion into a critique of the West, identifying Falcon as an *Übermensch*, the logical product of binary thinking. His ship is the *Republic* ("from stem to stern, a process" [36]), both a microcosm of the ship of the American state and the test-case for Plato's hierarchical society ruled by philosopher-kings; Falcon—"... the nation was but a few hours old when Ebenezer Falcon was born..." (49)—is Icarian man who flies too far and too high outside of himself without regard for others' warnings. Determined "to Americanize the entire planet" (30), this brilliant, vicious dwarf, his body as stunted as his imagination, sees only strict opposition and separation of the self and the other: "'For a self to act, it must have something to act on. A nonself—some call this Nature—that resists, thwarts the will, and vetoes the actor'" (97). He is the spirit of opposition, dualism, repression, and conflict. "'Conflict,' says [Falcon], 'is what it means to be conscious. Dualism is a bloody structure of the mind. Subject and object, perceiver and perceived, self and other...'" (97-98).

If indeed the "'mind was made for murder'" and "'slavery... is the social correlate of a deeper, ontic wound'" (98), then *Middle Passage* clearly sets Falcon's (and the West's) dualism against the unifying vision of the "captured" Allmuseri, who "saw [them] as savages. In their mythology, Europeans had once been members of their tribe—rulers, even, for a time—but fell into what was for these people the blackest of sins. The failure to experience the unity of Being everywhere was the Allmuseri vision of Hell." The "madness of multiplicity" is set against the dualism of the West (65). Rutherford negotiates the space between those that have no history ("a people so incapable of abstraction no

two instances of 'hot' or 'cold' were the same for them" [61]) and those who have too much. Caught between the two, Rutherford and the American experience (and, by extrapolation, any human endeavor that searches for identity, experience, and new beginnings), is a fantastic exercise in neither/nor, of America carving its way out of the two in between the two. America is not only the result of European influences, but it is also the result of African, Asian, and Native American ones, as well. This contradictory America, so invisible to Rutherford at the novel's opening, is clear at the end. The narrative itself is intimately bound up with this process of cultural appropriation, and with the evasion of capture—if the narrative slips, slides, withholds itself, postpones itself, relies on a known liar for its provenance, and loves it, then it alters narrative expectations and expands narrative possibility. The greatest truth we can obtain depends upon acknowledging, even celebrating, our lies. When fiction asserts its own fictionality, it gains a veracity as document (of the imagination) that is more "real" than mimetic illusion.

The narrative establishes a chaos of contradictory justifications, motivations, explanations, revelations, and denials against which the story struggles (and by which it is propelled), but which reflects the interrogation of identity in its interrogation of mimetic reality and narrative "truth." The narrative oscillates between naturalistic representation and a super-real representation of a self-conscious (anti-mimetic) telling. Johnson uses parenthetical intrusions which promise, withhold, delay, betray, falsify, and verify the narrative, and finally reveal it as performance: "... Jackson stayed, more deeply bound to our master than any of us dreamed. But I am not ready just yet to talk of Jackson Calhoun" (8); "living parasitically on its body. Do I exaggerate? Not at all" (168). By making outright appeals to be believed, the

narrative foregrounds its own status as fiction: "... failed at bourgeois life in one way or another—we were, to tell the truth, all refugees from responsibility . . ." (40). Rutherford's (and the reader's) implosive experience is reflected, redeemed, and re-doubled by Johnson's textual prestidigitation. The novel leaves its provenance uncertain: Is it the diary Rutherford started keeping after Falcon's death? It foregrounds the discrepancies between narrative time and story time and retains self-reflexive moments of narrative collapse when the telling intersects with the told, when the characters "hear" the narration—as well as the dialogue—and respond to it:

No question that since my manumission, I'd brought a world of grief on myself but, hang it, I wished like hell I had someone to blame—my parents, the Jackson administration, white people in general—for this new tangle of predicaments.

"Blame for what?" Squibb stared at me.

"Nothing. I was just thinking out loud."

