Storytelling After Rupture: Julius Lester and the Reconstruction of Black Identity

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Abstract

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This article examines how Julius Lester uses storytelling to confront the historical ruptures that shape Black identity. Through works such as *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, *The Old African*, *To Be a Slave*, and his rewriting of *Othello*, Lester returns to the question of how identity can be rebuilt after violence, displacement, and erasure. His works on slavery show how the Middle Passage, the forced Atlantic crossing endured by enslaved Africans, broke families and communities while also generating forms of memory and resistance that allowed people to endure. His version of *Othello* continues this work by giving the character a past, a name, and a sense of self that earlier interpretations denied him. By placing history and literature in relation, this study argues that Lester's writing restores depth to figures whose identities were reduced by colonial narratives. The article shows Black identity as something that is flexible not fixed, marked by trauma, carried through memory, and still able to grow. Overall,

the study highlights how Lester's storytelling repairs what history tried to erase and opens space for new ways of imagining what identity can be.

Keywords: Julius Lester, Black Identity, Rupture and Reclamation, Middle Passage, Storytelling and Memory, To Be a Slave, Othello Adaptation

Introduction

This article examines how Julius Lester reconstructs Black identity through storytelling and argues that his works collectively trace a movement from rupture to reclamation, survival, and finally to reconstruction. As a beginning, it will be more appropriate to give some background about Lester's life and the foundations that shaped his literary vision.

Storytelling After Rupture: Julius Lester and the Reconstruction of Black Identity

Julius Lester (1939–2018) was a Black American writer whose work, spanning children's literature, historical nonfiction, essays, and poetry, centers on African American history, identity, and justice. He wrote more than forty books and established himself as a storyteller and activist who challenged assumptions, embraced complexity, and insisted on confronting the realities of the Black experience. Lester grew up in America and understood from an early age that identity was never simple. He learned as a child that his maternal great grandfather was a Jewish immigrant from Germany who married a formerly enslaved woman, a family history that later resurfaced when he converted to Judaism. According to *The New York Times* obituary on Julius Lester, his conversion generated controversy in both the Black community he came from and the Jewish community he entered, yet it also reflected something central to his life: identity as layered, inherited, and chosen (Harris). Lester's commitment to writing

for children and young adults also grew out of his early experiences. He knew what it meant to encounter the world's harshness at a young age, and he believed that Black children deserved access to stories that did not hide the suffering, endurance, and humanity of their ancestors. However, that does not mean that his books are simplified versions of history; they are politically, historically, and literarily charged. In fact, he was a straightforward writer who wrote with a directness that refused to soften the truth. As Michael A. Gonzales notes in "*Julius Lester and the Burden of Telling the Truth*," he "made people choose whether they wanted honesty or comfort. They often said honesty and chose comfort" (Gonzales).

This article examines three of his children's literature books, *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, *The Old African*, and *To Be a Slave*, and argues that together they trace a narrative journey that begins with the violent severing of identity, imagines the

possibility of return and reclamation, and finally turns to the survival, memory, and lived reality of enslavement. It then turns to Lester's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, where he applies this same trajectory to the figure of Othello himself. Through Lester's prose retelling, Othello becomes the culmination of the cycle: a character whose identity has been fractured and misread, and whom Lester reimagines through the historical and cultural lens that shaped his work for young readers.

To begin tracing this trajectory, the study first turns to *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, the work that establishes the initial rupture.

From Slave Ship to Freedom Road

Lester's commitment to children's literature naturally leads into the first work examined in this study, *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*. The book brings together thirty-six paintings by Rod Brown, depicting the various stages in the life of enslaved Africans, from the moment of capture to the uncertain possibility of freedom. The collaboration between Brown and Lester creates a visual and textual archive of Black suffering and survival at a time when human trafficking was a widespread and normalized trade. Brown's paintings imagine the physical and emotional reality of enslavement, while Lester's accompanying texts transform those images into narrative fragments that refuse to soften the truth. The book reads as a dialogue between two forms of witnessing: Brown's visual rendering of the journey, and Lester's insistence on translating that vision into words that confront the reader directly.

Before the book even turns to its images, Lester addresses the reader with a plea that sets the tone for the entire work. He writes, "I found myself addressing you, the reader, begging, pleading, imploring you not to be passive, but to invest soul and imagine yourself into the images." For a children's book, this is an unexpected request. Instead of protecting young readers from being exposed to harmful material, Lester asks them to inhabit the trauma, imagine themselves in the place of the enslaved and the enslavers, and feel what it means to be dragged from one's home, forced onto a ship, stripped of one's name, and pushed into an unknown world. His goal is not to traumatize but to awaken: to ensure that young readers understand the emotional and historical weight of the past.

