The Ethics of Swagger

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Authorized Mentors

To Africa and Back in *The Color Purple* and *Middle Passage*

All of the Black Archivists endure the scrutiny of awards committees, but most explore white influences on black art via other themes. Alice Walker and Charles Johnson offer such explorations in *The Color Purple*’s and *Middle Passage*’s accounts of mentorship. Like many African Americans who attended college in the 1960s, these writers’ most significant relationships with white mentors took place on campuses.¹ These relationships were defined by warm conversations, thoughtful criticism, and staunch advocacy, but despite the benefits, each novelist reached an impasse because white assumptions conflicted with autonomous artistry. During a decade that sternly tested American democracy’s link with black life, Walker and Johnson’s exposure to white mentors epitomized the anxieties of interracial collaboration. Both in college and later, the novelists addressed these anxieties by engaging Africa.

Walker and Johnson matriculated when the independence movements that gripped countries such as Ghana, Uganda, and Kenya were in

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¹. Walker went to Sarah Lawrence in 1964, and Johnson enrolled at Southern Illinois University in 1966. Both had interacted with white teachers before their respective enrollments. Walker’s stint at Spelman College (1961–63) was enlivened by interactions with Howard Zinn, a firebrand radical and head of the college’s history and social sciences department. Johnson received similar support when he took a correspondence course in high school from illustrator Lawrence Lariar. He also regularly praised the white teachers in the integrated public schools of his hometown, Evanston, Illinois. See Walker’s “Saying Goodbye to My Friend Howard Zinn” (2010) and Johnson’s “I Call Myself An Artist” (1990) and “The Real Faith and the Good Thing” (2011).
full swing. If African decolonization shaped their outlooks on the motherland, then debates about black cultural formation also influenced their thinking. Unlike Ralph Ellison, who in 1960 declared that Africa held “no special emotional attachment” for him, Walker and Johnson made the continent central to their portrayals of black identity (Isaacs 60). They were aware of African political and cultural realities; nonetheless, in their literature, they rejected mimetic representations of the continent. Starting in the mid-1960s and the late 1970s, respectively, Walker and Johnson crafted literature that alluded to but did not document African societies. They mostly treated the African world as a malleable literary idea, an approach that reflected each author’s beliefs about imagination and freedom. Refined after integration, these beliefs are clearest in their fiction’s use of orphans.

The respective protagonists of *The Color Purple* and *Middle Passage*, Celie and Rutherford, both lose their parents. Although this literal orphaning is significant, each character experiences a cultural confusion that also suggests orphanhood. Celie lives in the Jim Crow South, and the first fifteen years of her life bring rape and impregnation by her stepfather, the spiriting away of her children, and the imposition of a menacing silence. While these circumstances define her intraracial quandaries, her relationship with God reveals bouts with white power. Rutherford shares Celie’s perplexity about race and morality. Notwithstanding the fact that his slave-master freed him, he still struggles to find his identity. His material circumstances influence his struggling, but his fight is truly about spiritual as opposed to economic liberation. Like Celie, he wrestles with white definitions of values. In depictions of mentors, *The Color Purple* and *Middle Passage* show how this wrestling influences black selfhood.

Celie and Rutherford respond to cultural orphaning by deauthorizing white mentors. Though such flouting can be exhilarating, defi-

2. Wilson J. Moses suggests that conflicting views about black cultural formation fermented through the civil rights movement and the Black Power era, and by the early 1970s, they flared with renewed vigor in arguments about affirmative action and black studies departments. For more on these debates, see Moses’s *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (1998) and Ron Eyerman’s *Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (2002).


4. Evelyn White believes that Alice Walker, “like many black Americans who first visited Africa in the 1960s . . . had been inspired by the independence movement that had swept across the continent” (110). Though Charles Johnson does not absorb his curiosity from the same well, his awareness of Africa’s history emerges in his fiction, his literary criticism *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970* (1988), and his work on the PBS documentary *Africans in America* (1999).
ance alone does not produce individuality. Independent selfhood requires replacing a faulty compass with a sound one, and in *The Color Purple* and *Middle Passage*, this replacement entails acquiring a broader perception of black existence. By depicting trips to Africa, Walker and Johnson examine how these broadened perceptions impact cultural confusion. Their examinations discount neat resolutions. Concentrating on self-assertion, the novelists imply that American blacks will improvise rather than discover whole the curriculums that shape their identities. These improvisations, for Celie and Rutherford, stress sibling interactions and surrogate guardians; additionally, standard parent-child nurturing gets revised. Because of these revisions, black selfhood attains a telling interdependence. This interdependence becomes an intriguing subtext of Walker’s and Johnson’s relationships with white mentors and one another.

Focusing on two climactic eras in black American history, Jim Crow and slavery, Walker and Johnson juxtapose the dilemmas of those epochs with their own post–civil rights quandaries. These quandaries involved trying to balance integration era encounters with white authority and the sense of a coherent black self. Africa becomes a bedeviling mediator in this search for coherence. By looking at how *The Color Purple* and *Middle Passage* reflect their authors’ experiences with white mentors, this chapter argues that these novels’ African plots muse on what resources can challenge white prescription in the development of black art. These musings convince Walker and Johnson that renovated moral vision is the key to managing white expectations. Through such renovations, two very different writers acknowledge the ethics of swagger.

**Faithful Guidance**

Celie addresses roughly half of the letters that comprise *The Color Purple* to God. Although these letters could be read as prayers in which she records “the text of her life,” some scholars contend that the God who

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5. For Alice Walker and Charles Johnson, portraying Africa marked intriguing expansions of prior musings. Walker had commenced her meditations with *Once* (1968), her first poetry collection. Although *Once* marked Walker’s first published depiction of Africa, she wrote an unpublished story, “The Suicide of an American Girl,” which Jane Cooper praised as “a complex, extremely prescient piece that explored the tensions between Africans and blacks in the U.S.” (White 105). In *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* (1986), stories from which were composed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Johnson sketched “the Allmuseri, the fictional African tribe of wizards who” became “the central symbol of [his] aesthetic” (Nash 7–8). Nash’s conclusions about the Allmuseri’s significance echo the observations of Ashraf Rushdy. See the latter’s “The Phenomenology of the Allmuseri: Charles Johnson and the Subject of the Narrative of Slavery” (1992).
is her “epistolary confidant” tyrannizes her (Gates, _Signifying_ 245; Juneja 83). The tyranny stems from God’s association with “the white folks’ white bible” (Color 194). Because Celie initially pictures God as a bare-foot, “graybearded,” “old” “white” man, many critics have followed her friend Shug Avery’s lead and charged that deity with “the nullification of [her] subjectivity” (Color 194, Cutter 148). These charges accurately reflect how Christianity has been contorted by white supremacy, yet they ignore the complex black reactions to those contortions. By portraying Celie’s faith, Walker remedies this oversight.

