

The Trickster as Savior in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*

Mahmoud Refaat

Assistant Professor,
Faculty of Arts,
Sohag University,
Egypt.

Abstract

The trickster figure is a key figure in the African American tradition. Charles Johnson employs the trickster figure in his *Middle Passage* as a figure of mediation and liminality. In spite of the excessive literature on the novel, no publications address the trickster figure in the novel. This paper aims at revealing the role of the trickster as a savior. It relies on Henry Louise Gates, Jr.'s reading of the African American trickster as a figure of transcendence that amalgamates characteristics from the African heritage with the American culture and Carl Jung's psychological archetype of the trickster as a savior. The African American trickster is a crossroads figure which combines both cultures. The voyage of *Middle Passage* is the voyage of America through slavery, capitalism, revolution, and transformation. Against this background the trickster figure

emerges as a figure of resistance who defies boundaries. He generates constructive chaos to create a favorable situation for him or his group to overcome oppression. This reading of the novel shows how the trickster protagonist transforms from a source of chaos and disunity into a figure of resistance and redeeming. The *Middle Passage* voyage represents this transatlantic transformation connecting him with his African roots offering him the opportunity to recover his lost past and the cultural gaps created by slavery. The trickster, in the novel, represents the hybridity, transformation, and amalgamation of the American experience, in general, and the African American experience, in particular.

Keywords: African American studies, American literature, trickster figure, Charles Johnson, Middle Passage

The Trickster as Savior in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*

Mahmoud Refaat

The trickster figure remains one of the most popular figures in the history of humanity, and the African American tradition and literature are no exception. African American folklore and mythology draw heavily on the trickster figure that found its way to the New World with the African slaves who passed the tradition of trickstry down from one generation to another. The trickster is mainly manipulative and destructive. However, he is also creative and empowering. He takes different forms and shapes, causes chaos wherever he goes, and is always on the move. Ayana Smith portrays the general characteristics of the trickster figure in the African American tradition as “one who flouts the norms of society using cunning, humour and deceit to obtain personal gain”, usually overcome by more powerful opponents and hence his main weapon is his tricks (179). Tricksters generally outwit the more powerful antagonists or forces that oppose or oppress them. They are disruptive, mischievous, witty, smart, and ridiculously funny that the powerful might not take them seriously. Therefore, the tricks of the African American tricksters serve as remarkable means of resistance to deliver the message of the marginalized and disempowered. Trickster figures are rebellious, by nature. They tend to defy and disrupt hierarchies that attempt to classify and categorize them. They reject mainstream impositions and refuse to adapt to social hierarchies that marginalize and oppress them, in the first place. According to Smith, such a tendency to live “outside the margins of society” and to fit “no normalized pattern of social behavior” allows the trickster to become a hero (180). Such a rebellious tendency potentially turns tricksters into saviors as they take revenge of the oppressor and avenge the oppressed.

The African American trickster was born and survived throughout slavery to express the community of slaves' inherent desire to resist. During slavery, trickstry was a tactic of survival: a hungry slave would steal food to compensate for lack of provision, a slave who cannot confront the system would make fun of it, he would trick whites out of their possessions, or manipulate the system for his own privilege. However, the degeneration and individualism of the slave community forced the black trickster to turn his selfishness and manipulation towards the oppressed and the weak, at times. As a spiritual and mythical folklore figure, though, the trickster remained the voice of the subjugated and part of his manipulation was meant to avenge the subdued or at least mock the power of the tyrants. The injustices of slavery created the need for the trickster. The persistence of such injustices, and African Americans' continuing vulnerability and lack of sociopolitical and economic independence beyond emancipation extended the presence of the trickster figure well into contemporary times, long after the end of slavery (Levine 370-1). Even centuries after emancipation, “guile and wit remained necessary and ubiquitous tools . . . to confront the dominant culture” (380). The trickster figure naturally stands as a symbol of resistance, for African American writers.

The trickster figure is also evident in African American folklore usually impersonated by animal characters like Br'er Rabbit who lives by his wits and is, or the Signifying Monkey who constantly humiliates and mocks the power of the lion, and is ‘always lying and signifying’. The Br'er Rabbit and signifying monkey have roots in the African tradition as Winifred Morgan notes that the “West African Esu-

Elegbara changed into the signifying monkey, while the African rabbit or hare turned into Br'er Rabbit. Characteristics of African American tricksters were intensified in the dire circumstances of chattel slavery" (15). Thus, the African American trickster owes its existence to its African forebears, as they were introduced by African slaves and reshaped by the experience of slavery. The trickster figure is also eminent in published African American literary tradition. For example, Uncle Remus is the trickster narrator of the folkloric stories of *Uncle Remus* adapted by Joel Chandler Harris telling stories of animal tricksters (1881), and the benevolent trickster Uncle Julius narrates Charles W. Chesnut's collection of short stories *The Conjure Woman* (1899). The trickster makes appearance in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) as the narcissistic confidence man, with minstrelsy characteristics, Dr. Bledsoe. The womanizer trickster in Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), wreaks havoc on whites as a form of self-liberation. Toni Morrison parodies the folktale of Br'er Rabbit in *Tar Baby* (1981). In Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Lebert Joseph, the deep-rooted trickster, mediates to guide the protagonist Avey back to the heritage she loses in pursuit of material success. The heroic, albeit wild, Albert Wilkes in John Edgar Wideman's *Sent for You Yesterday* (1983) is a tradition keeper, in spite of his disruptive violent acts of resistance of dating a white woman and killing a white police officer. The manipulative negative trickster Luther Nedeed tricks ambitious African Americans out of their souls in exchange for the prestige of residing in the hellish neighborhood of Linden Hills, in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985) based on Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*. These are just a few works that center around or involve the trickstry motif. Charles Johnson is no exception to this tradition, and

he too utilizes the trickster figure in *Middle Passage*, a topic which seems to have gone unobserved by critics, in spite of the relatively abundant literature on the novel.

