

**MIDDLE PASSAGE TO FREEDOM:
BLACK ATLANTIC CONSCIOUSNESS
IN CHARLES JOHNSON'S *MIDDLE PASSAGE*
AND S. I. MARTIN'S *INCOMPARABLE
WORLD***

**Robert Nowatzki
Ball State University**

Charles Johnson's novel, *Middle Passage*, and S.I. Martin's novel, *Incomparable World*, illustrate through mobile, culturally hybrid protagonists Paul Gilroy's notion of Black Atlantic consciousness, which is based on cultural hybridity and physical mobility across the Atlantic between Europe and Africa, America and the Caribbean. I argue that both novels blur the line between freedom and slavery, between oppressed and oppressor, and disrupt the links between blackness and slavery, between mobility and freedom. In both novels the diasporic Black Atlantic experiences privilege masculinity, since neither novel includes black women who can experience the mobility that the male protagonists do.

In his 1993 book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy emphasizes the creolized identity of persons of African descent since the opening of the African slave trade. Gilroy points out that black cultural identity has been shaped not only by Africa but also by contacts with the peoples and cultures of Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas, by interactions among these peoples and cultures, and by numerous forced and voluntary movements across the Atlantic Ocean. Thus, Gilroy argues, modern black identities are not defined by geographical boundaries but by movement, hybridity, and a fluidity that is both enabled and symbolized by the Atlantic itself. This essay will examine the creolized identities of the black protagonists of two novels published in the 1990s through the lens of Gilroy's *Black Atlantic theory: Middle Passage* (1990) by the African American author Charles Johnson and *Incomparable World* (1996) by the black British author S. I. Martin. Before doing so, however, I would like to flesh out Gilroy's theory in greater detail.

Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic resists the essentialist and dualistic logic that racially has defined and oppressed people for the past few centuries. He states that "in opposition to nationalist or ethnically absolute approaches, I want to develop the suggestion that cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective" (15). This emphasis on mobility and cultural blending places Gilroy's Black Atlantic concept in line with much recent postcolonial theory and at odds with the racial determinism of Afrocentrism. He later argues this:

The history of the black Atlantic . . . continually criss-crossed by the movements of black people—not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, citizenship—provides a means to reexamine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory. They all emerge from it with special clarity if we contrast the national, nationalistic, and ethnically absolute paradigms of cultural criticism to be found in England and America with

this hidden expression, both residual and emergent, that attempt to be global or outer-national in nature (16).

Such an approach rejects the notion that all persons of African descent living outside of Africa and in the Atlantic world are essentially African underneath the layers of imposed European, Caribbean, or American identities. Nor does Gilroy accept the idea that black Africans, African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, and Afro-Europeans are fundamentally different from each other. Instead he sees the Atlantic Ocean as a bridge rather than a boundary between the continents bordering it and the islands within it and argues that by crossing the Atlantic (as captured slaves, as sailors, or as free passengers), persons of African descent develop a hybrid black identity rather than maintaining a monolithic African identity or wholly assimilating to an American, Caribbean, or European identity.

One early example of the Black Atlantic experience is the 1789 narrative by Olaudah Equiano, who spent his life in Africa, the West Indies, North America, and England, as well as on the Atlantic itself. Equiano begins his narrative with a positive description of his native Africa, in which he foregrounds his African identity, but by the fourth chapter he claims that his attempts to embrace English culture as a slave in the British West Indies have made him “almost an Englishman.” In fact not only does Equiano adopt Christianity, become a missionary, acquire literacy, and engage in capitalism, he also becomes involved in English imperialism and works on a slave ship, despite his later abolitionist commitments.

This Black Atlantic consciousness that Equiano gained was forced upon him and other slaves who endured the Middle Passage to the New World; however the Black Atlantic also shaped the identities of emancipated and free-born people of African descent who traversed the Atlantic. Gilroy gives as examples abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and William Wells Brown; musicians like the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Miles Davis, and Jimi Hendrix; and authors like Phillis Wheatley, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin. Likewise in his book, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*,

the identities of black sailors like Equiano and Crispus Attucks also were shaped by their transatlantic experiences. Gilroy's notion of the Black Atlantic extends W. E. B. Du Bois' concept of double-consciousness, the idea that African Americans are torn between their African and American identities, by expanding the canvas beyond the U. S. and Africa and by emphasizing hybridity over conflict. It also provides a middle ground between white European and black identities that have often been overlooked by Du Bois' intellectual descendents, as Gilroy argues:

. . . where racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that these identities appear to be mutually exclusive, occupying the space between them or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provocative and event oppositional act of political insubordination (1)

The Atlantic Ocean can be seen as a symbol of the cultural space between discrete, "pure," cultural identities that people of African descent have transgressively occupied.

