The Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution allows for the commitment to slavery as punishment for a criminal act. Rutherford Calhoun, the main character in Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*, has been enslaved aboard the slave ship *Republic*, as a punishment for the crimes of thievery and being a stowaway. In any system of incarceration, it is necessary to have persons who occupy a liminal space between the prison staff and the inmates. As the sole Black member of the crew, he is otherized by both the crewmembers and the Allmuseri cargo of slaves. Being in the crew, but not of the crew, places Rutherford in a unique position from which it is possible to develop a relationship of limited trust with the ships officers, crew, and the slaves simultaneously. This position is analogous to the position occupied by a trusty in a penal institution. A trusty is given responsibility because it instills an internalized perception of trustworthiness that the trusty is unwilling to forgo because this is the first time this person has ever been placed in a position of trust. Often the trusty will perform acts of loyalty to the institution that go much further than required in order to maintain that desired feeling of trustworthiness. Because it is a ship, *The Republic* is a de facto prison for everyone aboard with the exception of the master, Captain Falcon, who uses Rutherford’s status as a non-member of the ship’s society to persuade him to spy on the crew by convincing him that this his duty because the Captain has placed trust in him. This is the point where Rutherford is forced to decide where his loyalties lie and to attempt to develop a sense of self-identity that allows him to place the needs of others above his own. By examining the internalized oppression that makes Rutherford Calhoun’s acceptance of the role as trusty possible, and the way Johnson’s
controlling metaphor of The Republic as a prison reinforces his internalized role, I will explain why Calhoun remains a static character, rather than a dynamic one, because of the constraints on his personality that are imposed by his internalized inferiority.

In order to understand the characters in this novel the reader must understand that they are not meant to be people, rather, they are exaggerations of people invented whole cloth from the mind of a philosopher who began his career as a political cartoonist. This is why they are all such recognizable tropes. Rutherford Calhoun is the happy-go-lucky con man, searching for his place. His brother, Jackson, represents society’s idea of a perfect black man, an educated man who negotiates with the white masters for what Malcolm X termed in a speech in 1963, an integrated cup of coffee and a space at the lunch counter. Ebenezer Falcon is the overseer who bows and scrapes to the ships owners in order to maintain his nominal privilege as Captain of a ship that is always one step away from sinking. Mr. Cringle is described as “…someone who’d grown up with a great deal of wealth, privileges, or personal gifts, and felt guilty in the presence of those who hadn’t” (Johnson 25). His White liberal guilt causes him to intercede on behalf of the crow and the slave cargo even when it is contrary to his own best interest. Reverend Peleg Chandler is the “good” White master who educates and then frees his slaves on his deathbed. The Almuseri captive, Ngonyama, represents Dr. King as the peace loving leader of his people. Diamelo is, of course, the more militant Malcolm X. Not one of these characters is an exact match of an historical figure, instead they are recognizable caricatures that Johnson can twist and shape in order to fulfill his purpose. In particular, Rutherford’s belief in his own inferiority makes it possible for him to accept whatever role is thrust upon him.

The hierarchy that existed within the slave sub-culture mirrored that of the dominant White society with a petty bourgeoisie and proletariat that are both in a inferior position to the
dominant culture. No matter what position the slave occupies on the plantation, their inferiority becomes ingrained on their personality. “Lipsky (1977) defines internalized oppression as the ‘turning upon ourselves, upon our families, and upon our own people the distress patterns that result from the racism and oppression of the majority society’” (qtd in Bailey 481). Calhoun’s internalized inferiority causes him to regard any impingement, no matter how small, on his freedom, as bondage. He is therefore unable to remain near his older brother so he paradoxically heads south in search of true freedom. Having been a slave his entire life, he has no idea what the word freedom really means; to him it is an abstract idea. Unwilling to submit to even the most basic constraints of society, Rutherford resorts to a hedonistic life of crime: “So I stole – it came as second nature to me” (Johnson 3). Rutherford rationalizes this thievery by reminding himself that this was the life he was born into.

His master, Reverend Peleg Chandler, had been telling, him his entire life, “I was born to be hanged” (Johnson 3). Because his master has raised him to believe that he is not trustworthy, he becomes a person who cannot be trusted, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. He embraces a life of crime without hesitation because it makes him feel a sense of belonging in a city that holds no warmth for an Illinois farm boy. “Cityfolks lived by cheating and crime. Everyone knew this, everyone saw it, everyone talked ethics piously, then took payoffs under the table, tampered with the till, or fattened his purse by duping the poor” (Johnson 3-4). Rutherford has no thought for the people he harms with his petty crimes. His only care is an aimless search for the next one-night stand or bender.

As an educated Black man Rutherford occupies a borderland between the uneducated Blacks and the White men, belonging to neither culture but able to travel with both. The way he switches between the use of vernacular and what I will call, for lack of a better word, White
Speech, illustrates this liminality. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates writes: “In the very creation of literature, the black author performed a twofold task: he or she exemplified, by definition, the ‘capacity’ of ‘the race’ for ‘progress’ and he or she taught, through his or her subject matter, that racism is an outmoded and unnecessary emotion” (Gates 118). Rutherford is communicating in White speech for the benefit of White readers, so they see Rutherford as a person. However, he reverts occasionally to the vernacular in order to demonstrate to his African-American readers that he has not lost sacrificed his blackness on the altar of gaining respect from Whites.