Middle Passage is among Charles Johnson's most popular texts and is the subject matter of a number of publications that cover a range of themes and topics in the novel. In spite of the abundant literature on Charles Johnson, hardly any publication addresses the trickster figure in the novel. Literature on *Middle Passage* falls under three main categories: postmodernity, historicity, and identity. For example, Ashraf Rushdy (1992) explains how Johnson promotes intersubjectivity, in the novel, while representing the postmodern condition of blacks who happen to be American, while Barbara Z. Thaden (1997) highlights the metafictional nature of the novel, from a postmodern point of view. However, the text receives much attention as a historical novel. Brian Fagel (1996) illustrates how the novel fills in the gaps of forgotten or imposed history. Marc Steinberg (2003) investigates how Johnson fictionalizes history to imagine lost realities. The novel is also read as a postcolonial text Robert Nowatzki (2003) applies the concept of Black Atlantic consciousness to the novel and argues that the novel, as a text of mediation, blurs borderlines between slavery and freedom as well as the oppressors and the oppressed. Timothy L. Parrish (1997) explores the meaning of slavery and the African American identity in texts written by Johnson and Toni Morrison, while S. X. Goudie (1995) highlights the reconciliation of double identities in the novel. From a gender point of view, Elizabeth Muther (1996) discusses the black gender crisis and highlights the marginalization of the female protagonist of the novel. References to the trickster figure in these and other similar studies are evident, but they remain insufficient, given the centrality of the figure to the subject matter

of the novel. This paper, accordingly, sets out to reveal the role of the trickster figure in the novel as a crossroads liminal figure essential for such cultural mediation between the African and American cultures.

The trickster of *Middle Passage*, Rutherford Calhoun always finds himself “drawn by nature to extremes” (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 29) and onboard the Republic he is trapped between two worlds: the American and the African. He becomes a liminal site of mediation. By mediating between two cultures—the African and the American—and two generations—of fathers and sons—Rutherford is a binding figure. He abridges gaps between cultures and generations to create alternative narratives where he assumes the role of a savior rather than a social parasite. He saves the upcoming generations of African Americans by creating a space where he and they are no longer drawn to the African nor the American extremes. As a cunning mediator, he transcends definitions and hierarchies to enable himself and fellow liminal figures to assume a new identity not dictated by the margins.

In his renown *The Signifying Monkey* (first published 1988), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. establishes the trickster figure as a topos repeatedly appearing in African, American, and Caribbean literatures and mythologies. Gates particularly highlights the Esu Elegbara trickster from the African mythology who is depicted as a semi-divine figure that *mediates* between humans and divine figures as “the guardian of the crossroads, master of style and of stylus . . . connecting truth with understanding, the sacred with the profane, text with interpretation” (Gates 6). According to this theorization, the main role of a trickster is to mediate and make connections. This mediator role allows a trickster to occupy a liminal position between cultures, defying mainstream definitions and borders, which

Rutherford eventually does. This theoretical realization is the foundation of reading Rutherford as a trickster figure who mediates, transforms, and eventually saves. As an African American, Rutherford is already at the crossroads between the two cultures, and as the son of an escaping slave, the brother of an ex-slave benevolent preacher brother, and an ex-slave himself, he mediates between generations of fathers and sons. He maintains such a liminal position which allows him to assume the role of the savior. Since he does not belong to either, he can be both, and enjoys such resilience which allows him to take turns and switch strategies of survival to save both himself and others.

For Gates, “Esu serves as a figure for the nature and function of interpretation and double-voiced utterance” (xxi). The African Esu trickster figure—the origin of the African American trickster—can be seen as a hermeneutist who interprets such “double-voiced utterance” which indicate double-identity and double-consciousness. At the same time, Esu is the “god of indeterminacy” which allows him to be an interpreter since “he embodies the ambiguity of figurative language” (21), and resides at the crossroads and liminal spaces (128). Again, this establishes tricksters as mediators. Gates is not the only critic who links the trickster figure to the African American culture, though. Elizabeth Ammons and Annette White-Parks contend that “[t]he essence of tricksterism is change, contradiction, adaptation, surprise” (xii). Isaiah Lavender, III, also argues that “the resilience of the trickster proves to be tantamount to the Black struggle because it is able to adapt to almost any given situation” (109). This resilience is a survival strategy, since the trickster is always in danger of being overpowered by outside oppressing forces. Therefore, a trickster constantly shifts and transforms, which allows him to adapt and take turns at the crossroads. Nataša Vajić, also, argues that

the African trickster had to adapt to the New World and circumstances of slavery, driven by survival needs such as money, work, sleep, or vengeance, which also stand for a degeneration of the African man, suppressing the supernatural elements of the African trickster, and transforming him into a more mundane protector and savior (135). The New-World trickster has to put down the mask of divinity and get down to earth to strife for survival.