"Oh." (92-93)

These dislocations of mimesis, of course, de-naturalize the mimetic role of fiction and serve to both invalidate the novel as story and re-validate it as ontic document (i.e., invalidate the referentiality of the novel in favor of its status as performance and artifice). It is dearer to us as an artifact of the imaginative exploration of the investing principles of identity than it is as a naturalistic tale. It is, in fact, another cleansing of experience through the word, another emptying of material into spirit, experience into document. Johnson writes that writing is a mode of thought, that writing works out problems of self: Just as Rutherford needs "to transcribe and thereby transfigure all we had experienced, and somehow through all this . . . [find] a way to make [his] peace with the recent past by turning it into Word" (190). Certainly, the work collects so much about itself as to be parodic, emptying, a pastiche of names and

ideas. Like Rutherford, the novel pilfers this and that. All writing is this appropriation, this re-iteration of writing that has come before it, this reproduction and recirculation of the written and the play of new writing in reference, response, and reaction to the Tradition—one's re-integration of the individual past, present, and future with that of the collective. These things mark the textual aporia by way of which *Middle Passage* opens up Rutherford's experience beyond the limits of fiction, beyond the specificity of African-American writing, without taking fiction and race out of play. Self-conscious narration, parenthetical intrusions, disjointed chronology—Rutherford gets the log book during the chapter entitled "*Entry, the seventh*" and writes from memory?—undermines the novel's semblance of chronological action and reliable narration. Clearly, Rutherford Calhoun (ex-slave, liar, and thief) constructs the story not as it happens (though it is written in log-book fashion, in the first person and the present tense), but retrospectively, as it will lead to a pre-existing, known end.

Rutherford's "quirky, rhetorical asides" (104) are, in fact, deadly serious markers of the text's breaking with mimetic tradition and experimenting with the bounds of textual reference and self-reference. They litter the narrative and serve to undermine the text's apparent accuracy, referentiality, mimesis, which is—interestingly enough—already thrown into question when it receives Falcon's exhortation to "include everything you can remember, and what I told you, from the time you came on board." In essence, Rutherford stands in the same position vis-à-vis authority as Johnson: Granted the leave to write, charged to "tell the truth," he does: "But I promised myself that even though I'd tell the story (I knew he wanted to be remembered), it would be, first and foremost, as I saw it since my escape from New Orleans" (146). Truth is a slippery thing that depends entirely on who claims it, and

from what perspective. While Falcon expects balance, proportion, and objectivity, Rutherford recognizes that such a project is entirely impossible so long as one pretends that one does not have eyes of one's own; that one does not see as one sees. One must acknowledge the particular, the partial, the subject who speaks—not the seamless, naturalized narrative of beginning, middle, and end, but a chaotic telling machine that criss-crosses versions of truth and illusion to expose not only its mechanisms but also its manufactured contingency.

Instances of radical revelation expose the text's simultaneous claim to utter falsity and the naked truth. Problematizing the conundrum of fiction, they also wed the fluidity of textual identity in *Middle Passage* to the difficulties of human identity. "As a general principle and mode of operation during my days as a slave, I always lied," our guardian of truth admits, "and sometimes just to see the comic results when a listener based his beliefs and behavior on things that were Not" (90). That which is material (body), that which is spiritual (culture), and that which combines the two to document or construct "truth" (the text) are all subject to the complications of racial experience, expectation, and the transcendence of these: "The Reverend's prophecy that I would grow up to be a picklock was wiser than he knew, for was I not, as a Negro in the New World, *born* to be a thief? Or, put less harshly, inheritor of two millennia of things I had not myself made? But enough of this" (47).

While certainly a matter of body, race has implications in *Middle Passage* for the whole realm of human and literary identity. In the construction of identity, it is deeply involved with the cultural values dualistic thought has attached to racial difference. Its potential to provide the space for new perceptions is Johnson's point of departure: "Because all conception—philosophy—is grounded in perception, there is no reason, in principle, that we can-