Gilroy's theory of the Black Atlantic provides the ideal framework in which to read *Middle Passage* and *Incomparable World*,¹ since they undermine the dualism of African/Western as well as other dualisms such as white/black and slavery/freedom, upon which racial logic and practice has been based. Both novels focus on ex-slaves of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who gain culturally hybrid identities as a result of crossing the Atlantic. These novels offer alternative black identities to those bound by nationality and also resist the racial essentialism that has often informed characterizations of persons of African descent. The Black Atlantic hybrid identities portrayed in both novels, however, like Gilroy's theories of the Black Atlantic, are limited in terms of gender, in that they do not extend this notion of mobility and fluidity to women of African descent. Both novels do suggest that the concept of hybrid Atlantic identities are not necessarily restricted to persons of African descent, a possibility which Gilroy does not explore in his book.

Johnson's philosophical, Melvillesque adventure tale, *Middle Passage*, which takes place in 1830, is narrated by a literate, dishonest ex-slave named Rutherford Calhoun who has left

southern Illinois for a career as a thief in New Orleans. There he is forced by Papa Zeringue, a corrupt and powerful black creditor, to marry his black girlfriend, Isadora Bailey, against his wishes. His only escape from matrimony is to stow away on the Republic, which turns out to be a slaver that transports a group of captured Allmuseri people from Africa. Johnson's novel undermines or inverts many of the interrelated binary oppositions that structure the discourses of slavery and race: black/white, African/Western, North/South, and freedom/slavery. One example of Johnson's reversal of binary logic is Calhoun's earlier journey south from Illinois, a Northern state where he was a slave, to New Orleans, the slave-trading capital of America, a journey that, like that of Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, inverts the more traditional northern journey from slavery to freedom. Johnson depicts Calhoun's slave life in Illinois as relatively benign, and his master hates slavery and manumits him on his deathbed. Still it is surprising that he and his brother were enslaved in Illinois, where slavery was forbidden by the 1787 Northwest Ordinance, and Johnson historically situates Calhoun's Illinois enslavement (ending in 1829) before Dred Scott's residence there between 1833 and 1838 (Johnson and Smith 417); thus, Johnson does not suggest that Calhoun would have been affected by the 1857 Dred Scott ruling that denied civil rights to African Americans. Johnson does not explain this anomaly, but some whites did hold slaves in Illinois and Indiana, either because of a lack of enforcement of the Northwest Ordinance or because of legal loopholes. At any rate, Johnson reverses the geographic dualism of slavery and freedom. Although New Orleans does not turn out to be the land of opportunity that Calhoun hopes for, he is not re-enslaved; rather he becomes complicit in the slave trade, an action, of course, that diminishes his moral authority. While he crosses the Atlantic on a slave ship, he does so on deck, not in the hold, and begins by sailing east, not west. These facts alone place Calhoun between black slaves and white slaveholders and illustrate Gilroy's argument that Black Atlantic consciousness is not only experienced by slaves during the middle passage.

Johnson also reveals how the racial identities and loyalties

of Calhoun and the other characters resist the dualisms that inform racial ideologies and institutions. Despite his racial identity and his former slave status, Calhoun does not naturally side with the captured Allmuseri people on board, and in that sense he resembles Equiano as a black man who participates in the slave trade.² In fact, *Middle Passage* reverses the notion of white magic in Equiano's *Narrative* (itself a reversal of European notions of African magic) by describing the Allmuseri as a tribe of sorcerers. Because of his cultural similarity to the white crew and his racial similarity to the Allmuseri captives, Calhoun is invited to participate in both a crew mutiny and a slave mutiny, and he never decides which side to join. His indecision reveals the conflict that can occur concerning race and culture and illustrates Gilroy's idea of Black Atlantic hybrid consciousness. Likewise the equations of whiteness with slaveholders and of blackness with slaves are inverted when the white Captain Falcon complains to Calhoun that he has to grovel before prospective investors, one of whom is Papa Zeringue. Falcon serves as a foil to the anti-dualistic quality of the book in a conversation with Calhoun:

Dualism is a bloody structure of the mind. Subject and object, perceiver and perceived, self and other—these ancient twins are built into mind like the stem-piece of a merchantman. . . . They are signs of a transcendental Fault, a deep crack in consciousness itself (98).³

To his list of dualisms Falcon could have added black/white, slavery/freedom, African/Western, poverty/wealth—dichotomies which both Gilroy and Johnson seek to undermine in their respective works.⁴

Calhoun is not the only black person on the ship whose identity is hybrid, however. Indeed, the fluidity of Allmuseri identity that can be seen in the quotation in the following passage resembles that of the Atlantic Ocean itself:

Stupidly, I had seen their lives and culture as a 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 evolv-

ing and as vulnerable to metamorphosis Ngonyama and maybe all the Africans, I realized, were not wholly Allmuseri anymore. . . . No longer Africans, yet not Americans either (124-25).

This dynamic identity is not only applicable to persons of African descent, however. In addition to the anti-essentialist description of the Allmuseri, the logic of this passage suggests that white sailors and officers on the Republic might be somewhat Africanized by their contact with the Allmuseri. Because black people were not the only group whose identities became complicated by the transatlantic trade industry—consider, for instance, the cultural identities of white sailors and of Indian indentured servants shipped to the Caribbean⁵—one may argue that the phrase, “Black Atlantic,” is racially limited.

Johnson emphasizes the notion of cultural hybridity even more through the self-consciousness of his protagonist. Calhoun recognizes that his own identity has been shaped and destabilized by his experiences on the Atlantic:

I was open, like a hingeless door, to everything. . . . 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 rightfully 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 countries, a patchwork of others and objects stretching backward to perhaps the beginning of time (162-63).

If Calhoun ever felt that his identity as an African American was stable and monolithic, his experience on the Atlantic has fractured that self-image. Culturally and linguistically, the African identity that he inherits from his forebears is complicated by his experience in the U. S., and his advanced literacy not only refutes white racists who equated literacy with humanity and argued that black illiteracy was a mark of their humanity but also shows his adaption to Euro-American culture. More recently his experience on the Republic complicates his position in the slavery economy and the ideological terrain that surrounds slavery.

In a later passage he again emphasizes the hybridity of his identity as a result of his Black Atlantic experience:

Looking back at the asceticism of the Middle Passage, I saw how the frame of mind I had adopted left me unattached, . . . The voyage had irreversibly changed my seeing, made of me a cultural mongrel . . . (187).

No longer American but not African either, Calhoun's identity changes as it moves from port to port in the Atlantic world.⁶

This notion of fluid, hybrid identity is also symbolized by the ship itself. As with Calhoun's description of his identity, his description of the ship suggests violence and disintegration:

The Republic was physically unstable. She was perpetually flying apart and re-forming during the voyage, falling to pieces beneath us, the great sails ripping to rags in high winds, the rot, cracks, and parasites in old wood so cancerously swift, spring up where least expected, that Captain Falcon's crew spent most of their time literally rebuilding the Republic as we crawled along the waves. In a word, she was, from stem to stern, a process. She would not be . . . the same vessel that left New Orleans, it not being in the nature of any ship to remain the same on that thrashing void called the Atlantic (35-36).

We can read this passage not only as a rather obvious symbol for the messy process of democracy in the American Republic, but also as a symbol for the Black Atlantic identity. The only constant entity in Calhoun's world is the tempestuous Atlantic itself, which threatens the physical and ontological integrity of everyone and everything floating on its surface. Johnson's description of the Republic may remind us of Gilroy's claim about the importance of ships in the Black Atlantic consciousness:

. . . ships were the living means by which the points within that Atlantic world were joined. They were mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they connected (16).⁷

While Gilroy's notion of the ship suggests connection rather than disintegration, both Johnson and Gilroy emphasize the disparate nature of the Black Atlantic experience.