Among the stages depicted in the book, the Middle Passage stands as the most devastating of all. Historically, the Middle Passage refers to "the route of sea going journeys of Africans

taken from their Native land, to the shores of the Caribbean and America, where they were invariably destined to an existence of institutional slavery" (Kendler). Many Africans were captured by rival groups or kingdoms, sold to European traders, and dragged onto ships where the real pain began. The enslaved were tucked together in tight spaces, often chained ankle to ankle, symbolizing their dehumanization. Families were torn apart, children were separated from parents, and individuals were stripped of their names. The enslavers did not care who these people were; they treated them as property and objects to be renamed and reordered according to the needs of the White owners. Some captives were not given names at all; therefore, the journey erased individuality and replaced it with a collective identity: the enslaved.

The Middle Passage was marked by starvation, disease, a high death rate, and "a few captains even used dogs to control

the captive" (Kelley 6); a detail that demonstrates the brutality of the voyage. At some point, the ship became a home, but not a typical home. It was a place where slaves spent months suspended between life and death, and between one world and another. This condition aligns with the concept of liminality, developed by Arnold van Gennep and later expanded by Victor Turner. Liminality describes a state of being "betwixt and between," neither belonging to the world left behind nor fully integrated into the world awaiting them. Turner states, "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions" (359).

Despite the overwhelming violence of the Middle Passage, some journeys witnessed acts of resistance. Enslaved Africans rebelled, fought back, and escaped in some cases. These acts

gesture toward the next work in this study, where the possibility of return and reclamation becomes central.

In short, *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* is a powerful and unflinching portrayal of slavery, driven by the emotional force of Rod Brown's paintings (Kirkus Reviews). It also establishes the foundational rupture that shapes the rest of Lester's work: the erasure of identity, the trauma of displacement, and the enduring struggle to survive and remember.

Having established the initial rupture, the study next turns to *The Old African*, where Lester imagines the possibility of reclamation.

The Old African

Speaking of acts of resilience and rebellion, *The Old African* stands as the most poetic, symbolic, and spiritually charged of Lester's works. If *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* exposes the

rupture, *The Old African* imagines the possibility of reclamation: a return to identity, land, and dignity. This section examines the ways in which Lester turns a historical legend into a narrative of collective determination, where enslaved Africans refuse to remain bound to the world that has stripped them of everything. Although the story is imagined, its existence reveals the depth of historical pain: freedom was so distant and denied that imagining it became an act of survival in itself.

The Old African is rooted in a pivotal legend in African American history: the Igbo Landing. This real site in coastal Georgia witnessed a group of Igbo captives who walked into the ocean rather than submit to enslavement upon arriving in America. Lester transforms this legend into a narrative of spiritual return, where the enslaved do not simply die but reclaim their homeland through an act of collective will. The main character, known only as the Old African, is a figure who embodies memory,

history, and ancestral knowledge. He possesses supernatural abilities as he can see souls, read minds, and ease pain.

Additionally, *The Old African* opens with a devastating scene about a young African boy named Paul, who is brutally whipped by Master Riley. The violence is brutal, and the scene immediately reveals the mercilessness of plantation life. Paul's name is not his own; it is a White, Christian name imposed on him by Riley, who forces his religion and identity onto the boy while erasing his original self. Paul becomes the embodiment of what the Old African repeatedly tells the others: that they were all born into slavery, where their names, languages, and histories have been taken from them.

In contrast, the Old African himself stands as the collective African memory. He has survived the Middle Passage, and after arriving on the Georgia plantation, another prison in its own, he refuses to surrender who he is. He remains silent for ten years,

not because he is mute, but because he does not learn English. His silence is a form of resilience, a refusal to let the language of the enslaver replace his own. As the story unfolds, we learn that the enslaved people on the plantation speak different African languages, revealing that they come from different African regions and cultures. However, what unites them is their shared longing for Africa and, even more powerfully, their longing for freedom.

Despite their linguistic and cultural differences, the enslaved form a community. They care for one another, stand together after Paul's whipping, and trust the Old African to guide them toward liberation. This unity is significant because earlier in the history of enslavement, African rivals sometimes aided Europeans in capturing people from other tribes, but here, Lester presents the opposite: Africans coming together despite their differences, recognizing that their survival depends on collectivity rather than individuality.

