

# *PRECARIOUS* *PASSAGES*

The Diasporic Imagination in  
Contemporary Black Anglophone Fiction

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University Press of Florida  
Gainesville · Tallahassee · Tampa · Boca Raton  
Pensacola · Orlando · Miami · Jacksonville · Ft. Myers · Sarasota

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

This book may be available in an electronic edition.

21 20 19 18 17 16 6 5 4 3 2 1

A record of cataloging-in-publication data is available from the Library of Congress.  
ISBN 978-0-8130-6247-1

The University Press of Florida is the scholarly publishing agency for the State University System of Florida, comprising Florida A&M University, Florida Atlantic University, Florida Gulf Coast University, Florida International University, Florida State University, New College of Florida, University of Central Florida, University of Florida, University of North Florida, University of South Florida, and University of West Florida.



University Press of Florida  
15 Northwest 15th Street  
Gainesville, FL 32611-2079  
<http://www.upf.com>

## An African American Journey to Black Diasporic Consciousness

Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*

“An African American concept of space had its beginnings in the holds of the slave ships during the Middle Passage,”<sup>1</sup> Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Carl Pedersen argued in their introduction to *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* in 1999. The stated aim of their co-edited essay collection was to participate in constructing “a transatlantic imagination” by “reconceptualizing the meaning of the Middle Passage for African American history and fiction”;<sup>2</sup> the adjective “transatlantic” has since been broadened, by others, to “circum-Atlantic”<sup>3</sup> or just “Atlantic” in order to ensure that it covers the entire Atlantic rim. Rather than “looking at the Middle Passage as a phenomenon of constricted space and limited time,” Diedrich, Gates, and Pedersen sought to “extend its meaning in time and space . . . to the syncretic notion of a space in-between that links geographical and cultural regions.”<sup>4</sup> Their historically grounded and interpretively expanded understanding of the Middle Passage as a transitional and connective process/space—which, I must add, *both* links *and* separates—is extremely relevant to my project, because it establishes a foundation for a black diasporic sensibility (the three scholars’ chosen term was “a Middle Passage sensibility”)<sup>5</sup> that affiliates itself with Cliffordian/Gilroyan routes, instead of requiring a geographically and ethnically specific self-identification with “roots.”

In the introduction, I highlighted the close connection between black diasporic memory and identity. The African American author Charles Johnson’s 1990 Middle Passage novel,<sup>6</sup> which focuses on a slave ship experience and is pithily titled *Middle Passage*, commemorates the foundational historical experience of the African diaspora (the crossing of the Atlantic on slave ships)

and depicts the Middle Passage as a transitional process/space that both connects and denotes rupture. The novel also contains, I argue, a hermeneutically significant thematic narrative of the formation of a black diasporic identity. Although much has already been written about *Middle Passage*, its narrative of the emergence of black diasporic subjectivity and identity has mostly been treated as a *sine qua non*, rather than studied in itself. Seeking to fill this void, this chapter maps out the African American protagonist's journey to a black diasporic consciousness and demonstrates that the entire novel can be read as a story about the formation of his diasporic self-understanding.

A few words on Johnson, memory, history, and philosophy are needed to situate *Middle Passage* both within diasporic perspectives and in the context of Johnson's recurring intellectual interests. In 1989, he published an essay titled "Novelists of Memory," a brief survey of the history of the African American novel. When he decided to write *Middle Passage*, he himself assumed the task of being a "novelist of memory." The way in which Johnson (an academically trained philosopher and a philosophically oriented literary author)<sup>7</sup> carried out this historically informed task in relation to hermeneutics/philosophy can be usefully likened to Gilroy's project in *The Black Atlantic*. In *The Black Atlantic*, the sea—as fluid a space as anything can be, characterized by powerful cross-currents whose combined impacts have the potential to surprise even the most experienced traveler—defies the neat, fixed boundaries of modern nation-states and highlights the importance of passages and routes for the evolution of post-Columbian modernity. The trope of the slave ship, too, occupies a special place in Gilroy's theorizing because the ship, "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion,"<sup>8</sup> embodies the "rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation" of the African diaspora.<sup>9</sup> Like *The Black Atlantic*, *Middle Passage* also highlights the importance of the forced Atlantic crossing on a slaver for the emergence of black diasporic consciousness. Moreover, just as Gilroy's academic book *both* examines specific geopolitical contexts and historical figures *and* uses such tropes as the slave ship as hermeneutically valuable chronotopes, Johnson's novel likewise interrogates the nexus of the historical and the hermeneutical/philosophical.