Like Johnson's *Middle Passage*, Martin's historical novel, *Incomparable World*, focuses on ex-slaves who have traversed the Atlantic as freemen, though unlike Calhoun, they are not involved in the slave trade. Instead, the three main characters—Buckram, William Supple, and Georgie George—are trying to carve out their existence as freedmen after fighting on the British side in the American Revolution. After the war, they crossed the Atlantic, but unlike their ancestors they traveled east and as freedmen; however, instead of returning to their ancestral homeland, they traveled to London.⁸ Because of Lord Mansfield's 1772 ruling in the Somerset case that forbade the forced deportation of slaves from Britain (a ruling that has often been misinterpreted to mean the abolition of slavery in Britain), these former slaves are purportedly free, but their freedom is severely limited by poverty, as Georgie George points out: "Free? Free? We're all in prison here, Buckie. You're just out of gaol" (6). The narrator later comments that when the war ended,

. . . as they boarded the troop-ships that would take them to exile in London none of the black fighters could have imagined the so-called freedom to which they would be doomed (10).

Their freedom is as tenuous as that of Calhoun in *Middle Passage*; Georgie George warns Buckram that despite their nominal freedom,

They're killing black people in [the sickhouse], y'know. If you get better in there, they'll sell you off to some sea captain bound for America. You'll end up back in chains (11).

The characters are actually neither enslaved nor free but live in an uncertain world in which they are sometimes dehumanized because of their race and sometimes accepted because of their adopted Englishness. On the one hand, English authorities see them as a social problem that can be solved by deporting them to Sierra Leone; on the other hand, like Equiano (who makes two appearances in the novel), they have become "almost Englishmen." For instance, when Buckram happens upon and assaults his former American master, he wins the approval of onlooking white Londoners because he uses "London English,"

despite his master's appeal of racial solidarity to the Londoners.

Toward the end of the novel, Englishness trumps race again when Georgie George and William end up in Recife, Brazil. They are followed by Portugese soldiers, who intend to capture them and sell them into slavery, but they are rescued by white English soldiers. Language links these black Britons to their white countrymen, as Georgie George explains:

. . . this is an English inn and we are English speakers. Until we blacks use our original African language, our lives are linked with these people and theirs with ours, even against our proper interests, with the best will in the world. . . . To these drunken seafarers, it mattered less that we are black men than that we have a common tongue. Language fosters conspiracy (162).

In this sense, language undermines binary racial categories because unlike skin tone or origin, it can be shared by people of different races. While this passage neglects the ways in which the English language has changed by the contact between white Britons and Africans or African Americans, the fact that William and Georgie George are able to use the language of their erst-while masters is more important than the fluidity of the language itself. The concept of Black Atlantic identity is perfectly illustrated by these two English-speaking black men who were slaves in North America, migrated to London and then to South America, where they are helped by white British sailors.

Martin also switches back and forth between promoting essentialist notions of blackness and destabilizing and parodying them. At one point in the novel, Martin emphasizes William's African identity and that of other black people in London: "Bambara, Mandinka, Wolof, Fulani, Ibo, Whydah, Ashanti, Coromantee, Fanti, Ga, Hausa, Yoruba, Angola, William knew them all, even if they didn't know themselves" (76). Buckram also has a dream of Africa which suggests that there is his true home, even though his notion of "Africanness" is filtered through his experiences as a slave in Carolina:

The scene was a forest clearing—everywhere was hot and damp, with rotting vegetation just like Virginia in August. Smoke rose from the chimneys, grass huts had

windows and all the people dressed in the same cloth, the slave material: buckram. Roasting, fatty meats turned on spits. The whole village sang, call and response, with the rhythms knocking out in the background. . . . Warm breezes gathered under his outstretched arms and carried him, spiralling slowly into the sky (28).

This suggestion of a stable African essence appears later, when an old slave named Gullah “talked of a world so unlikely William took it to be imaginary. It was a black world of black kingdoms where black people did black things” (76). Later in the novel, however, William and Georgie George swindle an American ambassador by posing as an African chieftain and his interpreter. William, an actor who plays the chief, performs an act of cultural blackface by disguising his American and British identities from the naïve American ambassador. His performance as an African dignitary highlights his lack of African essential identity, in that the only thing “African” about him is his skin color. As a result of his Black Atlantic cultural identity, performing “Africanness” is a difficult theatrical feat for this black Englishman.