In Carl Jung's psychological archetype, the trickster is "both subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being . . . so unconscious of himself that his body is not a unity, and his two hands fight each other" (169). Barbara Babcock-Abrahams also suggests that as a criminal or a cultural hero, the trickster "embodies all possibilities—the most positive and the most negative—and is paradox personified", which leaves the trickster in a marginal position trapped between well-defined boundaries that he constantly violates (148), and hence acquiring such a marginal status. That leaves the African American trickster in a state of contradictory liminality defying definitions and well-defined boundaries. He is always at odds with one borderline or another and is never in conformity with the surroundings. The trickster can, also, function as either a negative or a positive force: as a negative force he "symbolizes the identity crisis itself, disrupts life, and ultimately destroys itself. However, as a positive force, the trickster helps others survive by whatever means it has at its disposal" (Lavender 109). Rutherford undergoes the two possibilities, evolving from the negative into the positive phase.

Against Gates's theoretical framework of the Esu-Elegbera trickster figure, supported by other critical insights from a range of critics as well as Jung's trickster archetype, this paper reads Johnson's *Middle Passage* as an intercultural

work of fiction. Rutherford Calhoun, the trickster protagonist is an ex-slave who enjoys the pleasures that nineteenth-century New Orleans can offer him as a free black. He always finds himself in trouble due to his treachery, drinking, and gambling habits, though. Unable to meet his debts or avoid an imposed marriage in exchange for those debts which shall be transferred to and hence eliminated by Isadora upon marriage, he makes a flee towards the ocean and ironically boards the Republic, a slaver, which makes a final voyage to ship a slave cargo of the fearsome *Allmuseri* mystic tribe, navigated by the tyrant philosophical Captain Ebenezer Falcon who is obsessed with brining onboard his ship the *Almuseri* mysterious god, as well. On the return voyage, The Republic is the site of a crew mutiny and a slave revolution, eventually triumphed by the slaves who take control of the ship and seek assistance from the surviving crew. A violent tempest wrecks the already falling-apart boat, and a few slaves as well as Rutherford and one crew member are rescued by a ship owned by the black racketeer Papa Zeringue who initially chases Rutherford out of New Orleans for debt payment, and partially owns the Republic capitalizing on its cargo of illegal slaves. Papa Zeringue is a model of the American businessman who observes no moral laws when it comes to making money, even if he had to trade in slaves of his own color.

The novel, at its simplest reading, is an allegory to the foundation of America. The ship, the Republic, can be viewed as symbolic to antebellum America, at a historical moment of breaking away from the legacy of slavery which persistently haunts contemporary America. As the name suggests, it is a *republic*, ruled by a captain of raging temperaments, a right-wing autocrat, one Captain Ebenezer Falcon, the representative of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism, who sails the unstable

Republic across the Atlantic, in a clear reference to the historical Middle Passage voyages. The American crew and African slaves simultaneously revolt against autocracy and oppression, with connotations to the American Civil War. The Republic goes through and is wrecked by the tempest of the Civil war but is saved by the ship of capitalism, which owns and runs the Republic, in a clear reference to the Capitalist foundations of America. The story of the Republic is the story of America, and the story of the trickster transformation is the story of American amalgamative formation, and the African roots of the African American experience.

For Rutherford, to turn from a mere buffoon and a vagrant trickster into a redeemer he has to go through a transformation process that grants him the rite of passage as a savior; a process that parallelizes the transformation of the Republic (America) itself. From early in the novel, Rutherford presents himself as “a petty thief” who fell into a “life of living off others, of being a social parasite” in New Orleans, and as a freshly-manumitted slave he opts to stealing when no job is offered (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 4). Even as a child slave, he is known for his sticky fingers and for having to “tell preposterous lies for the hell of it” (4-5). Upon his first encounter with Captain Falcon, Rutherford, also, openly states his role as a trickster figure: “a crafty Negro, a shrewd black strategist, can work a prospective white employer around, if he’s smart, by playing poor mouth, or greasing his guilt with a hard-luck story” (29). Rutherford, here, points out the main characteristics of his approach as a trickster, namely outsmarting, and emotionally blackmailing others. He also clearly states that “it had always worked . . . before” (29) and as such it is a persistent trait of his character, rather than an occasional exploitation both as a slave and after

manumission by his philanthropist slave master Reverend Peleg Chandler.

For Rutherford, the cross-Atlantic voyage is a reversed Middle Passage, a journey of self-rediscovery, which opens his eyes to his middle position and forces him to reconcile the two identities: to admit that he is not African but at least he is not White either, but somewhere in between. The journey, metaphorically and physically, transcends geopolitical and cultural borders, to reclaim the African transatlantic diasporic experience. The return to Africa both affirms and subverts the African roots of Rutherford, reflecting upon his liminal position. It is an attempt to abridge the gap with his Africanness, reimagine and negotiate that lost past of the African American fragmented experience, both at the individual and collective levels. Vincent A. O’Keefe opines that “Rutherford’s Middle Passage functions to ‘include middles’ in his previously unquestioned perceptions, thereby adding healthy ambiguity to his judgments and fueling moral growth” (640). Brian Fagel, also, argues that he “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 middlelessness is . . . [the] uncharted space between America and Africa” (626). Rutherford, also, admits his exclusion from the community of the *Allmuseri* slaves: “[y]es, I was black, as they were, but they had a common bond I could but marvel at” (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 131). He apparently, does not share this racial bond that the *Allmuseri* have, and does not relate to the community of Africans, yet. The slaves, also, share this sense of distrust with Rutherford and accordingly exclude him: “I wouldn’t trust this one [Rutherford]”, Diamelos insists, “[n]ot until he has broken away from” the crew; Rutherford reaffirms that for the *Allmuseri*, “I was a crewman like