Pairing *Middle Passage* with *The Black Atlantic* requires the parenthetical acknowledgement that although much of the prolific scholarly commentary offered on Gilroy's book has been laudatory, multiple critical voices have also been raised.<sup>10</sup> Simon Gikandi, for example, has articulated the following questions (which, in part, quote and paraphrase Joan Dayan's concerns):

“What . . . are the implications of transforming the terror of the middle passage into the metaphorical terror of modernity and rationality? What is the conceptual meaning of the slave ship once it has been re-presented as . . . a ‘vessel of transit and means to a knowledge’?”<sup>11</sup> These questions—arising from the worry that Gilroy’s approach might privilege “culture over experience and hermeneutics over history,” as Gikandi puts it<sup>12</sup>—are important, but *The Black Atlantic* hardly fails to consider actual human experience or history. In Gilroy’s treatment, even the heavily theoretical term “chronotope” calls attention to time and space in their specific manifestations, rather than seducing the critic into an ahistorical vacuum. In *The Black Atlantic*, the slave ship serves as a chronotope,<sup>13</sup> as noted. In Gilroy’s usage of Bakhtinian lexicon, this term refers to a unit of analysis that, in the study of texts, necessitates and facilitates the consideration of both time and space “as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they spring,”<sup>14</sup> to quote Bakhtin. Through this emphasis on the temporal and the spatial (or, on the historical and the geopolitical), Gilroy affirms that his hermeneutical work is anchored in the lived experience of the peoples of the African diaspora.

In a parallel manner, Johnson’s *Middle Passage* is, as the late Rudolph P. Byrd accurately observed, “a philosophical novel rooted in the past.”<sup>15</sup> That is, on the one hand Johnson writes fiction that is *primarily* interested in the philosophical. As a result, Johnson’s fictional commemoration of the Atlantic ur-crossing in *Middle Passage* does not chiefly aim for a realistic representation of historically verifiable details; even the African ethnic group depicted in the novel is Johnson’s invention. Because *Middle Passage* is a highly interpretive enterprise that focuses on the formation of black diasporic identity, the slave ship here indeed becomes an existential and epistemological unit that functions as a “vessel of transit and means to a knowledge” (to summon again Dayan and Gikandi’s phrase).<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, Johnson does also address the Middle Passage’s historicity, including its physical terror;<sup>17</sup> neither his abundant philosophizing nor his postmodernist experimentation with the genre of the neo-slave narrative negates this fact. For him, as for Gilroy, the philosophical and the historical are intimately intertwined. Creating fiction that is informed by both of these realms is how Johnson chooses to be “a novelist of memory.” In *Middle Passage*, his approach results in a fictional representation of the formation of a diasporic self-understanding, a processual identity born from the memory of the Middle Passage as an in-between “space” that both denotes rupture and connects the black diasporic subject with Africanity.

Despite the questions raised by Gilroy's critics, a powerful emphasis on the origins of the African diaspora in trauma and terror is a nonnegotiable aspect of his diasporic hermeneutics, as discussed in the introduction. Given this emphasis, *Middle Passage*—a highly atypical rendering of the Atlantic slave trade—may at first glance seem to fit poorly within the Gilroyan framework of diasporic theory, because Johnson's postmodernist text addresses the trade's unspeakable horrors by resorting to such seemingly inappropriate devices as comical anachronisms and parody.<sup>18</sup> With its funny quirks and adventurous twists, the novel follows, as Marc C. Conner remarks, "the form and language of the adventure tale, the sea voyage, even of the Roman Comedy whereby the tricky servant schemes and connives his way to freedom."<sup>19</sup> However, despite the elements that may seem unexpected in light of Johnson's grave topic, what ultimately emerges from his unique admixture of historical inspiration, phenomenology, Buddhism, literary intertextuality, and dark humor is not only a good yarn spun by the seaman-narrator but also a lamentation over the suffering that the Atlantic slave trade inflicted on its victims—and, finally, the story of an African American journey toward a black diasporic self-understanding.

Throughout the novel, Johnson highlights the "in-between" and processual aspects of diasporic identity by overlaying the historical concept of the Middle Passage with the more metaphorical connotation of "transformation"—a passage from one state of being to another, or a fundamental change in perception that leads to existential reevaluation. In addition to "transformation," "perception" is, indeed, another key word in my analysis of Johnson's novel. In *Middle Passage*, transformed/liberated perception is required for a transformed/liberated consciousness, specifically for the narrator-protagonist Rutherford Calhoun's gradual awakening to the existential and moral significance of his identity position as a member of the African diaspora. This chapter, therefore, as its first task identifies three seemingly unrelated influences that inspired Johnson to probe into the nature of perception in *Middle Passage*. First, Johnson's narrative conducts an intertextual dialogue with Herman Melville's treatment of perception in *Benito Cereno* (1855/1856),<sup>20</sup> a novella about a black rebellion on a Spanish slaver. In addition to its thematic focus on slave mutiny, it was *Benito Cereno*'s pervasive attention to socially conditioned perception, I argue, that prompted Johnson to see this novella as an apt source for allusion and appropriation or as a suitable foundation for an "American palimpsest," to quote Byrd's preferred idiom.<sup>21</sup> The narrative of Rutherford's perceptual-cum-existential transformation also draws, second, on phenomenology and, third, on Buddhism, both of which Johnson is intimately familiar

with. Despite their vastly different genealogies, both phenomenology and Buddhism in their own ways study the role of human perception in individuals' existential processes. They examine the existential significance of how we perceive the world and ourselves and how we might free ourselves of our pre-conceived judgments based on fixed, frozen perception.