Martin uses transatlantic crossings to complicate not only the identities of persons of African descent, but also English national identity itself. For instance, at one point the narrator explains that Buckram

was suddenly seized by a delirious vision of this land, this London, in time to come, teeming with generation after generation of his kinfolk, freedmen, English-born and bred; transforming this wet, cold island with African worship and celebration. Imperial orphans in communion with a fractured past—his present—leading Albion’s hag-masses to a greater, more wholesome dance of life (40).

Buckram’s vision foreshadows the cultural hybridity of Britain that would result from the immigration of formerly colonized people from the West Indies, Africa, and India in the second half of the twentieth century. This perspective leads Buckram to a new understanding of where he belongs that con-

flicts with his earlier idea of African essentialism; he sadly, slowly realizes,

This is home: London. This is my home: London. My friends are here. My life is here, and I live in this, our home: London town (42).

Martin later uses a conversation between two famous eighteenth-century Africans to emphasize the cultural hybridity of the English in their partial absorption of African people and culture. Equiano tells Ottobah Cugoano that

(O)ur numbers here [England] increase and . . . we will become, if indeed we are not already, an ineradicable element of this nation's character (98).

Cugoano adds that the English are “a composite of those they've conquered, and nothing more. Mongrels all . . . (98). Such a passage certainly resonates in Martin's contemporary Britain, in which Britons of various racial origins are debating the connections between race and nationality. Both in Martin's time and in the late eighteenth century, the people conquered by the English, including Africans, are cultural “mongrels” as much as their English conquerors are.

Despite the relative freedom that the Black Atlantic brings to Calhoun, Buckram, William, and Georgie George, however, such freedom is not as available to female characters in the two novels. *Middle Passage* opens with Calhoun, Johnson's Ishmael-like narrator, claiming that “[o]f all things that drive men to sea, the most common disaster, I've come to learn, is women” (1). He says that Isadora “was . . . a woman grounded, physically and metaphysically, in the land” (5).⁹

While Calhoun is on board the Republic, the fact that the Atlantic is no place for women of any race is emphasized by his offhanded remark about the captain's homosexual activities and by his rare references to the captured Allmuseri women. Predictably, the crew of the Republic—including the black Calhoun himself—perform masculinity to extreme degrees for each other:

The Republic was, above all else, a ship of men. Without the civilizing presence of women, everyone felt the pressure, the masculine imperative to prove

himself equal to a vague standard of manliness in order to be judged “regular.” To fail at this in the eyes of the other men could, I needn’t tell you, make your life at sea quite miserable. It led to posturing among the crew, a tendency to turn themselves into caricatures of the concept of maleness: to strut, keep their chests stuck out and stomachs sucked in, and talk monosyllabically in surly mumbles or grunts because being good at language was womanly. Lord knows, this front was hard to maintain for very long. You had to work at being manly; it took more effort, in a way, than rigging sails (41).

While Calhoun shows his awareness of the performative element of nautical masculinity, he is not shut out from such a fraternity because of his race, and therefore his status as a sailor on the Atlantic enables him to cross racial boundaries.

While it is little surprise that Johnson’s seafaring novel focuses mostly on men, *Incomparable World* also includes few female characters despite the obvious presence of women in eighteenth-century London. Martin uses one black female character, the beautiful, middle-class schoolteacher, Charlotte Tell, to disarticulate blackness from slavery, since she seems to be the most English and one of the most educated and refined characters in the novel; however like Johnson’s Isadora, she is grounded in the land. In fact when she and her friends cross the Thames River, she becomes sick. Shortly after they arrive on land, Buckram is accosted by Hullside Harriet, a white prostitute who formerly worked for him and whom he discovers is the mother of his child. The fact that she abuses him verbally and physically, combined with Charlotte’s seasickness, suggests that he would be safer on the water while Charlotte would be safer on land. William Supple’s wife, Mary, (who never appears directly in the novel) is also tied to the land, in that she does not follow him to London. Although she wants to move to Nova Scotia with William and their children, William’s plan to bring her and the children falls through when he loses his money in a fire.

