

Chapter 4

“The End of the Black American Narrative”:

Bondage and Freedom in Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*

1. Form and Genre: What is the most African American Literary Genre?

Should we allow race to overdetermine the idea of African American literature? As explained in the previous chapters, African American literary history has been struggling with the dichotomy of this question. One of the central issues, and limitations, in African American literature and literary criticism has been its racial authority. With contemporary literary criticism, the last half of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of critical race theory and African American literary criticism. These articulate the quintessential dilemma between a racially defined literary genre and the proposition of the literary genre itself; African American literature is defined by its authors’ racial designation, while its ultimate mission is most often to defeat racial essentialism. This particular dilemma is indeed inherent within the African American literary tradition, and it has come to be a challenge for contemporary African American literature. In this chapter and the next, I will look into Charles Johnson and his use of one of the most African American literary genres, the slave narrative, and its progeny, the neo-slave narrative, with a focus on his treatment of love relationships. Johnson’s works expose the problems and the challenges inherent in African American literature. In examining narratives of love in Johnson's works, I shall explore the horizon of contemporary African American literature and literary criticism.

Published in 1990, Johnson’s *Middle Passage* begins with its narrator, Rutherford Calhoun escaping from his marriage with Isadora, a teacher from Boston. Setting the novel’s background in the year 1830 and utilizing the narrative form called neo-slave narrative,

defined by Barnard W. Bell and Valerie Smith, *Middle Passage* is a very African American novel. While the novel certainly fulfills the criteria of the neo-slave narrative, *Middle Passage* also engages in a new challenge of African American literature and literary criticism. Johnson's essay, "The End of the Black American Narrative," which I quoted in the Introduction, reveals his concern. What Johnson warns against is that the mere formality of African American narrative has come to be incapable of depicting the cotemporary African American experience. Johnson says that the "unique black American narrative which emphasizes the experience of victimization, is quietly in the background of every conversation we have about black people, even when it is not fully articulated or expressed" (33). He does not negate the importance of this narrative of oppression, struggle, and the fight for freedom. The narrative form, however, is fixed and itself becomes an identity – in this case, the African American identity. As Johnson comments, the narrative form for African American writers is deeply connected to their racial identity, yet it simultaneously constrains them within their skin color.

The issue here is much more complicated, since African American writers' ownership of the narrative form also claims their authority over the history of slavery. The question of authority over the African American past and repulsion for traditional western historiography were the underpinning ideas of neo-slave narratives. Since the late 1960s, there have been a significant number of African American literary works which take slavery as their subject matter. Literary critic Bernard Bell first called this group of writings the "neoslave narratives" identifying those fictions which are "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom," and designating the particular novelistic form as a literary generic trait (Bell 289). This broadly defined literary genre has been modified by scholars such as Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, Angelyn Mitchell, Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu and Timothy A. Spaulding. All

former critical works carefully examine the historical, social, intellectual and literary backgrounds of the African American contemporary literature of slavery. Rushdy examines the Civil Rights Movement as the background for the emergence of this literary genre with detailed historical and political context; Mitchell and Beaulieu emphasize Black feminism and the oral tradition in neo-slave narratives by female authors; Spaulding reads the contemporary African American literature of slavery within the stream of postmodern literary trends. These discussions on the meaning of the emergence of the late twentieth century neo-slave narratives established the contemporary literature of slavery as a solid literary genre.

Solidifying a literary genre itself is inevitably a political process. Since the genre is generally considered to have started with the disputes over William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in 1967, African American writers' authority over the neo-slave narrative has been unquestionable. It is certainly a legitimate claim to write on and about slavery from the black writer's perspective. The neo-slave narrative, however, has become one of the most sacred literary genres for African American writers, while at the same time paradoxically embodying the very dilemma inherent to African American literature. The genre represents the African American authority over the history of slavery, yet the very act of representing oneself racially defines African American literature.