not work through the particulars of Black life from *within* and discover there not only phenomenon[a] worthy of philosophical treatment in fiction, but also—and here I'll make my wildest claim today—significant new perceptions" ("Philosophy" 57). It is a conception of race in complete accordance with Johnson's stated intention to disrupt "the Cartesian bifurcation of *res cogitantes* and *res extensae*, and of course to the more primordial Platonic dualism, indicating how Western ontological divisions between higher (spirit) and lower (body) coupled with Christian symbolologies for light and dark develop the black body as being in a state of 'stain' " (*Being* 27). Race spans across the entire novel as corporal reality, cultural source, and textual foundation. To this end, Rutherford "a fatherless child" (126)—abandoned by a black father, rejecting a white one (Chandler)—confronts his past outside of Falcon's "devilish idea that social conflict and war were, in the Kantian sense, a *structure* of the human mind" (50): Jackson's decision to stay with the Reverend Chandler becomes linked with the self-emptying, unifying wisdom of the Allmuseri, and Rutherford himself identifies with the boy he throws overboard. In general, the Allmuseri come to represent a(n African/non-Western/anti-dualistic) philosophy that pertains more to Rutherford's search for origins and meanings than it does to the genetic details of color: "In a way, I have no past When I look behind me, for my father, there is only emptiness . . ." (160). More than any other event, it is Rutherford's encounter with the Allmuseri god, who adopts the appearance of his father, that problematizes Rutherford's relationship to his father and to his forefathers. The particular encounter plays on the larger cosmic proportions of body, origin, self, culture, humanity, divinity:

I came within a hair's-breadth of collapsing, for this god, or devil, had dressed itself in the flesh of my father. . . . for the life of me I could no

more separate the two, deserting father and divine monster, than I could sort wave from sea. Nor something more phantasmal that forever confused my lineage as a marginalized American colored man. To wit, his gradual unfoldment before me, a seriality of images I could not stare at straight on but only take in furtive glimpses, because the god, like a griot asked one item of tribal history, which he could only recite by reeling forth the entire story of his people, could not bring forth this one man's life without delivering as well the *complete* content of the antecedent universe to which my father, as a single thread, belonged. (168-69)

Quite literally, the Allmuseri are flesh of his flesh. Despite Cringle's early assertion that they are " 'not like us at all. No, not like you either, though you are black' " (43), they are the key to Rutherford's transformation into a self-defined and defining human being, experiencing and examining the world for himself.

Race, that meeting point of body, culture, and text for the African-American writer, is the crucial moment of the identity search. And the key to this questioning in *Middle Passage* is the history of Rutherford's encounter with the Allmuseri. Ashraf Rushdy asserts that the Allmuseri are the "theory and . . . symbol for the postmodern condition" (393). But, taking the growth of the Allmuseri into account, they are and are not. In the course of the novel they go from being exotic, romanticized avatars of a perfect, timeless age—"About them was the smell of old temples. Cities lost when Europe was embryonic" (61)—to being "like any other men," or at least like Rutherford:

They were leagues from home—indeed, without a home—and in Ngoniyama's eyes I saw a displacement, an emptiness like maybe all of his brethren as he once knew them were dead. To wit, I saw myself. A man remade by virtue of his contact with the crew. My reflection in his eyes, when I looked up, gave back my flat image as phantasmic, the flapping sails and sea behind me drained of their density like figures in a dream.

Stupidly, I had seen their lives and culture as timeless product, as a finished thing, pure essence or Parmenidean meaning I envied and wanted to embrace, when the truth was that they were process and Heraclitean change, like any men, not fixed but evolving and as vulnerable to metamorphosis as the body of the boy we'd thrown overboard. (124)

Inasmuch as Rutherford—in time—distances himself from the constricting, first, theoretical, symbolic speculations on the Allmuseri (most of which come from Cringle, who denies identity between Rutherford and the tribe), it is more important to consider them as the representatives of the process from encounter, to discovery, to identification that dispossesses them and Rutherford of constricting, dualistic structures. This process is linked with Rutherford's original assessment of the Allmuseri and with his final identification, not with the ideal vision of them—" . . . they might have been the Ur-tribe of humanity itself" (61)—but with the ultimate identification he makes between them and his brother—"There was something in this, and the way he canted his head, that reminded me so of how my brother sometimes stood alone on the road leading to Chandler's farm after our father left, looking. Just looking" (119)—his father, and himself. " . . . he was close to my own age, perhaps had been torn from a lass as lovely as, lately, I now saw Isadora to be, and from a brother as troublesome as my own. His open eyes were unalive, mere kernels of muscle, though I still found myself poised vertiginously on their edge, falling through these dead holes deeper into the empty hulk he had become, as if his spirit had flown and mine was being sucked there in its place" (122-23). Neither wholly on one side of the cultural opposition, nor entirely on the other, *Middle Passage* settles down into cultural multiplicity and versatility: Being "sucked there in its place" does not compromise Rutherford's identity, but peppers it with experience, breadth, complexity, and—in this

case—the first whiff of its origins. And as an African-American, he is such a complexity.