*Middle Passage* is written in the form of log entries in order to demonstrate Rutherford’s literacy and also to “demonstrate his … membership in the human community” (Gates 129). Henry Louis Gates extends this argument by writing: “Black people … had to represent themselves as “speaking subjects” before they could even begin to destroy their status as objects … within the western culture” (Gates 130). The epistolary log entries place Rutherford and the reader outside of the narrative leaving the “… long sordid story … shortened for those who, like the Greeks, prefer to keep their violence offstage” (Johnson 2). Because of this, Rutherford gives the sense of being a journalist rather than a participant in his own story. This journalistic style allows the reader to view the text as a static tale of events that transpired in the past instead of a dynamic tale that unfolds as the story is told. This perception solidifies the barrier that prevents preconceived ideas from altering significantly, allowing the reader to retain their internal belief structure rather than forcing them to revise it as Johnson intended.

This failure to deconstruct post-Civil Rights Era closet racism is compounded by the way narrative fails to disguise its contempt for Rutherford; the text clearly identifies more with Rutherford’s brother, Jackson. Jackson Calhoun is a representation of the ideal. He is not only
educated, he also works with the white master and sacrifices material goods to marginally improve the status of his people. Rutherford is painted as contemptible because is never able to place the needs of others above his own for more than a moment. He shows flashes of the man he could become, however he never quite gets there, choosing instead to revert back to his self-centered nature.

Rutherford’s self-centered nature is based on an internalized survival mechanism. Because of his former life as a slave, Rutherford knows that it is dangerous for a black man to act like a white man, even in the closed shipboard community of the Republic. When he is discovered stowed away aboard the ship, he immediately affects a subservient manner while explaining his presence to the first mate, Mr. Cringle. Taking pity on him, Cringle takes him to see the Captain, explaining along the way that Rutherford has made a terrible mistake: “But I’ll tell you true: Jail’s better. Being on a ship is being in jail with the chance of being drowned to boot” (Johnson 24). It has not yet dawned on Calhoun that, while attempting to escape the perceived bondage of a forced marriage, he has entered a more literal prison. Cringle’s statement signifies the beginning of Johnson’s controlling metaphor of The Republic as a prison.

There is only one authority aboard the ship, Ebenezer Falcon, the ship’s captain; He fills the role of the warden. Everyone else aboard ship is an inmate. They cannot leave until their sentence is completed. In order for this “prison” to function with only one supervisor, the Captain needs an extra pair of eyes among the crew. Spotting Calhoun’s insecurity, he recruits him for this task, in effect making him a “trusty” in the shipboard prison institution. As Sanford Bates explains in “Honor System for Inmates of Prisons and Reformatories.”

The "trusty" system is one whereby certain of the inmates, through a recognition of their good behavior or their superior intelligence, or for other less meritorious
reasons, are designated by the superintendent to carry out his instructions and occupy positions of trust and responsibility in the management of the institution (109).

In this case, Falcon chooses Rutherford because of his borderland status between the community of white crewmembers and the cargo of slaves. Calhoun mingles with the crew and is privy to their conversations, but does not have any loyalty toward them. In fact, he sees the crew as an uneducated rabble that cannot be trusted to decide their own destiny. As Bates writes: “Until a man has education, a vote is a useless and dangerous thing for him to possess” (113). Cringle is the only person, other than the captain, that Rutherford can identify with until the cargo of slaves comes aboard. This self-identification as “other,” places Calhoun in position in which he has no choice other than to remain loyal to the existing power structure or risk losing the small amount of self-determination that remains to him.

Ebenezer Falcon seizes on this misplaced loyalty and fear by literally handing the power of life and death to Calhoun in the form of a pistol. As Johnson writes: “the best way to control a rebellious nigger … is to give him some responsibility” (Johnson 74). He draws Rutherford in by claiming to trust him and addressing him as a ship’s officer:

“‘Mr. Calhoun. I hope that you can see that I trust you. I need a colored mate to be my eyes and ears … I want to know what each man’s thinkin’ … ‘Once weekly I’ll want a full report. If there’s any talk, you’ll tell me.’ ‘Be your Judas’ I asked. ‘A spy?’ … ‘Nay, a friend! I need someone to keep his eyes open and tell me of any signs of trouble’” (Johnson 57).