Johnson is one of the first writers who experimented with the slave narrative as a novel form that could be a "vehicle" for many other meanings. This chapter focuses on his award winning novel *Middle Passage* and its use of a novel form. Of particular concern here is the author's redefinition of the most African American literary concepts: bondage and freedom. These two concepts are not only a plotline for many slave narratives, but are also encompassing notions that control novelistic forms in many neo-slave narratives and,

ultimately requisite for the genre. The traditional double meanings of these two concepts are their physicality and mentality; on the one hand a slave is fettered in bodily bondage and strives for freedom, on the other hand is the simultaneous process of escaping psychological bondage to freedom. This chapter argues that in *Middle Passage*, the meanings of bondage and freedom develop from their traditional meanings into a philosophical state of being, where freedom ultimately suggests Johnson's project, "The End of the Black American Narrative." Johnson's combination of the slave narrative form with another literary form, ship's logs, is also important in terms of the discussion surrounding African American literature and its genre making. It also connects to the writers' act of redefining the meanings of bondage and freedom, and brings us to the point where *Middle Passage* becomes a narrative of love in which Johnson transcends the meaning of these concepts into an existential condition. By analyzing *Middle Passage* with a focus on the African American literary themes of bondage and freedom and their redefinition, this chapter aims to demonstrate how Johnson ultimately presents us with an existential narrative of love.

2. Neo-Slave Narrative and the Meaning of Bondage and Freedom

Establishing African American literature as a genre has been, of course, very important in terms of producing numerous works by African American writers as well as their criticisms. Yet, as discussed in the Introduction and previous chapters, the challenges and problems associated with the act of establishing a literary genre are neither simple nor easy to resolve. In 1992, Henry Louis Gates Jr. published *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture War*. In his study, Gates points out the huge gap between the politics of literature in a classroom and the real subject surrounding the classroom ("on the street"), and reconsiders the import of African American literature in literary canon-making. The dilemma Gates expresses is still vital, even

in the 21st century. “A canon is often represented as the ‘essence’ of the tradition, indeed, as the marrow of tradition: the connection between the texts of the canon is meant to reveal the tradition’s inherent, or veiled, logic, its internal rationale” (Gates 32). While Gates is talking about editing an anthology and the inevitable political-ness it pertains to regarding literary canons, this discussion is applicable to the discussion of literary genre studies. What is the “essence” of tradition for a literary genre and what is at stake with it? Tacit consent here is American relativism and its politics of representation. In his book *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, John Guillory problematizes the inconsistency we always face when establishing a genre based on a tradition: whether you include non-canonical literature into the canon or establish a new canon with a different and distinct discipline (5). African American literature has always been suspended, being situated and reposed between these two positions. Like Guillory, while Gates justly claims that it is important for the African American literary world to find their traditions, he also warns against the risk of taking this as self-evident.

This dilemma within African American literature appears on the literary generic level. Bell’s definition of the neo-slave narrative, “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom,” immediately brings us to one of the most famous and important slave narratives: *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) by Frederick Douglass. Bondage and freedom are literary themes that African American writers repeatedly visit, reflect on and contemplate, and Bell situated novels following this tradition as neo-slave narratives. Around the time of Styron’s *Nat Turner* and *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, the collected refutations of “Styron’s Nat” by John Henrik Clarke in 1967, numerous novels on and about slavery were published. Other than Butler and Jones, whose works I discussed in previous chapters, there are Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966), Ernest J. Gaines’ *The*

Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971), Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976), David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981), Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), J. California Cooper's *Family* (1991), Carolivia Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie* (1991), Lorene Cary's *The Price of a Child* (1995), Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* (2001), Edward P. Jones' *The Known World* (2003), and, Nancy Rawles' *My Jim* (2005), just to name a few. The prolific publication of novels on slavery and their corresponding literary criticism are more than enough to establish the neo-slave narrative as a genre, retroactively including Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder*, which was published in 1936.