the rest, an American, a risk unless I joined them by spilling blood” of a crewmate (133-4), to prove loyalty and reestablish a racial bond which is only reflected in skin color, so far. As such, by the virtue of his very skin color, he is doubly excluded from both groups: “externally excluded from the crew, and internally excludes himself from the Allmuseri” (Fagel 626). Not belonging to either party, Rutherford finds himself at loss of definition and in an identity crisis. This is not an issue in New Orleans where he is just another social parasite, but it is on the Republic where borders are more defined and eventually, he realizes he can be more than such a parasite.

The very medium where Rutherford develops is constantly changing and forming: “the Republic was physically unstable. She was perpetually flying apart and re-forming during the voyage . . . 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” (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 36). This view of the Republic as a *process* always in the making is symbolic to the formation of America itself which forces Rutherford, the *Allmuseri* slaves, and even the white crew to be in a continuous state of acculturation and cultural fluidity that parallelize such a process. Johnson affirms that the “nouns die in my books and the verbs go on. I think life is a process, more process than product” (Interview by Blue 137). Verbs, in Johnson’s conceptualization, are fluid, mobile, and indicate action, change, mobility, and processes of shifting and reformulation while nouns are static and definitive. This resonates with Lawrence W. Levine’s definition of culture as a process:

Culture is not a fixed condition but a process: the product of interaction between the past and present. Its toughness and resiliency are determined not by a culture’s ability

to withstand change, which indeed may be a sign of stagnation not life, but by its ability to react creatively and responsively to the realities of a new situation” (5).

Accordingly, cultures tend to transform rather than simply survive. Those that resist change are destined to die and weather away. Cultures constantly take new shapes and forms while sustaining certain elements from the past, which Levine argues is the case with the African American culture as African cultural constructs were not utterly severed from the lifestyle and world views of those who made it to the New World as slaves.

This vision of culture as a dynamic process of transformation matches the characteristics of the trickster as an elusive, changing, and adaptable being that defies borderlines and definitions. For those who are trapped in liminal positions, definition would come only from the borders not the liminal center where they are. That is, definitions are naturally set and dictated by the more powerful groups occupying the borders. In order to achieve autonomy, the marginalized might attempt to steer clear of definition altogether. Definitions are problematic and oppressive, and by eschewing possible confrontations with boundaries, they also avoid the oppression that comes along with it. This state of reconciliation and cultural fluidity is represented by a water motif throughout the novel. Cultural strains are frequently characterized as streams, and currents. An ongoing metaphor of waves and water, that dissolve in each other indiscernible from one another, creates a palimpsest of narratives being written and rewritten, time after time. The reversed *Middle Passage* voyage becomes a process of cultural merging and reconstruction “killing and remaking us all, and nothing I [Rutherford] or anyone else did might stop the terrible forces and transformations our voyage had set free”

(Johnson, *Middle Passage* 124). Simultaneously, the crew's mutiny indicates a "change not in the roles on ship but a revolution in its very premises" (125); a revolution that Rutherford likens to the French Revolution with its connotations of fundamental change.

The water motif of cultural fluidity is reinforced by the fact that a substantial segment of the plot is set on a transatlantic ship. Middle-Passage ships, in Paul Gilroy's theorization, are sites of amalgamation. They are "cultural and political units rather than abstract embodiments of the triangular trade" (Gilroy 17). Analogous to Johnson's symbolization, Gilroy regards the ship as "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion" (4), that evokes the Middle Passage with its implications of cultural exchange, and hence it stands out as a valid symbol of identity mobility. "A ship is a society . . . A commonwealth" (Johnson, *Middle Passage*, 173), Captain Falcon dictates to Rutherford. Gilroy basically argues for a "transnational and intercultural perspective" (15) that transcends geographical and nationalist borders. A trickster figure, known for adaptation and mental agility, is qualified to carry out such a transcending role. As a trickster, Rutherford finds himself in alliance with all conflicting parties on the Republic: he is a mutineer with the crew, assists the slaves in their revolution, and reports the mutiny plan to Captain Falcon. He is not morally mature, yet, to take sides: "I could no longer find my loyalties", Rutherford contends, "[a]ll bonds . . . were a lie forged briefly in the name of convenience and just as quickly broken when they no longer served one's interests" (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 92). As a trickster, he creates chaos and watches clashing parties annihilating one another. However, at that point he realizes that, after all, he has to make moral decisions: "[w]rong if I did as the first mate asked. Wrong if I sided with Falcon"

(Johnson, *Middle Passage* 124). The only option remaining is to side with the slaves, which he cautiously does from a safe distance.

Marc Steinberg reads the ship as a "a reminder of Calhoun's past, of the collective past of herded slaves" (377), offering a site of memory to such an unknown past. In his early years, Rutherford is an escapist who flees away from his past, but it's on the Republic that he has to face and reimagine that past. He catches sight of the lost heritage of his ancestors in the *Allmuseris*, in an attempt to fathom who he truly is. Eventually he visualizes himself as a mirror reflection of Ngonyama in a state of metamorphoses: "in Ngonyama's eyes I saw a displacement, an emptiness like maybe all 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" (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 123). The contact with white crew definitely changes the *Allmuseris*, something that might have happened to Rutherford's slave ancestors onboard similar slavers taking them to the New World. This awareness opens Rutherford's eyes to what he truly is: "a cultural mongrel" (185), a process without a real sense of what a true home or a pure identity is. He is a site of successive transfigurations that remake and reshape him a positive trickster.

