

Final Written Report

Professional Development Grant

“Flesh and the Feminine in Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*”

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This final report addresses the results of a professional research project funded by an ATU Professional Development Grant. This report follows the instructions provided in the Guidelines for Professional Development Grants.

A. Title Page (see above)

B. Restatement of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

Abstract of conference paper presented:

Many who have written about Charles Johnson's 1990 postmodern novel, *Middle Passage*, consider it the rare postmodern work that is also a celebration of life (Barbara Z. Thaden). They celebrate its stylistic blurred boundaries, in which genres and traditions contaminate and leak into what ultimately becomes a mongrelized form that resists the tyranny of binary oppositions (Lorraine Ouimet). Such disruptions fit the novel's philosophical stance, embodied in the Allmuseri Africans, who believe in no divisions, individuality, or autonomy. As the first-person narrator, Rutherford Calhoun, explains, "The failure to experience the unity of Being everywhere was the Allmuseri vision of Hell" (65). To them, the American slave ship's crew are "savages" who live in and are taking them to "purgatory . . . into the madness of multiplicity" (65).

According to Daniel M. Scott, the novel interrogates "the status of the body as well as cultural and textual positions," working to unify mind/body and self/other binarisms. But the representation of the body in this text is problematic, primarily because it insists on separating the physical body from sexual desire as a necessary concomitant of attaining the spiritual dimension it champions (a position that situates itself alongside traditional, even reactionary, sexual politics; St. Paul comes to mind).

Calhoun's ship's log declares in the first sentence, "Of all the things that drive men to sea, the most common disaster, I've come to learn, is women" (1). The particular woman he flees, Isadora Bailey, is a stock composite of misogynistic stereotypes within a parodic classic male quest/sea story (Elizabeth Muther). His opinion of love is that "people fell in love as they might fall into a hole" (7). The image conjures the threat of absorption by the female, a moment that, according to Levi-Strauss, lies at the inaugural moment of culture. He escapes her attempted entrapment in the masculine world of a slave ship that picks up a cargo of Allmuseri, thus beginning its doom. There follow lengthy graphic descriptions of abject bodies, flesh, leaking, oozing bodily fluids and excrement, infected, infecting, and disintegrating. Such images at first pointed me toward Kristeva's abject body, the feminine, contaminating body in opposition to the male clean and proper body. Yet here we have all the bodies on the ship, male and female, black and white, in the same state of abjection. And, although such a corporeal morass could point to a liberating perspective, subverting the classic fear and loathing of specifically female flesh, such a leveling in this narrative ultimately requires that all these bodies become asexual bodies.

In the final scenes, after Rutherford's transformation on the voyage and rescue by a ship that happens to count Isadora among its passengers, the two are together in her bedroom. She assumes he is the same sexually profligate rogue he was before, but in the midst of their awkward attempt at sex, he stops, thinking, "I wanted our futures blended, not our limbs, our histories perfectly twined for all time, not our flesh. Desire was too much of a wound, a rip of insufficiency and incompleteness that kept us, despite our proximity, constantly apart, like metals with an identical charge" (208). Isadora simply

lowers her head to his shoulder, “as a sister might” (209). Here the text, after all its transgressive blurring of gender and sex, performs a disturbing desexualizing of bodies, while also positing that a historicized body must be one without sexual desire.

#### C. Brief Review of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

I attended the American Literature Association conference in Boston, MA, and presented my paper there. I flew out of Little Rock on May 20, 2015, and returned on May 25, 2015.

#### D. Summary of Experiences

My primary teaching area within literature is modern American. I am the primary teacher of Modern American Literature, a required course for all our majors. All the papers on my panel were about postmodernism, and the chair of the panel noted that typically no one addresses issues of gender and race in most postmodern texts. I was pleased that I am making a contribution to postmodern scholarship. Not only did I manage to receive positive feedback on my paper, I was also able to attend numerous other panels relevant to my teaching and scholarship.

#### E. Conclusions and Recommendations

I am working on a publishable-length essay of which this paper is a part. Without the funds I received from the ATU Professional Grant, I would not have been able to attend the conference.