Middle Passage asserts racial identity as a hybrid, active process of being that reads and interprets itself and the culture that surrounds it. It is this identity that Johnson holds as a means to a larger, humanistic “end”: the liberation of perception, the opening up of epistemological perspective and of ontological meaning, not just for African-Americans but for all people. Caught in the moment of this revelation, Rutherford cries “for all the sewage I carried in my spirit, my failures and crimes, foolish hopes and vanities, the very faults and structural flaws in the blueprint of my brain (as Falcon put it) in a cleansing nigh as good as prayer itself, for it washed away not only my hurt after hurling the dead boy overboard but yes, the hunger for mercy as well” (127). It is at this point of utter self-consciousness, this moment of ultimate responsibility devoid of the desire for the mercy that relies on justification or excuse that the body not so much loses its grip on Rutherford’s soul as it merges within it. He is black, but he is not bound to sit on one or the other side of an artificially imposed and enforced racial, social dichotomy.

Washed by the moments of tears, prayers, and acceptance of responsibility, Rutherford—thief and liar caught in the loop of appropriation and definition—becomes himself. He proves to be far more responsive to the injustice of slavery at this point than when he joined the crew of the *Republic* without hesitation, far more certain of how his life and the lives of all other persons overlap, join, and depend on each other. Rutherford, the wily survivor of before, ironically ensures his greater survival from this point on by relinquishing his death-grip on his interests, himself: “. . . searching myself, I discovered I no longer cared if I lived or died” (127). At one and the same time, *Middle Passage* celebrates the particular (Rutherford as individual, his text as unique and uniquely wedded to

the process it documents) and addresses itself to general, universal “truths.” Johnson questions the validity of the construction of the universal:

“Universals are not static,” he writes, “. . . but changing, historical, *evolving* and enriched by particularization; the lived Black world has always promised a fresh slant on structures and themes centuries old” (“Philosophy” 57). It is from the particular transitions and transgressions African-American experience contains that Rutherford’s struggles arise, but ultimately they go far beyond specifics, feeding the universal questions of origin and destiny.

While the problem of identity is central to the novel, it is left—to a large extent—unresolved. The novel rests on a question mark, a struggle; resolves itself around a black center—a void and a fullness that holds the text in thrall. Gayatri Spivak asserts that “the only way to argue for origins is to look for institutions, inscriptions and then to surmise the mechanics by which such institutions and inscriptions can stage such a particular style of performance” (781). *Middle Passage* interrogates the mechanics of identity and meaning. The middle passage is writing. The novel inscribes the crossroads in response to, against, and across the parameters of identity, gender, race, history, social rank, and provenance that define, limit, and/or deny access to being and becoming. Within the interzone of contradiction, overlap, indeterminacy, liberation, removal, retrieval, dis-inscription, and re-inscription, the middle passage—never-ending, always shifting—is writing itself: the word sculpted, shaped, held for a moment in reflection and in radical difference to experience.

In the end, Rutherford is left alone; the text itself (the writing that Rutherford is charged to complete, which is this novel) begins here on the threshold between being and nothing-

ness, the heretofore sparsely documented space of Black America. When objectivity and subjectivity have vanquished each other, they leave behind them an aftermath of contradiction (objective subjectivity, subjective objectivity) and question, the fertile valley of questions without easy, clear, stable resolution in which, according to Johnson in *Being and Race*, writing flourishes:

Such egoless listening is the precondition for the species of black American fiction I see taking form on the horizon of contemporary practice, a fiction of increasing artistic and intellectual generosity, one that enables us as a people—as a culture—to move from narrow complaint to broad celebration. . . . we will see a fiction by Americans who happen to be black, feel at ease both in their ethnicity and in their Yankee-ness, and find it the most natural thing, as Merleau-Ponty was fond of saying, to go about “singing the world.” (123)

Balancing of the contradictory demands of subject and object, meeting in the middle of opposition, writing (for Johnson, and for the transformed Rutherford) is what Johnson terms the “individual consciousness grappling with meaning” (“Philosophy” 60). This is the contradictory middle-space (a concatenation of ambivalent, convergent, suspended, contradictory, indeterminate “middles”) in which he stages *Middle Passage*’s search for meaning.