Most of the scholarly works on neo-slave narratives generalize the writers' impetus for writing about slavery as a racially collective attempt to rewrite their history. Starting simultaneously with the Black Arts movement, the late twentieth century African American literature of slavery tends to be approached by literary critics with the assumption that it shares the same spirit as Black Aesthetics or celebrations of African American culture. Few criticisms are conscious of African American writers' diverse attitudes toward the history of slavery, while many attempt to totalize the genre's literary motivation.

The literary value of neo-slave narratives has been discussed in many ways. Being one of the most important literary genres, the neo-slave narrative indeed had a tremendous effect on creating a new literary sub-genre for writers after the Civil Rights movement. Ashraf Rushdy emphasizes the literary practice of restructuring the dominant history of slavery as told by white America, and resolidifying the newer African American identity in neo-slave narratives. This also challenges the most difficult task involved in telling about slavery; the retelling of trauma and traumatic memory. The legacy of slavery is also a common theme among writers, for one of the most significant traits of neo-slave narratives is that the authors have not actually physically experienced the US institution of slavery. From this point of

view, many contemporary sociological and literary themes emerge. Valerie Smith concisely puts these into theoretical terms: the intersection of gender and race, body and memory, orality and literacy, Christianity and folkloric religion, and finally, the ambiguous nature of the definition of freedom. As Bell defines neo-slave narratives as having plots of bondage and freedom, the ambiguity of freedom coined by Smith is something of import for the writers of neo-slave narratives as well as its critics.

In terms of interpreting representations within and issues surrounding neo-slave narratives, several groups of criticisms are important to mention. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, Caroline Rody and Angelyn Mitchell published their works on neo-slave narratives in relation to gender issues. Arlene R. Keizer focuses on the problem of western historiography and neo-slave narratives. Rushdy and Timothy Spaulding produced rather contemporary and more self-reflective criticisms of neo-slave narratives, examining their very historicity. *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999) by Rushdy and *Re-forming the Past: History, The Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative* (2005) by Spaulding both examine neo-slave narratives within the context of Black Power and Black Arts movements in the 1960s as well as the process of the academic establishment of black studies and the African American literary canon in the 1970s and 1980s. Their studies show how the neo-slave narrative not only corresponds to the original texts, slave narratives within the African American literary tradition, but has also itself been historicized since the 1960s.

Middle Passage as a work of literature pushes the discussions by Rushdy and Spaulding further, by responding to the ultimate discussion on African American literature itself. *Middle Passage* is not only an example of the neo-slave narrative, but is also a commentary on the neo-slave narrative. To examine this aspect of the novel, we need to look at exactly what forms Johnson utilizes in *Middle Passage*. Johnson writes of his motivation to

use the slave narrative form for his earlier work, *Oxherding Tale*:

As the novel took shape, certain features came into focus: its form could only be that of the slave narrative, one of the oldest literary forms indigenous to the American experience. The form, in fact, that provided the basis for the black novel and tradition of autobiography that stretches from Reconstruction to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Manchild in the Promised Land*. Its movement was, of course, from slavery to freedom. Yet it was indebted, I discovered, to an older form, the Puritan narrative, characterized by its narrator detailing his (or her) progress from sin to salvation; and *that* form, I realized, had ancestral roots stretching back as far as Augustine's *Confessions*. (xiv)

The significance of the slave narrative as a literary form for Johnson was not so much its originality as an African American literary archetype. Rather, it was the intertextuality that was opened up for the literary archetype. This leads Johnson to question and experiment with how and what the slave narrative form can function in *Middle Passage*.