Rutherford accepts this new power along with a, “crude ring twinned on his left hand,” (Johnson 58). Entering into an unholy alliance, which is symbolized by the paired “wedding rings,” with
the captain that makes it impossible for him to resist his authority. Rutherford, because of his self-identification as a commodified person of lower value than the Captain, helps him oppress the other inmates in their floating prison. As Bailey writes in “Development and Validation of the Internalized Racial Oppression Scale for Black Individuals.”: “Black people experiencing internalized racial oppression will replicate this same internalized oppressiveness, through beliefs and behaviors, toward people within their own racial classification or those individuals perceived to be in that classification” (481-2). The other crewmembers are not black, however they occupy a similar status as inmates within The Republic, making them nominal Black men in Johnson’s metaphor. In “Isadora at Sea: Misogyny as Comic Capital in Charles Johnson's Middle Passage” Elizabeth Muther writes: “He is psychically drawn back to the condition of his enslavement and defines himself in terms of it … His availability derives from the nature of his freedom, which is defined only by absence of constraint. Freedom for Calhoun requires no cooperation with other individuals, he sees himself as the sole deserving person. He has already decided to betray the other inmates in his own self-interest” (469).

Inmate communities form a collective and adversarial society that resists authority. Within that society any form of treason toward the inmate collective is seen as a capital crime. In “Inmate Identification in an Institutional Setting” Dr. William L. McWhorter writes:

One of the most despicable roles in the inmate society is that of the "rat." This is the inmate who breaks the strongest inmate value by informing on fellow inmates. He is universally scorned and is placed in very precarious circumstances with respect to his fellow inmates. The prohibition against informing on fellow inmates is the most salient of all inmate values. In general, no qualifications or mitigating circumstances are recognized; and no grievance against inmates, even though it is
justified in the eyes of the inmate population, is to be taken to officials for settlement (89).

The inmate setting eschews access to arbitrator of guilt, leaving summary judgment of offenses to the inmate community as the only possible recourse. Although the other crewmen have no concrete evidence that Rutherford has become an informer, the ring and the pistol make them wary of trusting him:

“McGaffin’s gaze drifted to my left hand.

‘That queer ring he’s wearin’, d’you see it? I only seen one like it afore. It’s on the flipper of the scoundrel who almost sank us this evenin’. You know,’ he said to the others, ‘I think I was wrong. This one ain’t no stowaway, he’s a blinkin’ spy.’

‘No! I stole the ring’

‘Oho! Then you hold no brief for Ebenezer Falcon?’

‘None at all’

‘you would’nt grieve none, or pour ashes on your head if, by some unexpected but nat’ral nautical accident at sea, the Old Man came to a sudden and tragic end?’

‘No.’

‘or mebbe …if you was the cause of that?’ (Johnson 87).

Rutherford is now in a position in which he has to prove his loyalty to his fellow inmates while still retaining his position of trust and privilege with the captain:

“In a narrow room filled with grizzled, desperate sea rogues, all in agreement (and armed), except for Josiah Squibb, standing a little off to one side and behind the
others, pulling at his fingers and swinging at his head side to side for only me to see – encircled by conspirators such as these … I could only do as they wished and say ‘tis done’ (Johnson 92).

Loyalty, however, means nothing to Rutherford Calhoun as a concept. In his mind, “All bonds, landside or on ships, … were a lie forged briefly in the name of convenience and just as easily broken when they no longer served one’s interest” (Johnson 92). His relationships with his family members, that he broke as soon as he felt the bond of obligation, demonstrate his belief that he is unworthy of trust or love. Cementing this idea in his mind, Rutherford now switches his allegiance to the Allmuseri slaves in the hold, seeing in them a possible way out of the vise he has constructed and is now trapped in.

Here again the seemingly inescapable cell that Rutherford occupies exists only in his own mind. He actually has the choice of either remaining loyal to the captain, killing the captain, or throwing in his lot with the crew. Choosing none, he makes the unlikely choice to side with the only group aboard ship that is more oppressed than he is. He makes this choice because he believes that they may treat him as a superior because, after all, he is an educated man, not an ignorant savage as they are. Calhoun believes, because he has been taught, that he is superior to illiterate slaves. The only way he can possibly control his own destiny is by helping the slaves escape. Siding with the captain would force him to remain in bondage as would siding with a crew made of White men, leaving the slaves as his only possible allies. He holds no loyalty for them, they are simply a means to an end. Even sacrificing their lives in his quest for freedom is allowable, because they have abandoned their own code of ethics by rebelling violently making them dispensable.
One of Johnson’s recurring themes, is the idea that a person loses his humanity once he resorts to violence. When this loss of humanity is combined with the cardinal sin of illiteracy, the person becomes sub-human and loses their value to the community. This is the reason that all of the Allmusari men die at the end of the novel. Calhoun is allowed to survive because his literacy allows him to remain as a storyteller. Squibb survives because of his selflessness, making him a “good white person” and the children survive because they are innocent of the crimes committed by their fathers. Having narrowly escaped death, Rutherford finds himself back where he began in New Orleans, again facing the bondage of marriage. His personality has not actually changed at all. The baggage he retains from his childhood prevents him from consummating his relationship with Isadora, leaving him permanently stuck in the borderland between slavery and self-determination. This novel appears on the surface to be a bildungsroman in which Rutherford Calhoun enters the life of a free man. However, he fails to escape the prison of his internalized oppression and inferiority leaving him trapped in the same static position that he occupied at the hour of his manumission.
Works Cited