Faith, “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen,” seemingly affirms passivity, but in Celie’s life, it prompts an assertive act, her attempt to engineer her sister Nettie’s deliverance (King James Bible, Hebrews 11:1). Before she leaves home, Celie accepts her stepfather’s sexual advances and lets “Nettie remain unscathed” (Wilentz 67). Further, when her new husband Mr. ___ kicks Nettie out because she repels him, Celie performs another protective gesture. She directs her sister toward Corrine, the woman who took in her daughter Olivia. Although Shug is often and rightly identified as an “efficacious spiritual guide” who leads Celie toward “wisdom,” the latter’s journey toward self-actualization begins before Shug appears (Wall 142). Her efforts on Nettie’s behalf signal an active tangling with the submission counseled by “a white Christian God” (Juneja 83). While Celie at first only inches toward independence, her ultimate response to white guidance stems from these seeds sown as she nurtured kinship bonds. The profundity of her response is evident in how she links her orphanhood to the fate of her children.

Celie’s feelings toward her children, Olivia and Adam, contradict the sexual abuse through which they were conceived. When her stepfather’s serial raping of her caused pregnancies, she—like some women in

6. Shug’s objection to Celie’s deity notes his sexist attributes, but her remark that “[God] ain’t a picture show” also addresses the issue of doing versus watching (195). This issue acquires considerable significance when placed in the dynamics of mentorship. If conceptions of God as a confidant and a confessor stress spiritual development as a result of passive reassurance, then this image is contrasted by a notion of God as an active deliverer. Shug’s comment takes up this tension and chides Celie for, among other things, the passivity of her faith. Hinting at a more active possibility, she observes, “The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it” (195). This remark implies two different models of instruction: submission to prescription and searching for revelation. While the former model is associated with white fundamentalist accounts of God, the latter recalls the mysticism of Howard Thurman. Critics have noted that Shug aggressively critiques Celie’s corrosive perception of what God “look like,” but equally important, in the mentorship paradigm, she focuses Celie on how God inspires humans to act (195).

7. Glossing Celie’s nuptials, Linda Abbandonato claims, “When Celie marries Mr. ___, this man with no name becomes part of the system of male oppression, joining God the Patriarch and Pa in an unholy trinity of power that displaces her identity” (1110–11).
Beloved—could have decided that the offspring of depravity were worthless. She instead embraced motherhood, and even after her babies were immediately taken from her, she remembered them. This remembrance prodded her toward actions that changed her life. By sending Nettie to Corrine, Celie not only sought better circumstances for her sister but also expressed a maternal longing for an improbable substitution. Her hope blossoms into Nettie’s surrogate mothering of Olivia and Adam. While this blossoming could be deemed fantastic or like a “fairy tale,” Richard Iton has argued that in black life, the fantastic contains insurgent dimensions (Berlant 29). He contends that fantasy or a vision that looks “beyond the already existing” challenges “conventional notions” of “the civil society.” While Iton stresses how blacks use imagination to refute “the state as the sole frame for subject formation,” Walker portrays the Jim Crow South with scant reference to chronology, a technique that emphasizes nebulous white power instead of specific governmental impositions (17). Celie’s actions reflect the feminist mantra that “the personal is political,” yet Walker’s blending of faith, imagination, and a desperate bid for deliverance connect The Color Purple to 1960s debates about black authorship. By studying Walker’s educations, one sees how this novel’s depictions of white mentors relate to such debates.

Helen Merrell Lynd, her academic advisor, helped Walker when she transferred from Spelman—a historically black college for women

8. In Beloved, women like Sethe’s mother and her friend Ella throw their rape-conceived children into the sea or refuse to nurse them. Celie’s attitude contrasts theirs, mirroring that of some recent African rape survivors. Although the race of the rapist may play a role in these situations, the differences are still striking. By juxtaposing her character’s status as a brutalized black American with that of other women in the Diaspora, Walker particularizes suffering even as she insists upon the benefits of communion. For a recent treatment of these realities, see Jonathan Torcovanv’s Intended Consequences: Rwandan Children Born of Rape (2009).

9. Cheryl Wall argues that “the parallels in the plots” that The Color Purple “develops for Celie and Shug—particularly those that situate them as mothers of lost children—reinforce” their identification with one another (148). Although these women bond intensely, their attitudes toward their lost children are not the same. Celie asks Shug whether she misses the “three babies” that she has had with Mr. __, and Shug replies, “Naw . . . I don’t miss nothing” (50). This statement could be attributed to Shug’s pique that Celie has taken her place in Mr. __’s life, but drafts of The Color Purple suggest that Walker purposefully accentuated Celie and Shug’s divergent maternal sensibilities. The drafts of The Color Purple are housed in the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University.

10. See Carol Hanisch’s “The Personal is Political” (1969) for an early exploration of this aspect of feminism. With “A Black Feminist Statement” (1977), the Combahee River Collective directly addressed how the personal and the political intertwined for black women.

11. Helen Merrell Lynd is the mother of Staughton Lynd, one of the Spelman professors who encouraged Alice Walker. While Walker appreciated her largesse, she felt that accepting her help had emotional costs. She stated, “Helen—as wonderful and generous as she was—condescended to me . . . Whenever I saw [her] I was nervous . . . because I never sufficiently outgrew my sense of being . . . the one who would not have made it without [her] help” (“Letter to Muriel Rukeyser” 19 May 1975).
located in Georgia—to Sarah Lawrence—an elite women’s college outside of New York City—but her most vital relationship was with Muriel Rukeyser. On a campus where Walker felt alienated by the wealth and entitlement, Rukeyser created a spot for her where literature ruled supreme.\textsuperscript{12} She awakened a young Walker to the fact that “poetry, done well, is always about the truth” and that this truth is “subversive” (White 109). While these insights resonated with the undergraduate, her interactions with Rukeyser were complicated.\textsuperscript{13} Walker’s 1965 correspondence with her mentor outlined this complication, but ten years later, a full picture surfaced.\textsuperscript{14}

In 1975, Walker boasted a “plum” editorship at Ms. magazine and a poetry collection that had been shortlisted for the National Book Award.\textsuperscript{15} Rukeyser, according to Walker’s biographer Evelyn White, envied these accomplishments because she “had never imagined that her own literary light might be outshone by the impoverished black woman from Georgia whom she had ‘taken under her wing’” (271). When Walker produced a forlorn portrait of Zora Neale Hurston during a television interview, Rukeyser saw a chance to set the record straight. She wrote to her protégé, “Zora was helped, at Barnard,” and this help

12. About Sarah Lawrence, Evelyn White writes, “Although Alice felt affirmed as a creative writer . . . she initially was taken aback by the tremendous wealth of her new classmates . . . The majority of Alice’s classmates were ‘of the manor born.’ Their family names graced banks, prestigious museums, and international corporations. Still, as young white women for whom privilege came as a birthright, they found license, in the 1960s, to rebel against their ruling class status by playing out the ‘rags-to-riches’ role—in reverse. For Alice, who’d been raised in paper-thin shacks without electricity or indoor plumbing, the apparent enchantment of her classmates with ‘deprivation’ was a constant source of bewilderment” (101).

13. Both Gerri Bates, the writer of Alice Walker: A Critical Companion (2005), and Evelyn C. White, author of the biography Alice Walker: A Life (2004), identify Rukeyser as an indefatigable promoter of Walker’s career. Rukeyser’s good friend Grace Paley said of the relationship between the two: “There was no question but that Alice Walker was [Rukeyser’s] prized student” (White 110), and on Walker’s side, her enduring admiration for Rukeyser is clear in her intimation that “[Muriel] . . . taught me that it was possible to be passionate about writing and to live in the world on my own terms” (White 109).