As a matter of fact, the Old African's decision to act is motivated by two elements: Paul's suffering and the knowledge that Master Riley wants him dead. Because he can read minds, the Old African knows that Riley sees him as a threat. Symbolically, this reflects the fear that enslavers had toward any sign of difference, strength, memory, or anything that could disrupt the system built on the bones of tortured Africans.

When the journey to freedom begins, it takes the group three days to reach the ocean. They walk fully clothed into the water, guided by the Old African and by their shared belief that their homeland is waiting for them. As they descend into the ocean, they pass the bones of Africans who died during the Middle Passage; a powerful symbol that freedom is built on the endurance and sacrifice of those who came before. The freedom they seek is not the typical or usual freedom we imagine. Since the story is imagined, it is logical to assume that they all die

because no one can walk across the ocean. Despite this, the message is clear: they refuse to remain enslaved. They rise, resist, and choose death over submission. Their act becomes a form of spiritual liberation, a reclamation of identity, home, and belonging.

In this sense, the ending of *The Old African* reverses the Middle Passage. Whereas the Middle Passage tore Africans from their land and erased their identity, this journey takes them back to their land and restores their identity. Whereas the Middle Passage was defined by captivity, this journey is defined by choice. It is the ultimate form of resilience.

As *Kirkus Reviews* describes it, the book is "heart wrenching and breathtakingly beautiful" ("Module 2"). Although the story is imagined, its imagined nature reveals the truth of the historical experience: that the pain of enslavement was so profound that freedom had to be dreamed before it could be lived. Yet dreaming

of breaking free from slavery becomes a form of resistance. In *The Old African*, Lester restores what the Middle Passage took away: home, identity, and the possibility of return.

This movement from rupture to reclamation naturally leads to *To Be a Slave*, where Lester grounds these themes in documented historical testimony.

To Be a Slave

To Be a Slave stands as Julius Lester's most celebrated work, and it is the book that most directly supports and confirms the ideas explored in the previous sections. While *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* reconstructs the horrors of enslavement and *The Old African* imagines a spiritual reclamation of identity, *To Be a Slave* grounds these themes in documented reality. It is more of a documentary text than a novel, built from the WPA Slave Narratives, which are firsthand testimonies collected in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration from formerly enslaved

people who had lived through and directly recalled the realities of enslavement. Lester, deeply aware of the importance of memory and its preservation for future generations, gathers these voices and arranges them into a narrative that immortalizes the lived experience of slavery. It is a clear message that if America forgets, the enslaved always remember, and books carry those memories forever.

Since *To Be a Slave* is composed of real stories, it reinforces the emotional and historical truths depicted in the previous works. The plantation life imagined in *The Old African*, including the violence, the fear, the longing, the resilience, appears here as testimony. The voices in *To Be a Slave* echo the same world: the same whips, contradictions, acts of resistance, and desire for freedom. In this sense, the book becomes the historical backbone of the entire study, confirming that the themes Lester explores

through imagination are rooted in the lived experiences of real people.

The stories Lester includes span the entire arc of enslavement, beginning with the moment of capture. One formerly enslaved man recalled being a small boy in West Africa when raiders attacked his village at night. He remembered: "Dey come in de night… kill de old ones and tie de young ones" (Federal Writers' Project). He was marched to the coast, chained to strangers, and forced onto a ship. His testimony reveals the terror and disorientation of capture: the sudden rupture from home, family, and identity. This memory mirrors the opening of *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, where the Middle Passage is depicted as the violent beginning of enslavement.

Another previously enslaved man described the overseer's whip as something that shaped his entire childhood: "I seed men beat till de blood run down in deir shoes" (Federal Writers'

Project). The sound of the whip was something he could never forget. This testimony reflects the same brutality shown in *The Old African* when Paul is whipped by Master Riley. The violence Lester imagines in fiction is confirmed here as a historical fact, remembered by those who lived through it.

Other testimonies reveal the emotional contradictions of plantation life. One formerly enslaved woman recalled being forced to care for the enslaver's white children, feeding them, dressing them, and comforting them while being denied affection herself. She learned early that she could love the children, but the household would never love her back. This story exposes the psychological complexity of enslavement: the emotional labor demanded was not met with recognition.

Yet even within this world of violence and contradiction, the enslaved found ways to resist. A woman, interviewed in the WPA project, described secretly teaching others to read using scraps

of newspapers. She knew she could be whipped or killed for it, but literacy was freedom, and knowledge was rebellion. Her testimony reflects the forms of resilience discussed in earlier sections: the refusal to surrender one's mind, the determination to preserve dignity, and the belief that identity could survive even under the harshest conditions.