While one may write about the body, culture, and textual situations in *Middle Passage* separately, they are, in fact, links each to the other, feeding into a network of interrogation of the structures of identity, belief, and value that underlie the unexamined, unquestioned life. If the unexamined life is to become pointed, fulfilling, and fulfilled, these assumptions of self must undergo and withstand such scrutiny. Interrogating identity and identity’s modes of expression, *Middle Passage* confronts such factors and asserts Rutherford Calhoun’s “middle” condition (black in America, suspended between cultures, at odds with his past and future) as symptomatic of not just

one “man,” or one race, but of us all. The “middle” space and “middle” energy is ever-evolving, never “there,” and always “here”—always both partial and complete, contradictory and changing. Between embracing tradition and revolutionizing it there is the transitional (and contradictory) space of embrace-and-rejection, the “middle” space of problematic identities and problematic documents of those identities. By emphasizing Rutherford’s choices of gender relations, the cultural dialogue between Europe, Africa, the *tertium quid* that is America, and the text’s contradictory stance toward mimetic illusion, *Middle Passage* re-presents Calhoun’s and the reader’s odyssey into the middle—a middle of ambivalence, in-between-ness, contradiction, and indeterminacy that Calhoun (and, one can assume, Johnson) identifies as particularly American:

If this weird, upside-down caricature of a country called America, if this land of refugees and former indentured servants, religious heretics and half-breeds, whoresons and fugitives . . . was all I could rightly call home, then aye: I was of it. . . . Do I sound like a patriot? Brother, I put it to you: What Negro, in his heart (if he’s not a hypocrite), is not? (179)

Crossing body boundaries, cultural boundaries, and textual borders, *Middle Passage* belies stasis in favor of the dynamic, evacuates structures of self (whether physical or metaphysical; whether corporal, cultural, or textual), and fills them with all that dichotomy denies. This crossing of boundaries simultaneously erases them and collapses the structures of Being in upon themselves. This transgressiveness, this insistence on transition, this collapse of “reality” is the site of meaning; it is a leap of consciousness that attempts to “rediscover the point of rupture, to establish, with the greatest possible precision, the division between the implicit density of the already-said, a perhaps involuntary fidelity to acquired opinion, the law of discursive fatalities, and the vivacity of creation,

the leap into irreducible difference" (Foucault 142). The outcome of this leap, the outcome of these interrogations of experience is a fluidity of meaning and value that revivify all regions of meaning and consciousness. Identity founded on this is not the identity of opposition but of contradiction, the identity of liberated perception.

In the end, *Middle Passage* re-figures, transforms the structures of reality, for one man and for us all. Consciousness and writing surround dualism and either/or definition with the space of transition.¹ Identity is history, race, and gender—and is not these things. It is revealed, rewarded in the unpredictable but inevitable improvisation of the living self (male or female) that marries himself to himself. The text is written and read in the space of contradiction, which is not negation, but a radical form of problematizing and destabilizing fixed manners of belief and being, the juxtaposition of one fixity impossibly next to another: what it means to be a man impossibly close to and dependent upon what it means to be a woman, without the destruction or belittling of either; with the expansion of meaning and possibility, the open-ended dynamic of writing at the crossroads that Spivak characterizes as a

"notion . . . as broad and robust and full of affect as it is imprecise. . . . It belongs to that group of grounding mistakes that enable us to make sense of our lives" (781).

As Johnson sings the world, he searches experience and perception for the roots of reality and the doorways to transformation. Writing, understood as a mode of thought, is the middle passage, between what has been and what will be, between the word and the world. "To put this bluntly, language is transcendence. And so is fiction" (*Being* 39). Johnson writes the collapsing, melic, ontic language of the self "forgetful of ourselves, gently cross[ing] the Flood, and countless seas of suffering" (*Middle Passage* 209). As a text, *Middle Passage* crosses borders of containment and identity, eluding the false gods of fixity and resolution. This contradictory balance, this transitional space is the key to *Middle Passage* and to Johnson's contention that "... philosophical hermeneutics and the exploration of meaning is native to all literary production; that universality is embodied in the particulars of the Black world; and that the final concern of serious fiction is the liberation of perception" ("Philosophy" 60). Indeed, *Middle Passage* is the realization of this liberation of perception.

1. See especially Norman Harris's discussion of "either/or" and "and/but" dichotomies in Johnson's *Faith and the Good Thing*.

Note

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