14. Despite having known her for only a few months, Walker, after she had an abortion in 1965, wrote to Rukeyser. Her letter was mostly a mea culpa regarding some “slick and desperate fabrications” she made in a moment of crisis, but what is striking in this document is the buffer that she erected in the face of heartwarming yet disconcerting generosity (“Letter to Muriel Rukeyser” n.d.). This buffer may date from her childhood when white surveillance inevitably led to a feeling of not being “worthy or valuable” (White 69). Though southern prejudice differs from northern condescension, Walker felt that both attitudes meant that her emotions somehow differed from those of the whites that she encountered.

came from “white women.” Rounding out her chiding, she added that Walker had been “helped at Sarah Lawrence in comparable ways” (“Letter to Alice Walker”). Her mentee replied keenly: “Have you ever considered how like a beggar I felt . . . when all of you were ‘helping’ me? How it felt to . . . have to depend on people who had no concept of poverty that they did not get from visits to it . . . The distance between us all was too great; an economic and historical distance that I seem unable . . . to forget or ignore.” Regarding Hurston, Walker contended, “When I spoke of . . . Zora being ‘helped’ or not ‘helped’ I mean by her own people . . . White people have helped and our literary history is full of Van Vechten and Nancy Cunard, but it is not full of black people who helped each other. When I first noticed this I felt myself shrinking” (“Letter to Muriel Rukeyser” 19 May 1975). Walker’s 1975 essay “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston” is often cited as a catalyst for the revived interest in Hurston’s career, but her colloquy with Rukeyser implies an intricate backstory. If the essay could be cast as Walker’s attempt to make Hurston a black foremother who balanced the white mentors in her life,16 then Rukeyser’s letter suggests that her white female advocates rued such efforts.17 The missives between mentor and mentee did not settle this matter; however, they influenced both the form and the content of Walker’s prizewinning novel.

The epistolary structure of *The Color Purple* no doubt reflects Walker’s attempt “to suggest that a reading audience can, like the audience of an orally transmitted text, significantly alter” the way that a story is told (Awkward 145–46). Focusing on God as Celie’s addressee, Michael

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16. Describing her early life, Alice Walker once observed, “Whenever white people came around, everybody turned to ice; that was the effect they had on black people” (White 69). Though the emotional distance described here derives from prejudice, Walker’s attitude toward the whites at Sarah Lawrence evinced a similar remoteness. She suggested this in her description of “a white girl” that she met while picketing a jail: “We tried to keep in touch—but, because I had never had very much (not even a house that didn’t leak), I was always conscious of the need to be secure. Because she came from an eleven-room house in the suburbs of Philadelphia and, I assume, never had worried about material security, our deepest feelings began to miss each other” (O’Brien 196). This sense of missing each other spurs Walker’s racial reserve.

17. The fact of white female mentors who superintended Walker’s education both in general and especially as a writer receives voluminous endorsement in all of her speeches, essays, and books. Notwithstanding her ability to nurture these interactions, her attitude toward Rukeyser and, to a lesser extent, Helen Lynd reflects the convoluted calculus that can attend those friendships. Gerri Bates explains that “independence and self-sufficiency” were “two important survival skills for Walker.” In talking about Walker’s ultimate outlook on Zora Neale Hurston, Bates states, “Walker concluded that Hurston was too dependent on others, thus her slump into financial ruin. Hurston, Walker thought, had too little knowledge of survival and too few survival skills” (9). As Walker’s relationships with Lynd and Rukeyser evolve, her tenacious insistence on independence and racial awareness begins to run headlong into their craving for white liberal affirmation.
Awkward concludes that “Walker constructs a text whose first letters suggest failures of communication” because He turns out to be an unengaged reader (148). Awkward’s analysis fits readings of Celie that stress her belated empowerment and impotent faith, yet it overlooks how “desperate hope” nourishes fantastic vision (W. Miller, “Broadening” 67). Equally important, it neglects Walker’s correspondence with Rukeyser as an influence on her depiction of Celie.

Celie’s plight connects to post–civil rights black novelists generally and her author specifically. While her relationship with God seemingly features stasis, her faith reveals an active negotiation in both her writing and her actions. This negotiation centers on her development of a radical imagination. Just as Walker cannot erase the liberal entitlement that leads Rukeyser to confuse generosity with creative supervision, 18 Celie cannot undo the mainstream thinking that conflates a Christian deity with Santa Claus. Walker discovers that despite such frustrations, black identity hinges upon moral vigilance. When Celie apologizes to her daughter-in-law Sofia for telling her stepson Harpo to beat her, she says that she feels “shame” and that “the Lord he done whip [her] a little bit too” (40). Whipping helps her express a guilty conscience, but the diction also casts God as attentive and engaged. Linking this portrait of God to her remorse, Celie implies that His prodding plays a role in shifting her consciousness. Such shifting links morality to imagination, and Walker believes that the black art after segregation must patrol that intersection. The Color Purple’s Africa plot shows the perils of this patrolling.

Although it occurs thousands of miles from her sister’s rural Georgia home, Nettie’s African sojourn links with Celie’s dilemmas. Her trip prompts questions about God that echo her sister’s, and because the voyage is missionary, it puts this black struggle with white authority in a larger context. 19 While the internationalism and the serendipity of Nettie’s odyssey seem implausible, Walker cultivates these dimensions precisely because she wants to dramatize the imagination in Jim Crow black life. 20 Celie has no idea that Nettie will be accepted into Corrine’s house, 18. Lawrence Jackson, in The Indignant Generation, chronicles how Rukeyser’s generation of white liberals often viewed their generosity and their concern as license to supervise black creativity.

19. The Color Purple’s missionary theme alternately inspires critics to chide Walker for incompletely engaging the ways that “the capitalist infiltration of Africa” formed the basis of “world racism against blacks” and to praise her for embedding “a post-colonial perspective on the action” (Berlant 35; Selzer, “Race” 68). Although debates about her depictions of Christianity and capitalism illuminate Celie’s epiphany, these analyses obscure Nettie’s travels from Pa’s house to the motherland and her serendipitous chaperoning of her niece and nephew’s parallel journeys.

20. Trudier Harris complains that the focus on Africa is “really extraneous to the central
and she certainly did not envision her sister as an African missionary. Despite her limited vision, she knows that placing Nettie in Corrine’s house is her only chance to affect her children’s fates. Nettie then provokes a shift in *The Color Purple*’s focus, yet this shift extends Walker’s portrayal of Celie. By emphasizing Nettie’s experiences as a missionary, a witness of colonialism, and a returning Diaspora African, the novelist stresses the protean dimensions of African American cultural orphans. The circumstances of the segregated South directly reflect grander realities that condition one’s life even when one is ignorant of them. If this invisible conditioning exists, then freedom will demand more textured reactions. These reactions are explored in Nettie’s second contribution to illuminating Celie’s life, her nurturing of Olivia and Adam.