In *Middle Passage* there are two deviations from the classical slave narrative we should look at in order to examine how and what can be told through the slave narrative form. One is that *Middle Passage* is a reverse and paradoxical narrative. The protagonist Rutherford's escape is not from the antebellum South to the free North. The former slave of a farmer in Illinois, Rutherford is already free at the beginning of the novel. After his manumission, he comes to New Orleans and becomes a good-for-nothing petty thief, and eventually gets himself involved into debt and finds himself on board the *Republic*, the ship that smuggles slaves from Africa. Rutherford's experience is not that of the fugitive slave, and this alone

indicates that the meaning of bondage and freedom in *Middle Passage* has been reinterpreted. Another deviation is that the novel is written as a ship's log. Scholars often take the text as a neo-slave narrative and situate the slave narrative as its archetype, yet the narrative form of *Middle Passage* is rather unique. This could also be a commentary on the literary criticism surrounding neo-slave narratives. The ship's log form, subtly complicates the given value of the neo-slave narrative, the value in which the protagonist, often-times the author, reveals his racial identity through the act of writing. This converges with the issue of authority discussed in the previous chapters. *Middle Passage* is, therefore, also a text that challenges identity politics and African American literature as a genre.

3. Bondage of Identity in *Middle Passage*

How does bondage figure in *Middle Passage*, then? The protagonist Rutherford's bondage can be found in the very beginning of the novel. After the death of his master, the Minister Peleg Chandler, Rutherford was living day-to-day in New Orleans. His monologue reads:

I would stare out to sea, envying the sailors riding out on merchantmen on the gift of good weather, wondering if there was some far-flung port, a foreign country or island far away at the earth's rim where a freeman could escape the vanities cityfolk called self-interest, the mediocrity they called achievement, the blatant selfishness they called individual freedom – all the bilge that made each day landside a kind of living death. (4)

Despite his status as a manumitted ex-slave, Rutherford wants to escape from this world. Self-interest, achievement, individual freedom – those are essential values in American

society, the important qualities of personal life. Rutherford, however, considers these bilge and wants to escape from them; in other words, he is entrapped within these cultural concepts.

This implies further social discipline, in which one is indeed responsible for achieving those qualities if you are one is free. Isadora, who is the reason for Rutherford being on board the *Republic*, also forces him to achieve these qualities of free men. Isadora blames Rutherford for being “not common,” indicating that he has not fulfilled the requirement of becoming “a credit to the Race” (9). Rutherford detests Isadora’s discipline, which reminds him of his brother’s docility: “I – after seeing my brother shackled to subservience – was determined not to become: ‘a gentleman of color’” (9). Rutherford here denies the discipline assigned to an African American man, a gentleman of color. This means that Rutherford refuses to become a representative man, a black man who represents the whole race. The act of representing race entails the generalization and solidification of race. This is the type of bondage in which Rutherford is entrapped: racial discipline and requirements that constantly interpellate Rutherford and seek his conformity as a free gentleman of color. Here, the bondage that entraps Rutherford is likened to the discourse of racial identity.

Rutherford therefore tries to escape from the kind of bondage embodied by Isadora at the very beginning of the novel. He gets away from Isadora’s marriage trap – escaping from the “Creole speculator” Philippe Zeringue’s threat to marry Isadora – and sneaks onto the *Republic*, the ship that is under the dictatorship of Captain Falcon. It is important to notice that this “bondage” continues to entrap Rutherford even after he sails off to the African Continent on the *Republic*. The ship is revealed to be smuggling slaves from the African continent, and its cargo includes one of the strangest peoples of the African tribes, the Allmuseri. As a black petty thief, manumitted, from Illinois, Rutherford is constantly being

demanded to prove his identity. But his effort to define himself within a certain group always fails. Rutherford allies neither with the smuggled Allmuseri nor with the ship's crew; he cannot even be Falcon's loyal servant, although the captain needs and trusts him. Johnson, therefore, implies that the notion of identity could be a form of bondage that entraps human beings and prevents them from having inmost relationships.

