
FROM RUTHERFORD'S TRAVELS
(a novel)

By Charles Johnson

Entry the first

June 14, 1840

Of all the things that drive men to sea the most common disaster, I've come to learn, is women. In my case, it was a spirited Boston schoolteacher named Isadora Bailey, who led me to become a cook aboard the *Republic*, both Isadora and my creditors, I should add, who entered into a conspiracy, a trap, a scheme so cunning that my only choices were prison, a brief stay in the stony oubliette of the Spanish Calabozo (or a long one at the bottom of the Mississippi), or marriage, which was, for a man of my temperament, worse than imprisonment—especially if you knew Isadora—so I went to sea, sailing from Louisiana on 14 April 1840, hoping a quarter year aboard a slave clipper would give this relentless woman time to reconsider, and my bill-collectors time to forget they'd ever heard the name Rutherford Calhoun. But what lay ahead in Africa, then later on the open, endless sea, was, as I shall tell you, far worse than the fortune I'd fled in New Orleans.

New Orleans, you should know, was a city tailored to my taste for the excessive, exotic fringes of life, a world-port of such extravagance in 1839 when I arrived from southern Illinois—a newly-freed bondsman, my papers in an old portmanteau, a gift from my master in Makanda—that I dropped my bags and a shock of recognition shot up my spine to my throat, rolling off my tongue in a whispered, *Here, Rutherford is home*. So it seems, those first few months to the countryboy with cotton in his hair, a great whore of a city in her glory, a kind of glandular Golden Age. She was, if not a town devoted to an almost religious pursuit of Sin, then at least to a steamy sexuality. To the newcomer she was an assault of smells: molasses commingled with mangoes in the sensually damp air, the stench of slop in muddy streets and, from the labyrinthal warehouses on the docks, the odor of Brazilian coffee and Mexican oils. And also this: the most exquisitely beautiful women in the world, throughbreds of pleasure created two centuries before by the French for their enjoyment. Mulattos colored like magnolia petals, griffs with breasts big as melons—women who smelled like roses all year round. Home? Brother, for a randy, Illinois boy of three and twenty accustomed to cornfields, cow plops, and handjob in his Master's hayloft, New Orleans wasn't home. It was Heaven. But even paradise must have its backside, too, and it is here (alas) that the newcomer comes to rest. Upstream, there were waterfront saloons and dives, a black underworld of thieves, gamblers, and ne'er-do-wells who, unlike the Creoles downstream (they sniffed down their long, Continental noses at poor, purebred Negroes like myself), didn't

First Chapter of *The Middle Passage*
preceding publication of the book

Charles Johnson

(Offprint): From Rutherford's Travels (a novel)

[No place]: Callaloo [no date - circa 1988]

\$1200

Offprint. 10pp. paginated p.109-119. Stapled self-wrappers. Horizontal crease else about fine. The first published appearance of any part of Johnson's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Middle Passage*, the literary magazine *Callaloo* published this first chapter when the book's tentative title was *Rutherford's Travels*. Formerly from the books of Johnson's close friend the author Nicholas Delbanco. These offprints were usually prepared in very limited numbers for the use of the author. While OCLC locates the article in the magazine, it makes no mention of this offprint. [BTC#419993]