Olivia and Adam are archetypes of African American orphaning. They do not know their biological parents, and although their early years contain “love, Christian charity and awareness of God,” their upbringings also reveal flux (133). Samuel and Corrine, their adoptive parents, work for the American and African Missionary Society. While the children begin their lives in small-town Georgia, they are taken from the South to New York to Senegal through Monrovia and on to Olinka, “[Alice] Walker’s invented African nation” (Kuhne 69). Their circuit to Africa could be seen as a sort of black “Grand Tour” since Adam and Olivia’s visits to Harlem, Liberia, and the African interior provide potent counter-narratives to Western cultural dominance. Despite such exposure, the pride that would make Senegal vibrate in an African American “soul” is balanced by knowledge of the hidden wounds within black societies (143). Nettie notes such paradoxes and insures that Olivia and Adam engage them. Recognizing that black Diasporic consciousness will not fix African American identity, she places nuance alongside nostalgia. Her efforts not only frame her niece and nephew’s education among the Olinka but also their full understanding of their histories.

Concerns of the novel” (“On” 157). Arguing that *The Color Purple* manifests “an indifference to historical contingencies,” Melissa Walker believes that since “none of the [stateside] public events of [Celie’s] time” registers in her mind or in “the novel,” the protagonist “cannot even imagine that the world outside could affect her” (62, 63).

21. Kuhne notes that “Olinka . . . is much more than a village or a tribe; it is an invented West African nation with an Atlantic coast and considerable inland territory. And, like many actual African nations, Olinka is composed of several ethnic groups . . . Olinka has suffered from colonialism, and like many contemporary African nations, Olinka is ruled by a corrupt leader who has little regard for his people” (69). While Kuhne’s catalog sees Walker’s Olinka as credible, Cheryl Wall talks about the “problematic” aspects of Walker’s invention (156).

Adam’s and Olivia’s Olinkan experiences are ambiguous. Although this ambiguity surfaces in physical realities, it shows more vividly in their mental outlooks. Their schooling provides one example. Olivia chafes under Olinka’s limited notions of femininity. The villagers “don’t believe in educating girls,” and her best friend’s father, after forbidding his daughter Tashi from visiting Olivia, admonishes, “Your Olivia can visit [Tashi], and learn what women are for” (162). If this scenario pairs with Pa’s pulling Celie out of school to exemplify “the universality of the oppression of women,” then Adam’s situation reveals another form of stifling (Kuhne 71). Adam has a “special aptitude for figures,” but because Olinka lacks teachers, his skills cannot develop (164). His situation connects to the country’s colonizers. Since the rubber company’s engineers fixate on numbers, math skill evokes white authority. Adam’s frustrated ability signals not only his arrested development but also Olinka’s succumbing to European industrial power. Though Olivia and Adam see the village’s deficits, they also enjoy its benefits. Each one’s relationship with Tashi captures these merits.

Olivia and Tashi promote the feminine fellowship that flourishes in Celie’s Georgia life. Just as Shug, Sophia, and Mary Agnes—Harpo’s second wife—grant one another space for self-definition amid racist, sexist, and economic threats, Olivia and Tashi make room for expressing black womanhood despite Olinkan society’s strictures. Tashi’s imaginings become especially charged as she strives to preserve Olinka culture in the wake of colonization. Pursuing this task, she has tribal marks cut on her face and plans to have her society’s “female initiation ceremony” (239). Tashi’s plight contrasts Celie’s; nonetheless, Walker connects these characters as black females who confront white mentorship. Through this connection, the author not only unites moral striving in Jim Crow America and colonial Africa but also implies imagination’s role in the success or failure of such striving. Celie’s relationship with God changes when she evaluates the consequences of her imagination. While this evaluation involves getting “man off your eyeball” or revising white, patriarchal constructions of truth, it extends to testing and refining your vision of a moral self (Color 197). This process concludes not only with indignation but also revelatory possibility. Though Celie’s actions on

23. The Color Purple’s depictions of blues singing and quilting attest the power of female friendship, and critics have robustly engaged this idea. On the blues and “sister bonding,” see Cheryl Wall (141) and Michael Awkward (149–51). Catherine E. Lewis takes up the “sense of sorority” and sewing (167), as does Martha Cutter’s “Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker’s Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in The Color Purple” (2000).
behalf of Nettie and her children prove imagination can impact black orphanhood, Tashi’s revolt, replete with radical solidarity, mistakes dogma for direction. Her relationship with Adam moves her physically and spiritually closer to Celie.

Adam and Tashi’s marriage subjects Jim Crow American and colonial African disorientation to love’s guidance. Nettie tries to heal Adam by filling in the gaps of his self-knowledge, and she reveals to both him and Olivia that Celie is their mother. Despite this disclosure, Adam shares with Tashi an unsettled identity. She addresses hers by taking up with the mbele, or “forest people,” a kind of resistance movement that battles the white colonial forces (228). Traveling to London, he supports his father’s attempt to get the administrators of the African and American Missionary Society to intervene in Olinka. These reactions emphasize adjusting white behavior as a solution to black conundrums. As Celie’s experiences with God showed, the focus on adjusting distorted white perceptions often disables imagination. Adam and Tashi arrive at a similar finding, and their commitment to each other belies the certainty of gender oppression and suggests the good in Diasporic exchange, two intraracial concerns. Although their empathy bridges cultural chasms, its costs highlight another dimension of moral imagination. Adam, when he finds Tashi among the mbeles, discovers that she is insecure about her facial scars and fears that he will leave her for a light-skinned, Americanized woman. Getting scars identical to hers, he rends his face to mark his heeding of the Biblical command to “rend your heart” (Joel 2:13). This tearing becomes the viable basis of black solidarity, and The Color Purple reflects a resolution of Walker’s mid-1970s white mentorship crisis.

Walker matured artistically because of white mentors; nonetheless, she—at times—experienced their encouragement as condescension. If her 1975 letter to Rukeyser expressed her peeve at this dilemma, then the Sisterhood suggested one solution. Organized in 1977, the Sisterhood, a “non-profit” group designed “to unify black women artists,” boasted members such as Margo Jefferson, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, and Toni Morrison. Walker’s hosting of this group’s meetings continued a search

24. Linda Selzer states, “The mbeles are particularly significant because they comprise a remnant group defined not by traditional village bloodlines but by their common experience of racial oppression and their shared commitment to active resistance” (“Race” 78). Given this alliance, it is quite apt that Tashi would seek them out as she worked through her identity.

25. Although The Sisterhood consisted of women authors, its meetings often included general attempts to promote publication opportunities for “young black poets and writers.” These attempts entailed lobbying Essence, Ebony, and Ms.; supporting fledgling publications like First World; and developing alternative publishing ventures like “Kizzy Enterprises” (Minutes of “The Sisterhood”).
for moorings that had begun after she transferred from Spelman to Sarah Lawrence. With *The Color Purple*, she shifted her preoccupations from white injury toward black moral renovation and discovered a cultural grounding. This development—as evidenced by the scathing critiques of Africa in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) and *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (1993)—does not signal an embrace of black utopias; rather, it marks her deepest investment in spiritual resources. With this inward turn, Walker challenges Western literary individualism with an empathetic selfhood that retains the burden of communion. Here, she prefigures the vision that she gives to Celie. By the end of *The Color Purple*, Celie’s tenacious faith literally summons all of the major actors in her life into an unlikely family. This summoning completes her fantastic imagination, and its results herald “personal transformations” as the vanguard of “social transformations” (Wall 160). While this personality seems either naïve self-indulgence or disguised conservativism, its beliefs were presaged by the ethics of swagger. *Middle Passage* is informed by a similar portent; however, Charles Johnson’s route to the expression differs.