Through his interaction with the Allmuseri, Rutherford gradually comes to be aware of his bondage. Johnson conveys the impossibility of identity for the Allmuseri. An important example of this is the language the tribe uses:

Nouns or static substances hardly existed in their vocabulary at all. A "bed" was called a "resting," a "robe" a "warming." Furthermore, each verb was different depending on the nature of the object acted upon, whether it was vegetable, mineral, mammal, oblong or round. ... It was not, I gathered, a good language for doing analytic work, or deconstructing things into discrete parts, which probably explained why the Allmuseri had no empirical science to speak of, at least not as we understood that term. (77-78)

Rutherford describes the language of the Allmuseri as water changing shapes. The Allmuseri language is also not suitable for deconstruction. There are no prepositions for deconstructive opposite binaries in the language of the Allmuseri, and this linguistic trait is reflected in their human relationships. There is no opposition between self and other, and objective self identity vanishes in their language. It is significantly suggestive that Johnson creates the Allmuseri language, for racial, or any kind, of identities are formed within language, yet the experience of race or other designation always contains something outside of language. It is a linguistic as well as phenomenological experience to communicate with

others, define others, and ultimately reflect that experience back onto oneself. It is, therefore, impossible to align oneself – oneself and other selves – with fixed social identities. Once the language loses its referentiality, the self as a fixed identity is unattainable. This is, of course not a comfortable condition of being. Rutherford expresses his insecurity about his lack of identity by saying that “[s]ome part of [him] was fatherless child again. Alone in an alien world. Wanting to belong somewhere and to someone” (126).

Comparing Johnson’s philosophy with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Richard Hardack posits that “[l]ike Emerson, Johnson believes that all matter and nature, from his body to slavery, are only reflections of mind, finally indicating a phenomenological rather than historical state: Johnson consistently echoes Emerson’s claims about the metaphysical status of slavery” (1028). As Hardack explains, Rutherford learns that even the Allmuseri became entrapped by the metaphysical slaver, the binary of self and other, once they were entrapped on the *Republic*. This bondage is also the bondage of Rutherford, who is entrapped by his own identity (and the idea of identity). Looking at his Allmuseri friend Ngonyama right before the Allmuseri's revolt, Rutherford thinks, “something in his look said keys and conventional means of escape did not matter anymore” (125). Once the meaning of escape changes, the meanings of bondage and freedom also change. It is not only the institution of slavery itself from which the Allmuseri try to break free; it is also this new perception of the world – binary opposition and objectivity – from which the Africans try to escape.

4. Ship’s Log: Writing Yourself Out

Rutherford’s road from bondage to freedom is his ship’s log, the very writing, *Middle Passage* which the reader is also reading. As mentioned, this particular genre of writing complicates the meaning behind the act of writing and its associated traits. Clarifying the

kinds of ship's logs in *Middle Passage* is important. First of all, there is a "rough log," a draft of the official ship's log by Captain Falcon. The rough log contains the record of transactions. The official ship's log is a fair copy of the rough log, which Falcon submits to the ship's owner as a report of all the business of the trip. In *Middle Passage*, there is also a journal titled "Self-Reliance," which contains Falcon's autobiographic information and thoughts. The difference between the official ship's log and this journal disappears during the course of the narrative. Rutherford does not differentiate between the two logs, therefore the basic writing system on the *Republic* is as follows: Captain Falcon rewrites the financial and shipping transaction into the official ship's log. In short, Falcon is rewriting the record of property in order to produce the ship owner's property. The latter is, however, Falcon's personal property since it is also his autobiography, and therefore it is the evidence of Falcon's identity. Here, writing the ship's log converges with the act of writing a neo-slave narrative, and these two literary genres merge into one.

The convergence of the ship's log with the neo-slave narrative symbolizes writing as an act of possession. After the Allmuseri's rebellion, Falcon committed his ship's log to Rutherford. Rutherford knows that Falcon "wanted to be remembered," yet he "promised [him]self that even though [he'd] tell the story [...], it would be, first and foremost, as [he] saw it since [his] escape from New Orleans" (146). As he had decided, Rutherford starts writing the ship's log retroactively, starting with his flight from Isadora. In *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction*, Rushdy termed the act of writing, rewriting, and acquiring identity in the neo-slave narrative "palimpsest narrative". The consequential import of palimpsest narratives is the achievement of a new identity via writing. In this sense, Rutherford is rewriting Falcon's ship's log and trying to possess his own identity. Rutherford, however, does not only rewrite; he redefines the