Rutherford is not a savior yet, despite his involvement in the slave revolt. He simply takes revenge at Captain Falcon's Capitalist ideology that oppresses him as well as the crew and the slaves. By extricating himself from Falcon's hegemonic authority, he gains his independence before he can be a redeemer. Jung identifies the trickster as a "forerunner of the saviour" (169). Nevertheless, for the trickster to metamorphose into a savior, a process of evolution is due to take place from a state unconsciousness to consciousness. A trickster is an unconscious being

“represented by counter-tendencies in the unconscious” (168) and hence “operates largely outside conscious awareness” (Dossey) and for him to perform more positive roles, he has to grow more conscious. Jung explains that as the “marks of deepest unconsciousness fall away from him; instead of acting in a brutal, savage, stupid, and senseless fashion, the trickster’s behaviour towards the end of the cycle becomes quite useful and sensible” (172), thus giving way to the humane constructs to surface and overpower the original selfishness and brutality which withdraw to the unconscious “where they remain unconscious so long as all is well with the conscious” (173). This also explains why a trickster can revert to trickstry once the need arises.

Babcock-Abrahams points out that the marginal figure tends to be “associated with . . . crossroads, and other open spaces which are ‘betwixt and between’ clearly defined social statuses and spaces or in which normal structures or patterns of relating break down—with places of transition, movement” (150). The marginal figure in this case is the trickster, to whom the Republic offers a very accommodating setting of middleness for such an evolvment to occur, that is to bring him back to the conscious by drawing together white crew, *Allmuseir* African slaves, and Rutherford as the crossroads trickster who mediates in between. Witnessing the transformation of both the crew and the slaves simultaneously ignites change in Rutherford himself. O’Keefe suggests that beholding the mutual effects the crew and the slaves have on each other have a purgative effect on Rutherford, freeing him from his former ways of manipulation and theft (637). Such a reciprocal effect that the slaves and the crew have on each other triggers change in Rutherford himself, realizing his middle and mediating position. Their transformation is a precursor to his. He

has to experience this mediating position, ironically in the middle of the Atlantic, to redivert his trickstry towards a more honorable cause.

Rutherford realizes that

Ngonyama and maybe all the Africans . . . were not wholly Allmuseri anymore. We had changed them. I suspected even he did not recognize the quiet revisions in his voice after he learned English as it was spoken by the crew, or how the vision hidden in their speech was deflecting or redirecting his own way of seeing . . . the slaves’ life among the lowest strata of Yankee society—and the horrors they experienced—were subtly reshaping their souls . . . but into what sort of men I could not imagine. No longer Africans, yet not Americans either. (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 123).

This understanding is essential for Rutherford to recognize his own position as a hybrid at the crossroads. The *Allmuseri*’ transformation process reveals to Rutherford his own ancestral process of cultural amalgamation. Yet, the *Allmuseri* and Calhoun are not the only ones who experience transatlantic transformation. White sailors are not exempted, either. Squibb, the cock of the ship, for example, experiences such changes: “[t]he result of Squibb’s sea change was that his touch . . . reminded me of Ngonyama’s . . . His breathing even resembled that of the Allmuseri . . . I felt perfectly balanced crosscurrents of culture in him” (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 174). Essentially, change goes both ways on the Republic, and all those onboard, except maybe for Captain Falcon, experience such “crosscurrents” of the Atlantic change.

Rutherford also realizes that he, as a mediator, has to see himself in the new light of the Middle Passage:

I saw myself. A man remade by virtue of his contact with the crew. My reflection in his [the dead slave's] eyes, when I looked up, gave back my flat image as phantasmic . . . Stupidly, I had seen their [the *Allmuseris*'] 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" (Middle Passage 123).

This is a moment of enlightenment for Rutherford. He understands, at such a cathartic instant, that Heraclitean eternal change is the norm, rather than Parmenidean's conceptualization of reality as accomplished and absolute. Rutherford realizes that not only does this principle apply to *Allmuseri* but also to himself. Johnson confirms that not only the characters of *Middle Passage* "interpenetrate and change and transform each other", but that also those who survive "are the ones who are capable of change" (Interview by Blue 137). Only Rutherford, Squibb, and three girls of the *Allmuseri* survive, those who are unable to accept or adapt to their changes sink with the ship, beginning from the very top of the hierarchy, Captain Falcon himself, the "special breed of empire builder, explorer, and imperialist", "known for his daring exploits and subjugation of the colored races" (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 30), as well as the rest of the crew and the *Allmuseri* slaves who cannot handle the overwhelming change that overcomes them. Although signs of change overbears them, they do not internalize or adapt to it.