**Foster Care**

Celie snaps to moral attention because of Olivia, Adam, and Nettie. If Rutherford at the outset of *Middle Passage* lacks both offspring and fraternal love, his mind, like hers, does reflect an unresolved collision between black reality and white values. The segregated South stylized her predicament; slavery contextualizes his. Though he lives as a recently emancipated black New Orleanian, he was born in Makanda, Illinois, and raised by Reverend Peleg Chandler. Chandler, like *Beloved*’s Garner, lacks the brutality of other literary slave-owners, but despite the fact that he taught Rutherford and his brother Jackson “more than some

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26. Walker’s 1965 trip to Africa did not confirm the rhapsodic portraits that black nationalists were painting, yet it did intensify her exposure to African artists leading her in 1973 to ask: “Where is the book, by an American black person . . . that equals Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine* . . . a book that exposes the subconscious of a people, because the people’s dreams, imaginations, rituals, legends . . . are known to be important, are known to contain the accumulated collective reality of the people themselves” (O’Brien 202). Although enrolled at Sarah Lawrence when she went to the motherland, Walker insisted that Constance Nabwire, her Ugandan roommate at Spelman, inspired her journey by teaching her “to care deeply about Africans and African women.” She elaborated, “I went to Uganda trying to understand how Constance had been created and produced by this country which before Idi Amin was very beautiful, very tranquil and green” (A. Goodman). For more on Constance Nabwire, see White (73–74).
white men . . . knew” and then freed them, he still vexed Rutherford by insisting that he “become a credit to [his] Race” (8, 9). By substituting a preacher for God, *Middle Passage* takes the racial dimensions of *The Color Purple*’s theological portrayals and adds class commentary. Chandler’s “credit to the race” rhetoric evoked a long tradition of white paternalism, and his focus on “respectability” bespoke bourgeois social values that Rutherford associated with “a kind of living death” (4). While his mindset is equal parts antimaterialist and hedonist, Rutherford also captures circa 1830 the wary interplay of blacks and democracy. Chandler à la Norton in *Invisible Man* implies that black exemplarity will speed access to mainstream society. Rejecting the premise and the process, Rutherford embraces a debauchery that echoes his father’s. His attitude—given his enslavement—seems defensible, but his brother Jackson, who shares the same tutelage, raises questions about Rutherford’s outlook.

While explaining his migration to New Orleans, Rutherford states that like many of the other slaves under Chandler’s ownership, he fled the plantation when the owner freed him. His brother by contrast remained in Makanda, “more deeply bound to our master than any of us dreamed.” If sycophancy is one explanation for Jackson’s behavior, then his determination to “serve his people by humbly being there when they needed him” invites other interpretations (113). His commitment to service could be read as a testament to Chandler’s meticulous theological instructions. Just as Rutherford places his brother in the moral league of “a black saint like the South American priest Martin de Porres,” Chandler states that in his selflessness, Jackson has been “an inspiration” to him (3, 118).

27. Celestin Walby contends that Charles Johnson “models his characters in *Middle Passage* on Osiris, Horus, Seth” from Egyptian mythology. For Walby, Jackson represents Horus, the “falcon-god” who “sacrifices himself for the sake of the community,” while Rutherford embodies Seth “Horus’s worldly alter-ego” who rules “over the sensuous and purely physical” (661, 660). Walby’s analysis not only suggests that African cosmologies form part of the intellectual crucible that Johnson concocts but also reinforces the tension between Johnson’s decision to eschew the reality of Africa in favor of a personal myth of the continent.

28. Pianist Mary Lou Williams, a devout Catholic, premiered her composition “Black Christ of the Andes (Hymn in Honor of St. Martin de Porres)” in 1962. Gayle Murchison analyzes this premiere against the backdrop of “the civil rights movement, the Second Vatican Council, and Williams’s return to jazz” (591). Although Johnson makes no reference to Williams in interviews, her connection of St. Martin de Porres to the fight for racial equality, the evolution of religious thought, and black artistic life makes Rutherford’s quip about Jackson even richer. For more on Williams’s composition, see Murchison’s “Mary Lou Williams’s Hymn Black Christ of the Andes (St. Martin de Porres): Vatican II, Civil Rights, and Jazz as Sacred Music” (2002).
erford’s one of active dialogue with Chandler’s beliefs. The differences in
the brothers’ styles reflect different reasons for their convictions.

Rutherford’s Big Easy existence includes whoring and gambling. In
fact he is first drawn to New Orleans because it is “tailored to [his] taste
for the excessive, exotic fringes of life” (1). While he casts these appetites
as antibourgeois, his motives are multifaceted. Chandler, when Ruther-
ford is still a child, notes “stickiness” within his fingers and “a tendency
to tell preposterous lies for the hell of it.” Though his master sought in
vain to turn him to “Old Testament virtues,” Rutherford adopted social
critiques that synced with his indulgences (3). This tendency emerges
most vividly in his theories about stealing: “Theft, if the truth be told,
was the closest thing I knew to transcendence. Even better, it broke
the power of the propertied class, which pleased me” (47). Rutherford’s
remark betrays an opposition to class ascendancy and reification. Despite
these putatively lofty bases for his outlook, there is in Rutherford also a
tendency to romanticize his predicament. He observes, “The Reverend’s
[Chandler] prophecy that I would grow up to be a picklock was wiser
than he knew, for was I not, as a Negro in the New World, born to be a
thief? Or, put less harshly, inheritor of two millennia of things I had not
myself made?” (47). As William Nash has pointed out, this musing evokes
black victimization and shows Johnson’s desire to engage late twenty-first-
century debates about black identity politics. 29 In addition though, it begs
a question tied to Johnson and his mentor John Gardner’s debates about
art: what defines moral identity?

Johnson’s relationship with Gardner commenced at the Southern Illi-
nois University in Carbondale, a white campus lacking the drama that
Walker confronted at Sarah Lawrence. While SIU was a fairly benign
environment by 1972, the year the two met, their interactions still evinced
volatility. Johnson, looking back on their days together, deemed Gard-
ner the best “teacher of the craft of writing in our time” (“World”). 30
Because he was a “skills . . . junkie,” he felt that Gardner’s admonitions
about “form as a meditation” were crucial to his grasp of writing’s sig-
nificance (Byrd, I Call 12; Watterson). These lessons about hard work and

29. Nash argues that Rutherford’s “victimization mentality” leads him to “negative actions”
(145). By presenting this connection, Johnson, in Nash’s view, continues a critique of “the heritage
of victimization” that runs through his entire oeuvre (45).