Finally, *To Be a Slave* includes memories of freedom itself. One female participant remembered the moment Union soldiers arrived: "Dey say we free. We jump and shout. But we don't know where to go" (Federal Writers' Project). Freedom came with joy but with uncertainty as well. This shows that freedom was not an ending but a beginning, a transition into a world that offered possibility but no guarantees.

Not only do these stories document the daily life of the enslaved, but they also echo the themes explored throughout this article. The resilience shown in *The Old African*, including physical

endurance, emotional survival, intellectual resistance, and collective determination, appears here as lived reality. The longing for Africa, the brutality of the whip, the contradictions of plantation life, and the struggle for freedom all find their historical counterparts in the voices preserved by Lester. Through *To Be a Slave*, what is imagined becomes verified, what is symbolic becomes historical, and the narrative of survival becomes a documented truth.

Ultimately, *To Be a Slave* stands as a monument to memory. It ensures that time does not erase the voices of the enslaved but instead acknowledges and honors their pain and resilience. By gathering these testimonies, Lester restores what history attempted to erase: the humanity, agency, and enduring strength of those who lived through slavery. In doing so, he completes the arc of this study and shows that while the Middle Passage

ruptures identity and *The Old African* imagines its reclamation, *To Be a Slave* preserves the memory of survival itself.

To complete this trajectory, the study now turns to Lester's adaptation of *Othello*, where the themes of rupture, reclamation, and memory converge in a single literary figure.

Othello

When it comes to Julius Lester's adaptation of *Othello*, it represents the culmination of his literary intelligence and his lifelong commitment to making stories of Black identity accessible to younger generations. Throughout his career, Lester consistently transformed historical and literary material into forms that could speak to modern readers, especially the young. His decision to retell Shakespeare's Othello as a novel reflects this commitment. He admired Shakespeare deeply, but he also understood that many contemporary readers found the language distant and the world of the plays unfamiliar. Another point to

consider is that "Lester [knew] that many people today do not enjoy Shakespeare as much as he [did]. Many find the language difficult. Some think the stories are not modern enough" (Lester 9). His motivation was therefore clear: he wanted this story to reach new readers, and he believed that "readers would understand the story better if it was written as a novel" (9).

Not only does Lester simply modernize the language in adapting the play, but he also reframes the entire narrative through a postcolonial lens that foregrounds identity, memory, and cultural rupture. His stylistic choices reflect this dual purpose. In this novel, Lester uses modern vocabulary so that readers can understand the events better, but he also includes words from the play to keep the Shakespearean spirit alive. For example, on page 133, he includes the Shakespearean line: "*Often I shape faults where none exist*," which he explains to mean that people sometimes perceive flaws in others that are not truly there. These

italicized phrases from the original play appear throughout the novel without interrupting the flow of the story (10). This technique mirrors Lester's broader literary project: honoring the past while making it legible to the present.

However, Lester's most significant transformation lies in how he reshapes Othello's identity. Shakespeare's Othello is a man uprooted from his origins, isolated in Venice, and defined largely through the gaze of others. Lester refuses this isolation, restores Othello's African past, gives him a community, and situates him within a cultural memory that Shakespeare's text keeps hidden.

Lester also gives Othello African companions, Emily and Iago, who share his origins and understand the world he comes from. Crucially, he gives them African names that they use only when they are alone together, creating a private space of cultural continuity. As the novel explains: "When the three of them were alone, they made a point of addressing each other by the names

given to them by their parents: Iago was once again Modibo—Helper. Emily became Ashaki—Beautiful. And, to them he was Enaharo—Like the Sun" (31). This moment is one of the most powerful in the novel as it reveals a dual identity: the public names imposed by the new world, and the private names that preserve memory, lineage, and belonging. In this intimate space, Lester restores what enslavement and displacement attempted to erase.

The symbolic roles of Modibo and Ashaki deepen this reclamation. Modibo, who becomes Iago in the English world where the novel is set, represents the Africans who betrayed their own people to slavers; those whose actions contributed to the rupture of the Middle Passage. Ashaki, who becomes Emily, represents the opposite: the members of one's own community who protect and help preserve identity under threat. These figures echo themes from Lester's earlier works. In From *Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, betrayal and solidarity shape the experience of

capture and survival. In *The Old African*, community becomes the source of spiritual reclamation. In To Be a Slave, testimonies reveal how enslaved people relied on one another to endure. By embedding these themes into Othello, Lester shows that the patterns of rupture and resilience he explored in his historical works also operate within literary reinterpretation.