Rutherford's transformation, however, remains the most obvious and significant, and as a trickster he is the most resilient character. What he experiences is, essentially, a rebirth. The hull of the ships "darker than the belly of Jonah's whale" (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 35) symbolizes the womb that embryonates the new Rutherford. This obvious reference to Jonah's whale—in which belly Jonah is trapped for three days before being vomited ashore, serves as a transformation medium towards the divine mission of saving Nineveh by conveying God's warnings and prophecies—foreshadows Rutherford's imminent spiritual re-creation. Like rebellious Jonah, the trickster of *Middle Passage*, can't escape the designated divine mission of saving. In other words, he becomes a savior despite his attempts to evade responsibility. He mainly flees to the sea to elude an active responsible role, in contrast to his brother Jackson who stays back in the plantation to extend the hand of help to other black folks with all the learning he obtained, refusing the property offered by their ex-master on his death bed, and insists on distributing it among all slaves equally. Jackson, like the *Allmuseri*, rejects any sense of ownership: "it don't seem *right* to ask for myself. I *could* ask for land, but how can any man, even you, sir, *own* something like those trees outside? . . . How can I say I *own* something like that?" (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 115). Rutherford, however, prefers a more reckless lifestyle in New Orleans. Swallowed by the Republic, he eventually realizes his role as a humanitarian capable of saving and utilizes his trickster skills to protect the *Allmuseri* slaves and save the remnant crew member on the falling-apart Republic.

Rutherford, as such, assumes the role of Moses—the savior of the Israelites—during the first tempest that the Republic goes through, as if leading the cargo of slaves

to freedom, their freedom as well as his: “the ship swung around with her face to the west, plunging into a trench, as if into Hell, below water columns that broke over us to the height of the crosstrees—two solid walls on either side, held still as when Moses parted the Red Sea” (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 81). Assuming the roles of the rebellious and protector figures of Jonah and Moses, Rutherford is finally ready to lead as an altruist: “nothing in my sight could sustain itself without me, how I was responsible for all of it ... knew I was dying, no doubt about that, and I did not care for myself anymore, only that my mates should survive” (178-179). At this turning point, Rutherford is finally a savior. Levine suggests that protecting other slaves or caring for them, as a prominent theme of slave stories, is an act of opposition (396). The act of protecting the surviving *Allmuseri* slaves, also, amounts to protecting an upcoming generation of African Americans. O’Keefe suggests that “Rutherford’s *Middle Passage* will gradually teach him healthier perception of others” (340).

The confrontation with the *Allmuseri* god accomplishes Rutherford’s evolution as a savior trickster. The mysterious African god is depicted as a trickster, in a form similar to what Gates describes as the semi-divine figure of Esu Elegbara, the Yoruba trickster figure who is presented in Gates’s theorization as the god of indeterminacy and interpretation (21). Captain Falcon defines the *Allmuseri* god as “a tricky rascal” (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 101). By definition, the *Allmuseri* god is a mythical trickster figure; it’s tricky, misleading and can actually manipulate human minds with a “hundred ways to relief men of their reason” (101). Its presence is felt, although it has no physical shape. The mysterious creature is presented as a tricky combination of Loki—the trickster god of chaos, in Norse mythology—and Br’er Rabbit—the African-

American trickster of wits (101). In a way he is the ultimate trickster, while Rutherford is a mere apostle, just like the signifying monkey is the successor of Esu Elegbara. This visionary confrontation is essential to connect Rutherford with his African roots, and what is a better connection than such an African mysterious spiritual entity?

The confrontation with the mysterious creature guides Rutherford at the crossroads between the two cultures; it takes him back to the roots and unravels his identity crisis and he is finally reborn. Based on Jung’s psychological rebirth archetype, what Rutherford experiences is a subjective transformation. Possibly, what Rutherford experiences is an enlargement of personality, a psychological process that takes place when “new vital contents finding their way into the personality from outside and being assimilated” (Jung 62), but that can only occur when some internal receptors exist as “a man grows with the greatness of his task. But he must have within himself the capacity to grow” (63). Rutherford has such intrinsic capacity as he sees his brother Jackson, with his sense of self-denial, as a “negative” of himself, “[h]e was the possible-me that lived my life’s alternate options, the me I fled. Me. Yet not me. Me if I let go. Me if I gave in” (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 111). Additionally, Rutherford’s encounter with the *Allmuseri* provides him with that final external component to his personality that makes such a rebirth possible. It is noteworthy, though, that the true and obvious transformation of Rutherford occurs on the return journey from Africa, and after being in touch with the *Allmuseri* long enough, learning about their culture, and speaking their language. He learns the language of *Allmuseri* and serves as a mediator between the two parties on the Republic, the oppressors and the oppressed, that is the crew and the slaves. The *Allmuseri* are described as a very old spiritual people “who existed

when the planet—the galaxy, even—was a ball of fire and steam” (43), they are the primordial “Ur-tribe of humanity itself” (62). They are so spiritual that they have no fingerprints (61) and leave no marks on the outsider world:

Allmuseri elders took twig brooms with them everywhere, sweeping the ground so as not to inadvertently step on creatures too small to see. Eating no meat, they were easy to feed. Disliking property, they were simple to clothe. Able to heal themselves, they required no medication. They seldom fought. They could not steal. They fell sick, it was said, if they wronged anyone. (78).

Not only such qualities make them favorable to slave masters in terms of costs of sustenance, but also does it make them “the most spiritual people on the planet. A whole tribe of Mother Teresas and Gandhis”, as Johnson describes them (Interview by Wanner 163). Their purity, excessive spirituality, and lack of materialism stand in sharp contrast to the materialistic imperialist American ideology, represented by Captain Falcon. Such characteristics work together to enlighten Calhoun and put him in touch with his true inner self, say his unconscious African ego buried below layers of centuries of slavery and oppression. Such a disparity leaves Rutherford in the middle torn by the two extremes and at loss of a defining boundary. He is neither, but he is both or simply somewhere in between.