30. Johnson’s claim about Gardner’s teaching prowess appears in a blog, E-Channel. Con-
ceived by his buddy Ethelbert Miller, this yearlong project allowed two black male artists space to
range over numerous topics. Johnson’s friendships with Miller and August Wilson provide a fasci-
nating complement to his experiences with white mentors. See his essay “Night Hawks” (2009)
for more on his interactions with Wilson.
technique united the two men, but when Johnson’s creativity evolved, their exchanges revealed tensions.³¹

Gardner felt that great writing derived its power from classic Judeo-Christian verities. Because his “moralistic certainty about . . . art” reflected such Eurocentricism, his aesthetics dismissed certain creative experiments (Little 131). Johnson initially took his mentor’s “word on literature as law,” but by 1982, Gardner encountered fresh innovations in his pupil’s work (Byrd, I Call 23). Incorporating the “meta-fictional” devices that Gardner had elsewhere criticized, Johnson also used Buddhism more conspicuously (C. Johnson, Oxherding xvii). These changes did not precipitate a falling out; however, they did show the inevitable stretching that accompanies an erstwhile student’s growth. While Johnson and Gardner’s disagreement reveals the generic conflict between a teacher and an apprentice, it also demonstrates the precise challenges that accompany a white mentor who seeks to shepherd an independent black artist. Johnson detected within Martin Luther King, Jr.’s study of Gandhi and Clarence Major’s formal daring alternate paths for his own writing. While his interest in morality remained, his sense of the moral self defied Gardner’s truths. Middle Passage, through the life of a man emancipated thirty-five years before slavery ends, allegorizes this defiance. Revisiting both Beloved and The Color Purple’s musings on freedom, Johnson’s novel announces a black moral transcendence that affirms democratic pluralism. It does so starting with a slaver bound for Africa.

Rutherford’s departure for the motherland lacks the salvific dimensions of Nettie’s embarkation. In fact, his presence aboard the slave ship The Republic is directly connected to his sybaritic habits. He has amassed gambling debts, and when his creditor Papa Zeringue bargains with his girlfriend Isadora, Rutherford finds himself caught between certain maiming and imminent matrimony. Escaping the consequences of his debauchery, he unknowingly heads toward Senegambia. The closer that the ship gets to the motherland, the more intensely he, the sole black crewman, deals with questions of betrayal. These questions initially center on his relationship with the ship’s captain, Ebenezer Falcon.

If Chandler exemplifies white mentorship on land, then Falcon supervises Rutherford’s seaside apprenticeship. Falcon, as others have pointed

³¹. Regarding Johnson’s divergences from Gardner, see Jonathan Little’s Charles Johnson’s Spiritual Imagination (1997), especially the section “Anxiety of Influence: Johnson and John Gardner” (127–35). Little’s insights helped refine my linkage of Middle Passage’s characterizations and mentoring.
in his discussions of merit, he offers Rutherford a template for white expectation and black behavior that is a conservative complement to Chandler’s liberal one. He tells Rutherford, “I believe in excellence . . . Eighty percent of the crews on other ships . . . are incompetent, and all because everyone’s ready to lower the standards of excellence to make up for slavery, or discrimination” (31–32). Falcon suggests that mediocrity rather than race and oppression determine the debased status of blacks. Aside from offering a chiding commentary on the affirmative action debates, this portrayal also shows the dangers of submitting to white constructions of black realities. A fuller sense of that danger surfaces in Falcon’s attitudes toward the Allmuseri, the fictitious African tribe whose members form *The Republic’s* cargo.  

Slavery’s central transaction changes a human being into property, and that absurd transformation becomes the baseline from which the institution is judged. While *Middle Passage* makes Rutherford’s antiestablishment posture a rebuke of such absurdity, Falcon’s ambitions vis-à-vis the Allmuseri reveal the former slave’s glib rage as an insufficiently rigorous response. Falcon wants to take the Allmuseri God and insert the deity into a system governed by “exchange value” (Selzer, Charles 190). Beyond producing a triumph of white Western power, this gesture signals blackness as a metaphysical vacuum. Falcon seeks to affirm the Hegelian edict that Africa and Africans are “no historical part of the world” (99). Against this backdrop, Rutherford searches for solutions other than a conning indignation and a “bitter obsession with racial difference” (Nash 132). His dilemma indicates the range of white expectations and the
Johnson unlike Walker gives his protagonist a direct experience of the black suspension between Africa and America. Where Celie understands Diaspora links because of her family, Rutherford can read his liminality in *The Republic*’s diabolical circuits. His situation provides a crucial insight regarding movement and liberty. Though black literature going back to the slave narratives often associates movement with freedom, the middle passage, the journey that turns liberty to slavery, stresses paradox as the reigning principle in black existence. Rutherford alludes to this reality when he describes his New Orleans life of petty thievery and swindling as a sort of “transcendence,” but his dubious sincerity limits his comprehension (47). With his shipboard exposure to Falcon’s mission, he understands the immensity of his life’s contradictions. His dawning consciousness reflects a commentary on ethnocentrism.

Johnson worked on *Middle Passage* during a half-decade that featured both expanding white conservatism and a reinvigorated Afrocentricity. If he used Chandler and Falcon to explore the former, then Rutherford’s mindset aboard *The Republic* showed the writer probing the latter. Johnson acknowledged the black Diaspora; nevertheless, he thought that Afrocentricity’s view of the motherland was puerile. Disturbed by the ideology’s insistence upon rote solidarity, he emphasized America’s commitment to creating “space for the individual to exist as an individual” and suggested that this value was a more promising basis for fellowship (Bender et al. 37). William Nash explains Johnson’s outlook on Africa as “a sort of organic phenomenological transformation,” a belief that one works through a racial vision of identity to discover “the limitations of racialist thought in favor of a more expansive understanding of personal and group identity” (4). While Johnson certainly enjoins his readers “to accept the illusory nature of . . . race,” he also returns to topics such as slavery and segregation that confound attempts at cultural


37. Charles Johnson clarifies his outlook on Afrocentricity in a 1992 review of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *In My Father’s House.* In that review, Johnson applauds Appiah’s “repeated denial that race is the unifying trait of the African diaspora, and his jettisoning of all attempts to find a universal characteristic defining ‘black’ people.” When Johnson notes that Appiah’s opinions “doubtlessly will bother anyone who has a personal or professional investment in the idea of racial differences,” he undoubtedly has Afrocentrists like Molefi Asante, Leonard Jeffries, and Frances Cress Welsing in mind (Byrd, *I Call* 186).
amnesia (Storhoff 22). This simultaneous dismissal of biological category and honoring of shared experience pervades his art. With Middle Passage’s slaving voyage, he posits such simultaneity as moral enlightenment. Rutherford’s return to New Orleans reveals the process.

After The Republic loads its human cargo and begins the trip back to America, several folks vie for Rutherford’s allegiance among them the Allmuseri bondsmen, the white crew, and captain Falcon. Linda Selzer has argued that each of these constituencies—Africans pressed into slavery, a motley aggregation of white men, and a dictatorial monomaniac—allows Johnson to put “into play multiple forms of cosmopolitanism that interrogate one another” (Charles 209). If these quizzing cosmopolitanisms all teach Rutherford something, then his interactions with the Allmuseri form his dearest lessons. Gary Storhoff argues that the Allmuseri embody three Buddhist precepts, namely “eternal unity,” “no-self,” and “emptiness” (174, 175). While these tenets challenge Western individuality, the Allmuseri’s intertwining of freedom and empathy also critiques Rutherford’s deceitfulness. This double-edged chiding reflects Johnson’s reaction to American cultural conflict. Whether in the 1830s or the 1980s, fixed perceptions foreclose communion. Rutherford, through a moral harrowing, presents selfhood “breaking out of stasis,” and his breakout centers on family (Jablon 41).