Lester further deepens Othello's identity by giving him a history of enslavement. In this version, Othello was enslaved in Africa and brought to Europe through the violence of the slave trade. This detail aligns him with the figures in *To Be a Slave* and *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, meaning he is a survivor of rupture, too. His journey from Africa to England is a forced displacement that shapes his understanding of himself and the world around him. This background explains why he insists on belonging in the English society, so assimilation becomes his

strategy for survival even if it cancels the identity he tries to preserve.

This tension between memory and assimilation is the central tragedy of Lester's Othello. Unlike the protagonists of Lester's earlier works reclaiming identity through memory, community, or spiritual return, Othello attempts to secure identity through acceptance by a White-dominant society. He converts to Christianity, adopts a new name, and tries to embody the values of the world that enslaved him. He even marries a White lady, and his marriage to her becomes a gateway into the English society; a way to prove that he can belong, be accepted, and be seen as more than the African past he carries. Yet, the society he seeks to join cannot accept him. His downfall reveals the impossibility of assimilation in a world structured by racial hierarchy. It is important to note that when Othello kills himself and dies, it is not because he lacks identity, but because the

identity he tries to claim is denied to him. In the end, when he kills Desdemona, his wife, in a scene that resembles a ritual, he attempts to reclaim the "African spirit" he believes he has lost, but it comes too late, and it brings his tragedy to its end.

In this sense, Lester's *Othello* adds a dimension that the previous works do not: it shows the cost of attempting to belong to a society built on exclusion. While *The Old African* imagines a spiritual return to Africa and *To Be a Slave* preserves the voices of those who endured, Othello confronts the painful reality of living between worlds. Othello is a liminal figure between Africa and Europe, between memory and forgetting, and between selfhood and the identities imposed upon him. His tragedy is not merely personal; it is structural.

Taken together, Lester's adaptation of *Othello* brings the entire trajectory of his work into focus, showing how rupture, reclamation, memory, and reconstruction form a continuous arc,

and he traces this journey accordingly. By rewriting Shakespeare's work, he reclaims a figure who has long been shaped by racist readings and restores to him the cultural depth, history, and humanity that earlier interpretations denied. In doing so, Lester reshapes a four-century old play and shows that Black identity, shaped by history and memory, is still alive and evolving.

Conclusion

Ultimately, across Lester's works, Black identity emerges as something flexible and continually rebuilt through memory, resistance, and storytelling. His narratives show that even when history fractures identity through violence and displacement, it can be reclaimed in the names people carry, the stories they tell, and

the memories they preserve. In this way, Lester's storytelling affirms that identity endures through the act of remembering and retelling.

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مُلخّص البحث

يتناول هذا البحث الطريقة التي يستخدم بها جوليوس ليستر السرد لمواجهة الشرخ التاريخي الذي أصاب الهوية السمراء. فمن خلال أعماله التي تستعيد تاريخ العبودية مثل (من سفينة العبودية إلى طريق الحرية) و(الشيخ الأفريقي) و(أن تعيش عبداً) وإعادة كتابته لـ(عُطيل)، يطرح ليستر سؤالًا جوهريّاً: كيف يُمكن إعادة صياغة هوية ما بعد تعرّضها للعنف والتهجير ومحاولات المحو؟ تكشف كتاباته عن أثر العبور الأطلسي، برحلته القسرية للأفارقة المستعبَدين عبر المحيط، في تمزيق العائلات والمُجتمعات، لكنها تُظهر أيضاً كيف نشأت من قلب تلك التجربة أشكال من الذاكرة والمقاومة ساعدت الناس على البقاء والاستمرارية.

تواصل نسخة ليستر من (عُطيل) هذا المسار عبر منح البطل تاريخاً واسماً ووعياً بالذات، وهي عناصر حُرِمَ منها طويلاً في القراءات السابقة. ومن خلال ربط التاريخ مع الأدب، توضّح الدراسة أن كتابة ليستر تعيد لهذه الشخصيات عمقها بعد أن ضيّقتها السرديات الاستعمارية. وتبيّن النتائج أن الهوية السمراء هوية مرنة وليست بثابتة إذ تتأثر بالصدمة، وتحملها الذاكرة، ومع ذلك تظل قادرة على التطوّر.

وفي الختام، تُبرز الدراسة كيف يُسهم سرد ليستر في ترميم ما حاول التاريخ محوه، ويفتح المجال لتخيّل أشكال جديدة للهوية.

كلمات مفتاحية: جوليوس ليستر، الهوية السمراء، السرد، الذاكرة، العبور الأطلسي، العبودية، رواية عُطيل.

جامعة حمص

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Storytelling After Rupture: Julius Lester and the Reconstruction of Black Identity