Rutherford, being an ex-slave, finds himself in an antagonistic relationship with Capitalist, rather than White, America. Such a conflict with Capitalism enlightens him: his subjugation to Captain Falcon’s tyranny and realization that Papa Zeringue, a black man himself, is involved in illegal salve trade open his eyes to the harsh reality that it is Capitalism that runs the institution of slavery

and manipulates him along with other black people. He eventually sees himself for what he is: a black ex-slave who is neither African nor American. That’s when he realizes he has only one option: to take the side of the oppressed group, the *Allmuseri* slaves, probably on a basis of common suffering, as he is unable to see himself as a member of their community on the basis of ancestry. At that point, he is far detached from his African origins to recover them, and for him to recuperate such a connection he has to be reborn.

Jung illustrates two sites of rebirth and transformation: the cave and the center; the cave (i.e. darkness) and the middle (i.e. the center) are the spaces of incubation and transformation (82). Rutherford experiences both sites: as a liminal figure he is in the middle, spatially between two cultures—which takes central stage—and temporally between two generations of African Americans (that of his assumingly selfish father who fled slavery and deserted his family and that of his brother Jackson with his spirituality and selflessness) and the hull of the Republic already serves as a symbolic womb that prepares him for such a rebirth. The last stage of Rutherford’s rebirth is the confrontation with the *Allmuseri* god.

In his vision, Rutherford, hardly in his “right mind”, we’re reminded, dreams of the *Allmuseri* “god, or devil, had dressed itself in the flesh of [his] father” that he no longer can “separate the two, deserting father and divine monster” (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 166). By confusing images in a twilight experience, he is capable of reclaiming the lost images of his father and the roots of his own trickstry, for “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”, a phantasm that

“forever confused my lineage as a marginalized American colored man” (167). A succession of images shows Riley Colhoun, the fugitive father, running away leaving a wife and two sons, as a dark, handsome, strong, large-chested, gambling, and flamboyant man popular among women and hated by men. Through the figure of the father, Calhoun offers a glimpse into the roots of black manhood crisis and why trickster is their legal business:

You couldn't rightly blame a colored man for acting like a child, could you—stealing and sloughing off work when people like Peleg Chandler [the master] took the profits, and on top of that so much of their dignity he couldn't look his wife Ruby in the face . . . for being powerless, even with their own children, who had no respect for a man they had seen whipped more than once by an overseer and knew in this world his word was no better than theirs” (167).

African American men, disempowered and victimized, use their wits and tricks to resist an oppressive system. The father's story is a defense for Rutherford, himself, justifying his amorality. As a man, Rutherford himself is trapped in this vicious cycle of acting like a child, never being allowed to grow up to manhood, unlike his White counterparts. He must steal to eat and disrupt to survive.

The father and the son also have something else in common: turning against the weaker group, their own community. Instead of fighting the oppressor, the father turns against his own people: “[m]ost of the time Da did fight. Never Reverend Chandler, though. Rather, he fought his family and others in the fields” (168). The same goes for Rutherford who manipulates Isadora and uses her for his own delight and comfort although she offers him lodging, food, and love, but he treats her with much contempt. In

Rutherford's visionary dream, the father is shot and dies in his escape attempt, freezing his image at twenty-eight years and Rutherford is finally relieved to learn that his father does not leave him behind, he just dies trying. Levine suggests that, in the legacy of slave tales, running away is a form of resistance (394) which highlights the father as a figure of resistance. Rutherford is previously not so proud of his father for potentially deserting his family and leaving him behind, but this spiritual revelation of his father's fate who dies resisting creates in him the desire to resist himself.

In Jungian psychology, towards the end of the trickster cycle

the conscious mind is then able to free itself from the fascination of evil and is no longer obliged to live it compulsively. The darkness and the evil have not gone up in smoke, they have merely withdrawn into the unconscious owing to loss of energy, where they remain unconscious so long as all is well with the conscious. But if the conscious should find itself in a critical or doubtful situation, then it soon becomes apparent that the shadow has not dissolved into nothing but is only waiting for a favourable opportunity to reappear (173).

Thus, the ways of the trickster remain tact and Rutherford's savior role does not end with sustaining and delivering his voyage companions to safety, but it continues beyond. Onboard the Juno, he, in such a Capitalist environment, is back to his old ways and decides to make the best out of the blackmail cards he has against Papa Zeringue. As a trickster's *grand finale*, Rutherford threatens to reveal Zeringue's illegal slave trade along with his scandal of enslaving people of his own race. Such a move saves Isadora from Zeringue's grip and guarantees the slave girls a bright future with

the money he blackmails out of Zeringue. This final act of saving further establishes Rutherford as a redeemer and a savior as well as a trickster, once more.

In spite of the disruptive negative nature of the trickster figure, he can be a savior and a figure of resistance. Rutherford Calhoun of *Middle Passage*, transforms from being a selfish trickster into a savior and a redeemer of the group of African slaves, although he still occupies a liminal position mediating between the two cultures as an African American. His transformation is initiated by the reversed Middle Passage voyage that brings him back to his African roots. The encounter with the *Allmuseri* slaves puts him in contrast with both conflicting parties onboard the Republic: the African slaves and the American crew. In a cathartic moment, he realizes he does not fully belong to either, but he combines both. He sees how the slaves gradually transform into less African and more American beings. His encounter with the *Allmuseri* slaves and their mysterious god partially restores this lost Africanness and subsequently his consciousness as he is enlightened to the evil Capitalism of America, both Black and White, that oppresses both Africans and African Americans indiscriminately. That parallelizes the transformation that he goes through himself, and realizes he has a moral duty to fulfill.