meaning of writing and its inevitable consequence of intertextuality. After the revolt of the Allmuseri and Falcon's suicide, the *Republic* floats on the Atlantic Ocean as if the fugitive slave were running toward the North Star. The ship eventually breaks down because a tremendous storm. Only three characters, Rutherford, the cook Squibb, and the Allmuseri Baleka are saved by the *Juno*. As soon as he is saved, Rutherford starts writing the ship's log again, allying his life with it: "Here the log of the *Republic* – and my life – might have ended" (185).

Writing the ship's log has two important effects on Rutherford:

Only the hours I spent hunched over the skipper's logbook kept me steady. Along with his sea chest, it had been salvaged after the shipwreck, and once its pages dried I returned to recording all I could remember, first as a means to free myself from the voices in my heard, to pour onto these water-stained pages as much of the pain as I could until at the end of each evening, after writing furiously and without direction, I at last felt emptied and ready for sleep. Then, as our days aboard the *Juno* wore on, I came to it with a different, stranger compulsion – a need to transcribe and thereby transfigure all we had experienced, and somehow through all this I found a way to make my peace with the recent past by turning it into Word. Consequently, when I wrote I was incapable of venturing forth into the social world, so Baleka did this for me, begging passengers for things I needed, such as a wig. (189-90)

The first effect is to empty himself, and the second is to remake the meaning of the experience. Contrary to the earlier definition of the ship's log as a record of property, the act of writing here is not to claim authority or obtain one's property. In other words, the ship's

log is not Rutherford's autobiography, as it was for Captain Falcon. The ship's log as a writing genre originally had the function of recording property and proving one's wealth, yet it this is not the case with Rutherford's ship's log.¹ The ship's log here is the process of changing self and altering the meaning of the self. The neo-slave and slave narratives are appointed as records of violence, the proof of oppression. To write it is to possess stolen property: one's stolen self. What Rutherford is writing here is the last stage for the neo-slave narrative, where he has to let go of his possession by changing the meaning of the record of physical as well as metaphysical possession. The interchangeable writing self is entrapped within the web of intertextuality. Johnson thus comments on the nature of the act of writing, property and possession, by having Rutherford write the ship's log. The ship's log, which was the property both of the ship owner and Falcon (as his autobiography) is taken over by Rutherford and transformed into something that paradoxically denies the notion of property. Johnson explains this deeper meaning of reading and writing by quoting Merleau-Ponty:

To read is to inhabit the role and real place of others; to write is a stranger experience yet, for it involves a corresponding act of self-surrender such that my perceptions and experiences are allowed to coincide with those who came before me and despoiled words, shaped their sense and use, who impose the "accumulation" of senses, as Matthews puts it, upon us until my life and the life of others "intersect and engage each other like gears," according to Merleau-Ponty. (*Being and Race* 39)

By Rutherford's act of writing his ship's log, *Middle Passage* introduces the intertextual nature of writing and shows a possible way to recognize oneself through intersubjective encounters with others.

Recognizing himself in this way, Rutherford achieves the following awareness. Lost in the Atlantic Ocean without a captain, the *Republic* is in utter chaos with many hints of disease. To the reader's surprise, Rutherford tries to help others toward the end of the story:

And to comfort the weary on the *Republic* I peered deep into memory and called forth all that had ever given me solace, scraps and rags of language too, for in myself I found nothing I could rightly call Rutherford Calhoun, only pieces and fragments of all the people who had touched me, all the places I had seen, all the homes I had broken into. The 'I' that I was, was a mosaic of many counties, a patchwork of others and objects stretching backward to perhaps the beginning of time. (162-63)