Rutherford never knew his father well, yet he endorses the man’s values. As he recants white mentors, his objections echo his dad’s defense of “living off others” (2). He justifies his promiscuity by pointing out Riley’s legendary “bedswerving” (169). Although his actions are opportunistic, Rutherford’s rationale betrays cynicism. The Allmuseri force him into dialogue with his father’s legacy, and through a theophany, he expe-

38. Arlene R. Keizer argues that Johnson mines “the existential condition of the slave for insights about subjectivity and freedom, not just for African Americans, but for Americans more generally” (49). Following this insight, she states that he also finds in slavery a “ground zero for African American identity formation” and a sense of “gravity” for his “theoretical inquiries” (49, 50). Her explanation captures Johnson’s desire to eschew representative blackness while acknowledging America’s racial perversity, a balancing act that permeates his art.

39. Identifying how Charles Johnson and Middle Passage fit into the late twentieth century proliferation of black public intellectuals, Selzer explains, “In part a reaction to the postmodernist rejection of grand narratives in favor of the particular and local, and in part a response to the essentialist claims of some versions of so-called identity politics, the new interest in cosmopolitanism reflects a resurgence of critical focus on the normative power of universals” (Charles 167). Johnson’s identification with “the cosmopolitan wing of black intellectualism” reveals his desire to esteem “the force of the universal while recognizing multiple, overlapping allegiances” (Charles 168, 169).

40. Margaret I. Jordan claims that Riley’s chief impact on his sons is “a wallowing in self-pity; fantasizing about a place and past that are not really his to claim; using his enslavement as . . . an excuse for doing whatever he pleases regardless of the consequences to himself or others” (158).
riences a conversion. Among the Africans that Captain Falcon buys in Senegambia, there is one acknowledged as the Allmuseri god. This deity is kept in *The Republic*’s hold, and those who gaze upon it get transfigured. When Rutherford confronts the god, he senses it as Riley. He states: “I had to listen harder to isolate him [my father] from the We that swelled each particle and pore of him, as if the (black) self was the greatest of all fictions; and then I could not find him at all” (171). Amplifying *Middle Passage*’s Buddhist aspects, this passage syncs concepts such as “eternal unity” and “no self” with democratic pluralism. This syncing stresses the integrative traditions lurking in America’s heritage.\(^{41}\) If that integration is celebrated, then the speculation that “the (black) self” might be “the greatest of all fictions” tests allegiance. Rutherford’s loss of his father seemingly discounts blood ties, a key form of connection. Recalling Celie though, he revises rather than rejects kinship. His new family lights the path to more sincere belonging.

*The Republic*’s homeward trip features a genocidal mutiny by the Allmuseri and ends with the ship’s destruction by an apocalyptic storm. While these events leave Rutherford physically broken, they buoy his spirit. The embrace of life as a “cultural mongrel” aids his awakening, yet he expresses enlightenment in a quaint domestic hope (187). After beginning the novel fleeing marriage, he ends the book trying to make Isadora, his erstwhile girlfriend, and Baleka, a young Allmuseri survivor, into a black family. This attempt provides an interesting solution to cultural orphaning. Replacing Rutherford, Baleka—like Adam, Olivia, and Tashi in *The Color Purple*—symbolizes both the rift that the Middle Passage produces and the redemption that adoption extends. She grants him an opportunity to craft a “drama of domestic inclusion,” and in this regard, her fate revises the flight from home that defines many American texts (Little 151). While Johnson does not excise his novel from a mainstream tradition, he signals a difference drenched in specific experiences. For Rutherford, these experiences are racially inflected, and ironically, his brother tutors him in sane survival.

Jackson, though still in Illinois, haunts Rutherford from New Orleans to Africa and back. If he initially scares him by being virtuous, then as Rutherford evolves, Jackson’s ghostliness shifts. Rutherford believes that

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41. In “‘Whole Sight’ in Review: Reflections on Charles Johnson” (2006), John Whalen-Bridge observes that one of the “main claims of Johnson criticism, going back over twenty-five years now, is that Johnson is an integrative artist in the school of Ellison” (245). Confirming such observations, Johnson in 2010 reaffirmed that “Ellison is extremely useful to us” because he observed that “what fuels our lives is integration . . . What’s at the heart of what Ellison is saying is a truth that’s true of every culture that . . . has ever existed: that our lives interpenetrate” (Ross).
his brother makes morality “a debilitating cage that allows no room for his ego or desires” (Page, Reclaiming 148). Casting Jackson as akin to “Martin Luther King, Jr.,” Rutherford wonders whether his brother’s “slow-moving reform” embraces white expectations even as it attempts to transcend prejudice (Little 147). Rutherford’s speculation that “Jackson might well have been one of [the Allmuseri’s] priests” suggests an end to his wonderment (109). By concluding that Jackson should rightly be viewed not as a Christian priest, Martin de Porres, but as an Allmuseri clergyman, Rutherford liberates his brother from the saintliness defined by Chandler’s theology and the white supremacy perpetrated by Falcon. His conclusion reflects African Diasporic awareness; nevertheless, as his studies of the Allmuseri indicate, the tribe’s interconnection stemmed less from biology and more from “values” (109). Here, Rutherford discovered a black selfhood that could shed white circumscription and yet resist bigotry. Johnson presented this discovery as a commentary on post–civil rights black life and literature.

During the time that he was working on Middle Passage, Johnson also completed Being and Race (1988), a study of post-1970 African American writing. In that study, he wrote that Negritude, an “esthetic philosophy” that attempts to authenticate “a unique African personality,” fails because it is “a flight by the black artist . . . from the agony of facing a universe silent as to its sense” (19, 20).42 His prizewinning novel levels a similar indictment against Reagan era fiction. At the beginning of the eighties, Johnson saw black writing that shirked “the boundaries of invention” and avoided the place where “fiction and philosophy meet” (Oxherding Tale xviii).43 He also thought that whites such as John Gardner offered

42. In Being and Race, Johnson concludes that Negritude’s “dualism,” its mind/body dichotomy that “equates consciousness . . . with Europe” and “the body . . . with Africa” is “a retreat from ambiguity, the complexity of Being occasioned by the conflict of interpretations” (19, 20).

43. Johnson’s critique of black writing featured a specific target, Alice Walker’s The Color Purple. Providing a context for Johnson’s sentiments, Rudolph Byrd writes, “Oxherding Tale appeared at the apex of what is sometimes referred to as the renaissance of African American women’s writing. In many ways displaced by the formidable trinity of Morrison, Walker, and Naylor (who had seemingly displaced the earlier trinity of Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin), Johnson’s second novel did not have the wide impact he had hoped for during an era when male writers, black and white, were no longer in vogue” (Charles 64). Alice Walker responded to this reasoning: “To blame black women for one’s low sales is just depressing to think about, considering the sad state of our general affairs . . . That black male writers, no less than black men generally, think that when they don’t get something they want, it is because of black women, and not because of the capitalist system that is destroying us all, is almost too much irony to bear” (Tate, Black 183). Aside from professional competition, what emerges here is the extent to which The Color Purple permeates Johnson’s awareness as he is composing Middle Passage. His comments all seem connected to Oxherding Tale, yet Johnson “began work on Middle Passage” during “summer, 1983,” a timetable that squarely coincided with Walker’s and her novel’s growing prominence (Byrd, I Call 26). Part II of this study will explore the general significance of such awareness.
flawed views “of what black literature . . . should be” and thus were part of “a universe silent to its sense” (“John” 623). Caught between these realities, Johnson refined his aesthetic that fused Buddhism, American democracy, and black cultural experience. This refinement proved a powerful response to black cultural orphaning, and since *Middle Passage* won the National Book Award, “the only national prize [Johnson] ever wanted,” it seemed triumphant (Ross). In a telling paradox, his achievement exposed him anew to white literary expectations. Alice Walker, who wanted nothing to do with awards, joined him. With their experiences, serious questions about art and authorization surfaced.