The voyage of the Republic is the voyage of America through slavery,

capitalism, revolution, and transformation. Against this background the trickster figure emerges as a resistance figure who deviates from norms and deconstruct boundaries. He generates constructive chaos to create a favorable situation for himself or his group to overcome oppression. The Middle Passage voyage, in the novel, represents this transatlantic transformation connecting the trickster with his African roots offering him the opportunity to recover his lost past and the cultural gaps created by slavery. Eventually he leads as a savior and employs his trickstry to deliver himself and other slaves to safety albeit remaining a liminal figure that defies well-defined boundaries constantly deconstructing the discourse of oppression.

The trickster is a key figure in the African American tradition. Although morally degenerate, the trickster can be honorable, leading negative or positive roles. In spite of the celebration of Charles Johnson as a prominent author, the nature of the trickster is hardly researched in literature on his authorship. The Middle Passage voyage represents the transatlantic transformation that connects the trickster with his African roots offering him the opportunity to recover his lost past and the cultural gaps created by slavery. It is safe to conclude that the trickster in *Middle Passage* is a crossroads figure exemplifying the hybridity, transformation, and amalgamation of the African American experience.

Works Cited

- Ammons, Elizabeth and Annette White-Parks, eds. *Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature: A Multicultural Perspective*. UP of New England, 1994.
- Babcock-Abrahams, Barbara. "‘A Tolerated Margin of Mess’: The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered." *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, vol. 11, no. 3, Mar. 1975, pp. 147-186. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3813932>.
- Dossey, Larry. "The Trickster: Medicine's forgotten character." *Alternative Therapies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1996, www.hgi.org.uk/resources/delve-our-extensive-library/resources-and-techniques/trickster-medicines-forgotten#:~:text=The%20Trickster%20operates%20largely%20outside,from%20within%20the%20human%20mind.
- Fagel, Brian. "Passages from the Middle: Coloniality and Postcoloniality in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*." *African American Review*, vol. 30, no. 4, Winter 1996, pp. 625-34. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3042516>.
- Gates, H. L., Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford UP, 1989.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Verso, 1993.
- Goudie, S. X. "‘Leavin’ a Mark on the Wor(l)d’: Marksmen and Marked Men in *Middle Passage*." *African American Review*, vol. 29, no. 1, Spring 1995, pp. 109-22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3042437>.
- Johnson, Charles. "An Interview with Charles Johnson." Interview by Marian Blue. *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson*, edited by Jim McWilliams, U of Washington P, 2004, pp. 123-41.
- . "Interview with Northwest Writers: Charles Johnson". Interview by Irene Wanner. *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson*, edited by Jim McWilliams, U of Washington P, 2004, pp. 159-91.
- . *Middle Passage*. 1990. Scribner, 2015.
- Jung, Carl. *Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster*. Translated by R. F. C. Hull, E-book ed., Taylor and Francis, 2004, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315722894>.
- Lavender, Isiah, III. "Lebert Joseph to the Rescue: A Positive Trickster in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*." *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, Summer 2009, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 109-124. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40986303.
- Levine, Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thoughts from Slavery to Freedom*. Oxford UP, 1977.
- Muther, Elizabeth. "Isadora at Sea: Misogyny as Comic Capital in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*." *African American Review*, Winter 1996, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 649-58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3042518>.

- Nowatzki, Robert. "Middle Passage to Freedom: Black Atlantic Consciousness in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* and S. I. Martin's *Incomparable World*." *Ethnic Studies Review*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2003, pp. 12-28. <https://doi.org/10.1525/esr.2003.26.1.12>.
- O'Keefe, Vincent A. "Reading Rigor Mortis: Offstage Violence and Excluded Middles in Johnson's *Middle Passage* and Morrison's *Beloved*." *African American Review*, vol. 30, no. 4, Winter 1996, pp. 635-47. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3042517>.
- Parriah, Timothy L., "Imagining Slavery: Toni Morrison and Charles Johnson." *Studies in American Fiction*, vol. 25, no. 1, Spring 1997, pp. 81-100. <https://doi.org/10.1353/saf.1997.0003>.
- Rushdy Ashraf H. A., "The Phenomenology of the Allmuseri: Charles Johnson and the Subject of the Narrative of Slavery." *African American Review*, vol. 26, no. 3, Autumn 1992, pp. 373-94. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3041911>.
- Smith, Ayana. "Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster." *Popular Music*, vol. 24, no. 2, May 2005, pp. 179-91. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3877642.
- Steinberg, Marc. "Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*: Fictionalizing History and Historicizing Fiction." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 45, no. 4, pp. 375-90. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40755397.
- Thaden, Barbara Z. "Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* as Historiographic Metafiction." *College English*, vol. 59, no. 7, Nov. 1997, pp. 753-66. <https://doi.org/10.2307/378634>.
- Vajić, Nataša. "The Trickster's Transformation—from Africa to America." *European Journal of Social Sciences Education and Research*, vol. 4, no. 3, May-August 2017, pp. 133-7. <https://doi.org/10.26417/ejser.v10i1.p133-137>.