Daniel Scott notes that "*Middle Passage* asserts racial identity as a hybrid, active process of being that reads and interprets itself and the culture that surrounds it" (362). The following passage is one of the best examples of this interpretation of racial identity, where Rutherford meets the Allmuseri God on the very bottom of the *Republic*. This meeting with the Allmuseri God turns out to be Rutherford's reunion with his runaway father:

A thousand soft undervoices that jumped my jangling senses from his last, weakly syllabled wind to a mosaic of voices within voices, each one immanent in the other, none his but all strangely his, the result being that as the loathsome creature, this deity from the dim beginnings of the black past, folded my father back into the broader, shifting field – as waves vanish into water – his breathing blurred in a dissolution of sounds and I could only feel that identity was imagined; I had to listen harder to isolate

him from the We that swelled each particle and pore of him, as if the (black) self was the greatest of all fictions; and then I could not find him at all. He seemed everywhere, his presence, and that of countless others, in me as well as the chamber, which had subtly changed. Suddenly I knew the god's name: Rutherford. (171)

The emergence of Rutherford's *I* with the other voices is the state in which he is freed from the notion of property, the bondage of identity. This paradoxically allows him to find himself, the universal *I*, the god. The lower-case 'g' of god here indicates not a certain religious icon, but the acknowledgement of an inmost self that can be only explored after Rutherford had gone through from bondage to freedom by writing himself out.

5. Three Ends—*Middle Passage* as a Narrative of Love

The most important characteristic of Rutherford's ship's log, *Middle Passage*, is that it opens and ends with Isadora, the woman from whom Rutherford first runs away and to whom he returns in the end. The novel begins with the sentence, "[o]f all the things that drive men to sea, the most common disaster, I've come to learn, is women" (1). This opening is problematic in terms of Rutherford's bondage. With Rutherford's escape from marriage with Isadora, the homosociality on the *Republic*, Rutherford's relation to his brother and his search for his father readily invite readers to construe the novel as a masculine, even misogynistic text. Rudolph Byrd argues that *Middle Passage* is "a deeply masculinist text... that Johnson has created a narrator who addresses and seems only to imagine a male readership, and who... explores many of the themes and questions that shape the lives of men" (103). Molly Travis criticizes *Middle Passage*, saying that "[most women] claim they feel disconnected from the narrative circle because the novel almost totally excludes female characters" (194).

Indeed, we do not see much of female characters in *Middle Passage*, and the novel could be read as a masculine attempt to possess the masculine black self.

Yet this reading does not take Isadora into account as a key figure in Rutherford's journey from bondage to freedom. For Rutherford, to be bonded to a woman by marriage certification is "imprisonment" (1). As explained above, this is because Isadora embodies the racial discipline, which is pressuring Rutherford to be a representative man, to acquire racial identity. Rutherford's impetus to escape from this bondage, however, strangely changes into a feeling of wanting Isadora throughout the course of his adventure on the *Republic* in the Atlantic Ocean. Readers already know that Rutherford is in a strange way attracted to Isadora when they learn that he carries her picture with him in the middle of the novel. Finally in the end, Rutherford, having stripped off his need to possess anything, meets Isadora again with a different perspective.

Rutherford was afraid of Isadora because he was afraid of being possessed, being someone's property. Property here means one's possession. At the beginning of the novel, Rutherford is called a "petty thief" and this is deeply connected to the idea of property as possession and trait (2). Obviously, slavery is an institution in which the structural center consists of property: a slave is a master's property. About a slave stealing master's property, Frederick Douglass theorizes as follows: "[W]hatever rights I have against Master Thomas I have equally against those confederated with him in robbing me of my liberty" (*Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* 105). A slave is already stolen, taken off his property, and himself made the property of another human being. Douglass shows this paradoxical relation between a slave and a master, claiming that stealing as a slave is not theft. It is, however, not a simple justification of theft Douglass is doing here. It is, rather, a comment about the significance of having property. If you possess, you are able to possess yourself; the property

you have becomes the second meaning of the word “property” – the attributes and traits that define you as a being.