**Co-opted Independence**

Carol Iannone’s “Literature by Quota” (1991) remains one of the few published pieces to ever link *The Color Purple* and *Middle Passage*. Evoking Walker and Johnson’s accomplishments as evidence that late twentieth-century American prize grantors are more interested in “act[s] of repar-

44. Drawing on Charles Johnson’s *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing* (2003) and the research of John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff, Marc Connor and William Nash conclude that Johnson’s 1982 return to “sitting meditation” allowed him to see “engaged Buddhism” as useful for blacks “facing the systematic racism woven firmly into the fabric of American life” (xxviii, xxx). Though Johnson’s *moksha* is unassailable, his spiritual development bespeaks both a generic penchant for refinement and a specific awareness that in black communities, his religion, writing, and philosophy are at times dismissed as substitutions of enlightenment for action. Johnson takes such dismissals seriously perhaps because of his father. See Watterson and Byrd (*I Call 3–16* for more on their relationship.

45. In a 2010 interview with Michael Ross, Johnson explained: “The only national prize I ever wanted was the National Book Award because [Ralph] Ellison got it.” Jonathan Little notes that when “Johnson won the National Book Award for *Middle Passage* in 1990, his acceptance speech was an opportunity to lavish praise on Ralph Ellison, whose aesthetic precedent and vision had long inspired” him (135). Though Little’s statement conveys generous homage, Linda Selzer comprehensively grasps Johnson’s affinity for Ellisonian ideologies: “The 1990 [NBA] award ceremony cemented Johnson’s identification with the cosmopolitan wing of black intellectualism” (*Charles* 173). Johnson’s alliance ultimately becomes his reply to questions about his art’s cultural authenticity. Just as Ellison scorned those who lectured him on just how much whiteness his black creativity could include, Johnson saw in his work and his awards justification for his intellectual eclecticism. This chapter’s conclusion suggests that his outlook was not shared by all of mainstream America.

46. Evelyn C. White observes, “[Alice Walker] did not and would not have lobbied Harcourt to submit *The Color Purple* to the Pulitzer jury . . . Nor had she sought the novel’s nomination for the 1983 American Book Award in fiction, which it had also won the previous week. With regard to prizes, Alice was satisfied that she’d served, with openness and admiration, as a medium for her characters. That she’d rendered the lives of Shug, Celie, and Mr. __ with authenticity and compassion was all the reward she needed” (358). Where Morrison could and did make prizewinning an integral facet of her negotiations with white expectations, Walker rejected the awards metric even as she racked up envy-inspiring plaudits.

tion” than “the ethic of excellence and merit,” the essay collapses these novels’ explorations of white mentors and black apprentices into the more incendiary interracial narrative of affirmative action (51, 50). Iannone’s motives for vilifying Walker and Johnson have been analyzed, but her remarks hint at how these writers’ prizewinning books carry prophetic commentary on white expectations and the ethics of swagger.

*The Color Purple* and *Middle Passage* use two venerated forms in Western writing, the epistolary novel and the seafaring adventure respectively. Employing these putatively white structures, they test the conventions of sentimental fiction and democratic pluralist allegory to see if they can be tailored to fit African American experience. Both books conclude that through a revised individualism, blacks can renovate their moral visions and create room for themselves amid the nation’s gracious plenty. By perpetuating the “gross and dangerous oversimplification” that white supremacy monopolizes the judgment of merit and hence the parameters of American-ness, Iannone vivifies the tides against which Celie and Rutherford swam (Miles). Her efforts also suggest the after-the-prize complexity of the Black Archivists’ negotiations.

Although Walker and Johnson began their lives amid rich black cultures, each writer advanced professionally with the aid of white mentors. Muriel Rukeyser set in motion events that led to the publication of Walker’s first book. John Gardner placed a chapter of Johnson’s first novel in the journal *Fiction Midwest*. Though both black authors were grateful for this help, their lives and their fiction dramatized the difficulty of balancing independent artistry and white expectations. Advancement,

47. For accounts of Iannone’s agenda, see James English’s *The Economy of Prestige* and Jack Miles’s “The ‘Dictatorship of Mediocrity’” (1991).

48. This chapter discusses *The Color Purple*’s epistolary aspects above. For more on Johnson’s interest in American seafaring literature, see William Nash (146–50).

49. Rukeyser sent Walker’s manuscript to Monica McCall, her literary agent. When McCall forwarded the book to Hiram Haydn, an editor at Harcourt, he accepted it and launched Walker’s career. For a concise account of this episode, see Haydn’s 1974 memoir *Words and Faces*. Hadyn’s role in promoting fledgling writers has been noted, but his specific contributions to black writers ranging from Paule Marshall to David Bradley is a leitmotif of this study.

50. Johnson had finished six unpublished novels, but by 1972 when he began working on his seventh, he concluded that he needed better instruction. While “working on *Faith and the Good Thing*,” Johnson learned that one of his six apprenticeship novels had been accepted for publication. Though he “want[ed] to get published,” his consultations with John Gardner convinced him that the book “wasn’t” representative of his “philosophical vision.” He explained, “[This novel] was very much in the style of James Baldwin, which is why I believe the publisher liked it . . . Gardner’s influence helped me understand all of what is at stake when you write . . . Knowing him ratcheted up my concern with craft . . . and literary aesthetics” (Watterson). For an account of Gardner’s role in Johnson’s “first ‘serious’ literary publication,” see Johnson’s essay “John Gardner as Mentor” (622).
in the 1960s and 1970s, became easier with influential white friends. This truth undergirded Walker’s editorial position at Ms. magazine and Johnson’s writer-in-residence post at the University of Washington. If mainstream mentors could open doors, they also offered reminders that the power distribution between white teacher and black student was not equal. This inequality pertains in all mentoring relationships, but for black writers in post–civil rights America, the insecurities reached back a long way.

From the earliest days of African American writing, white mentors produced ambivalent effects. They authenticated black writing for a skeptical white public, and at the same time, they often tried to frame black art for a mainstream readership’s consumption. Walker and Johnson had carefully studied the black literary tradition and knew the history of these interactions. Although each correspondingly wrote The Color Purple and Middle Passage as a seasoned novelist, both saw the growing uneasiness regarding black artistic autonomy and used their own experiences with white expectations to ponder this phenomenon. One effect of their pondering was a kind of communion. The second part of this study will take up this communion more expansively, but here, the alterations that blacks and democracy demand of one another proves illustrative. Iannone suggests that such alteration may not be possible, but Ernest Gaines’s A Lesson Before Dying shows that she is part of a “conflict of interpretations” which signals that change is already underway (C. Johnson, Being 20). Foraging among the “ruins of modernity,” he sets the margins of such changes (R. Miller, On 1).