The lack of mobility of these black female characters is not unique to these novels, however; rather, they are symptomatic of

the restrictions placed on black women that prevented them from crossing the Atlantic like their male counterparts. Though Gilroy's theory of Black Atlantic consciousness does not explicitly exclude black women, in practice it applies mostly, if not exclusively, to black men. In fact, despite brief mentions of Phillis Wheatley and Ida B. Wells, Gilroy's focus is primarily on black men such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Delany, and Richard Wright. The two novels discussed here undermine many binary oppositions such as black/white, African/Western, and slavery/freedom, but unfortunately the male/female dualism seems to remain intact. Although it would be valuable to examine how the Black Atlantic has informed the experiences of women of African descent such as Wheatley, Wells, Harriet Jacobs, and Ellen Craft, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations to the notion of the Black Atlantic as a gendered, and therefore limited, concept.

Despite their exclusion of women from Black Atlantic consciousness, however, both of these novels are worth analyzing in themselves. However, reading them together may be even more fruitful. Because Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic crosses and even erases national boundaries, it makes sense to examine the works of a two authors of African descent from opposite sides of the Atlantic, one British and one American. In other words, reading these novels in tandem will help break down the national boundaries that Gilroy sees as obstacles to an understanding of the Black Atlantic phenomenon. Such a juxtaposition demonstrates how not just the fact of Black Atlantic consciousness but the very concept itself has been put to literary use on both sides of the Atlantic.

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NOTES

¹ Unlike Johnson's *Middle Passage*, Martin's *Incomparable World* seems to have attracted little notice among U. S. literary scholars, perhaps in part because of the lack of distribution of the novel in the U. S.

² See W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seaman in the Age of Sail* for information on African seamen involved in the slave trade. Bolster writes that "African mariners in the slave trade exhibited the nervous detachment of men simultaneously smug about their own favored position and constantly leery of their European employers' potential duplicity or of other Africans' revenge" (52). Bolster also writes that "[t]he process of cultural adaptation referred to as 'creolization,' through which Africans transformed themselves into African Americans, began, not on the shores of America, but on those of Africa, and aboard the slavers that bridged the two" (53).

³ Gilroy briefly compares *Middle Passage* to Martin Delany's novel *Blake, or the Huts of America* in *The Black Atlantic* (218).

⁴ In his review of *Middle Passage*, Gilroy writes that "Middle Passage

seeks to wrench [Falcon's theory of dualism] apart. First, by showing it to be 'adrift from the laws and logic of the heart' and second, by demonstrating the power of process, movement, and cultural 'creolization'" (qtd. in Fagel 632).

⁵ In Britain "black" often includes persons of Indian descent as well as persons of African descent; in that sense, the Black Atlantic may include persons of Indian descent in the Atlantic world. In this article, however, I use the word "black" in the American sense to denote only persons of African descent.

⁶ Brian Fagel's article "Passages from the Middle: Coloniality and Postcoloniality in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*" does not refer to Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic, but offers an excellent discussion of postcolonial hybridity in Johnson's novel. For instance, Fagel argues that "Calhoun cannot identify with the borders, where culture exists, because he is excluded from every community; he only mediates, mapping out the constricted space in-between. One site of Calhoun's middle-ness is between the Republic's crew and the Allmuseri: This is the uncharted space between America and Africa, white and black" (626).

⁷ Earlier, Gilroy writes that "[t]he image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs" (4).

⁸ See Gretchen Gerzina, *Black London: Life before Emancipation* for information about black ex-slaves who migrated to London after fighting for the British in the Revolutionary War (136).

⁹ In her analysis of Johnson's depiction of Isadora, Elizabeth Muther argues that "[t]he love story between Isadora and Rutherford, when read across these intertextual spaces, comes to seem an act of historical commentary on the Middle Passage, the Atlantic transportation of slaves. Far from remaining a static feminine icon of shore-grounded

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conservatism, Isadora becomes a partner with Rutherford in treacherous refigurations of identity and relationship across historical reaches” (650). However, her alliance with Calhoun’s enemy Papa Zeringue only spurs Calhoun on his journey into Black Atlantic consciousness, while she does not appear to leave New Orleans herself.