Rutherford does not only employ Douglass’s theory. In addition, he ultimately negates the notion of defining oneself with property. The property that Rutherford tries to steal from others is not money or materials. From the beginning of the novel he tries to steal experiences. His monologue reads, “I hungered – literary *hungered* – for life in all its shades and hues: I was hooked on sensation, you might say, a lecher for perception and the nerve-knocking thrill, like a shot of opium, of new ‘experiences.’” (3). Yet, of course, experiences are not objects that you can hold onto as possessions. Rutherford learns of the meaninglessness of defining himself with property through his meeting with the Allmuseri on the *Republic*. Furthermore, Rutherford experiences truer freedom, the freedom of not being someone else’s property, as well as not possessing personal property. Thus, he is also free from the very tradition of the slave narrative as a literary genre.

This could also be the case with Rutherford’s amorous relationship with Isadora. Free from the notion of possession, he tells us, “[d]esire was too much of a wound, a rip of insufficiency and incompleteness that kept us, despite our proximity, constantly apart, like metals with an identical charge” (208). One cannot be together with somebody if one desires him or her. When this paradox is resolved, Rutherford finally meets Isadora, the woman of whom he had been afraid, to dispossess her in order to love her. The ending of the novel thus opens up as its potential as a narrative of love. In the novel, the condition of love is expressed as the state in which Rutherford does not need to possess others:

...just now, I wanted our futures blended, not our limbs, our histories perfectly twined for all time, not our flesh... 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, she lowered her head to my shoulder, as a sister might... Isadora drifted toward rest, nestled snugly beside me, where she would remain all night while we, forgetful of ourselves, gently crossed the Flood, and countless seas of suffering (208-209).

They suffer, because the insecurity of not possessing is always with them. It is, however, a beautiful image of the journey from bondage to freedom, where you surrender the notion of identity and interact with others intersubjectively. One does not need to add that the metaphor of the ocean *is* the middle passage as well as the intertextuality of *Middle Passage*, and the spacio-temporal chaos of history from slavery to the present.

This unknowability of self as a paradoxical affirmation of oneself finally shows us Johnson's recent concern, "The End of the Black American Narrative." Johnson points out the limitations and challenges in the original narrative – the narrative that is considered African American writers' property in his essay "The End of the Black American Narrative" in 2008:

What I am saying is that "official" stories and explanations and endlessly repeated interpretations of black American life over decades can short-circuit direct perception of the specific phenomenon before us. The idea of something – an intellectual construct – is often more appealing and perfect (in a Platonic sense) than the thing itself, which always remains mysterious and ambiguous and messy, by which I mean that its sense is open-ended, never fixed. It is always wise, I believe, to see all our propositions (and stories) as provisional, partial, incomplete, and subject to revision on the basis of new

evidence, which we can be sure is just around the corner. (39)

Johnson continues to envision that in the 21st century, we need “new and better stories, new concepts, and new vocabularies and grammar based not on the past but on the dangerous, exciting, and unexplored present, with the understanding that each is, at best, a provisional reading of reality...that one day is likely to be revised, if not completely overturned” (42).

This might seem like abstract observation, yet we cannot ignore this vision in considering the real end of African American literature. The “End” in “The End of the Black American Narrative,” therefore, has multiple meanings. It is the finale of the old narrative; therefore, we have to create a new narrative. It is also the aim of the old narrative; therefore, we need to examine the purpose of narrative when we utilize it in the 21st century. Finally, it is the result of the old narrative; therefore, we need to show the consequences of the narrative. *Middle Passage* reveals the end of the black American narrative, corresponding with the discussions surrounding African American literature and literary criticism today. The ultimate narrative of love the novel reveals to us might yet be insecure, but it could be a way to challenge the end of the black American narrative and envision a new end for literary works in 21st century.

Notes for Chapter 4

¹ For the function of ship’s log, see Mary Poovy, “The Limits of the Universal Knowledge Project: British India and the East Indiamen” *Critical Inquiry*, 31-1. 2004, pp183-202.