*Benito Cereno*, phenomenology, and Buddhism share, I repeat, an interest in transformed/liberated perception as a requirement for a transformed/liberated consciousness. It is for this reason, I contend, that Johnson throws these three seemingly unconnected ingredients into his literary melting pot in order to create a story about a journey to black diasporic awareness. Below, my more detailed discussion of these influences serves as a threefold contextualization, within Johnson's intellectual milieu, of the argument that *Middle Passage* can be legitimately read as a literary representation of black diasporic identity formation. This contextualization is followed by a close reading of the novel, with a focus on the narrative of the protagonist's journey to African diasporic subjectivity.

#### Perceptual Change, *Benito Cereno*, and *Middle Passage*

The events of *Middle Passage* are set in motion when the young African American freedman Rutherford Calhoun escapes personal trouble in New Orleans by, rather dimwittedly, sneaking onto a slaver that is about to depart for the west coast of Africa. Once discovered, he is assigned the lowly position of an assistant to the ship's cook. In this capacity of a semiaccidental black intermediary in the slave trade, he witnesses the Middle Passage of forty captive Africans as the ship eventually sails back from West Africa toward Louisiana with the human cargo in its hold. This forced Atlantic crossing of Johnson's fictional Allmuseri, his countermaterialistic and spiritual "ur-people,"<sup>22</sup> takes place in the summer of 1830, more than twenty years after the importation of slaves to the United States was rendered illegal. Unlawful and clandestine as the enterprise is, the forty African captives are, nevertheless, being shipped to New Orleans, a major port serving the legal US interstate slave trade at the time.

During the ocean voyage, the narrative spotlight is all along on the gradual existential transformation of Rutherford, the only black crewman on the slaver. Torn between his status as one of the crew and his sympathies with the suffering Africans, he witnesses the horrors that take place on the poorly managed and decaying *Republic*. (The significance of the ship's name has not

been lost on scholars.)<sup>23</sup> As the *Republic's* crew and cargo together cross the sea—the vast “living void”<sup>24</sup> or “emptiness”<sup>25</sup> (to echo relevant Buddhist concepts) that Rutherford calls a “theater of transformations”<sup>26</sup>—the presence of the Allmuseri gradually and irreversibly alters the young man’s perception of life, reality, and morality. When he first boarded the *Republic*, a vessel that Johnson’s existentially laden narrative explicitly characterizes as a “process,”<sup>27</sup> Rutherford was a drifter and a self-absorbed player, a Melvillean/Ellisonian “confidence man.”<sup>28</sup> However, during the journey from New Orleans to West Africa and back, he arrives at a completely transfigured understanding of both himself and the world: his transformative experience as a participant-observer on the slaver forcefully brings him to a moral, cultural, spiritual, and political awareness of his diasporic existence.

In *Middle Passage*, Johnson’s treatment of perception, a motif vital to his account of Rutherford’s journey to an aware existence as a diasporic subject, is in intriguing conversation with Melville’s strategic deployment of the same motif in *Benito Cereno*. Perception, which is characterized by unreliability and malleability, is no neutral cognitive event; the beholder’s proverbial eye always has a complex relationship with what it has and has not perceived before. Scholars interrogating the malleable social construct of “race” know this very well, as do fiction writers whose work deliberately challenges habitual patterns of thought that contribute to conservative social perception. The first of the two epigraphs that Ralph Ellison, Johnson’s deeply admired literary ancestor,<sup>29</sup> chose for *Invisible Man*—a 1952 masterpiece about black identity, socially conditioned perception, and the perils of racialized modes of seeing—was a quotation from the famous closing dialogue of *Benito Cereno*, which Ellison evoked to emphasize the invisibility of “the Negro.”<sup>30</sup> The Melvillean epigraph sets the stage for *Invisible Man* quite effectively because the discourse of perception, or of sight and insight, occupies an important role in Ellison’s novel, as it does in *Benito Cereno*. Johnson has always been explicit about his profound appreciation of *Invisible Man*,<sup>31</sup> and in *Middle Passage* he engages in a conversation with the same source of inspiration that Ellison highlighted via said epigraph, that is, with *Benito Cereno*. Johnson alerts the reader to his dialogue with *Benito Cereno* by adopting names for several of his fictive Africans (Babo, Diamelo, Francesco, Atufal, Ghofan, and Akim) from the semifictional deposition appended to Melville’s novella.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, one of Johnson’s minor characters explicitly laments “how some writers such as Amasa Delano have slandered black rebels in their tales.”<sup>33</sup> Most importantly, both *Benito Cereno* and *Middle Passage*, resonating at what Ellison would term