

## Honoring the Form: Zen Moves in Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*

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### Abstract

In *Being and Race* Charles Johnson compares a writer working with traditional forms to a martial artist who “honors the form” of his predecessors. In his 1982 novel *Oxherding Tale* Johnson honors the form of a number of traditional fictional genres, including the slave narrative, the picaresque novel, the philosophical novel of ideas, and Zen texts such as koans, sutras, and the twelfth-century graphic narrative, the “Oxherding Pictures.” Calling his novel a “slave narrative that serves as the vehicle for exploring Eastern philosophy,” Johnson alludes to Hindu, Taoist and Buddhist texts, as well as to Western literary and philosophical works, to dissolve the dualistic thinking at the heart of what he calls “the samsara of racial politics.” To be free of the illusory nature of “ontological dualism,” however, one must journey through stages of increasing awareness, admirably depicted in the ten illustrations of the “Oxherding Pictures.” From seeking a self (ox) that one thinks one has lost, to glimpsing the self that is first elusive and finally illusory, the seeker comes to realize that all identities are constructed and therefore temporary, including such notions as “race” and “self.” Like some biracial Everyman, Johnson’s narrator may not complete the journey by the end of the novel but he discovers much about the insubstantiality and interconnectedness of himself in the world along the way.

### Keywords

race, identity, graphic narrative, slave narrative, Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism, Zen

... something I deeply appreciated in [John] Gardner—  
and have always tended to do myself—is take form  
itself as a meditation when I’m writing.  
—Charles Johnson (Boccia 614)

In *Being and Race* Charles Johnson compares a writer working with traditional forms to a martial artist who has brilliantly executed a kata (sequence of moves), as he says, *con brio*: in each case, the artist—martial

or verbal—has “honored the form” (47). By spontaneously moving within the form, the artist makes it his own. This is what Johnson does when he honors the form of Kakuan Shien’s twelfth-century graphic narrative called “The Ten Oxherding Pictures” (1150 CE), which provides the model for Johnson’s loosely allegorical meditation on the steps of the path to enlightenment through self-mastery, published in 1982. In addition to the pictorial predecessor, Johnson works with—meditates on, “signifies upon,” or more plainly “worries”—a variety of traditional fictional narrative forms, including the slave narrative (its most apparent model), the picaresque novel (*Lazarillo de Tormes*), the folk novel (*Journey to the West*), the philosophical novel of ideas (*Candide*), the historical novel (*Siddhartha*),<sup>1</sup> and various Zen texts,<sup>2</sup> including koans, sutras, and the Oxherding Pictures themselves.

As a cartoonist, Johnson is aware of the power (and limitations) of visual media to tell a story, not only about race relations, his first cartoon subjects, but also about the experience and philosophy of Zen. His unpublished book of cartoons on Buddhism, “It’s Lonely at the Top,” satirizes common notions of satori and the imperfect “enlightenment” of his white protagonist, Herman Wilder, who, for example, boasts at the top of Echo Mountain: “Disciple Herman Wilder is a most enlightened fellow!” (Little 597). The satire is directed at those who publicize their own enlightenment to hear their praises sung in the form of an echo. When he wanted to do more than go for the single-pointed satirical strike, he turned to the novel because “it offered Johnson the cartoonist a more expansive artistic genre that allowed him to convey greater complexity of value and meaning” (Little 598). As a student of John Gardner, Johnson was aware of the novel’s ability to absorb travesties of itself and thus to metamorphose into a multitude of uses. Johnson found his right form for dealing with his experience of Zen and the martial arts not by abandoning the cartoon strip for the philosophical novel but by creating in *Oxherding Tale* a hybrid that honors both forms.

<sup>1</sup> Byrd points out that while *Oxherding Tale* and *Siddhartha* are both historical novels about the Buddha, Johnson writes “against the conventions of this genre” (552), as indeed he does with the other genres.

<sup>2</sup> There are scattered allusions and references to figures like Dogen Zenji (1200–1252), the great Japanese philosopher-monk and author of *Shobogenzo*, who can be compared to (and was admired by) Heidegger; and Kwanzan (1277–1360), the Rinzai master who in the novel is the reason Karl Marx learns Japanese, even though he decides that Kwanzan and probably all Eastern thought is not worth the effort.

Johnson has called his novel a “slave narrative that serves as the vehicle for exploring Eastern philosophy” (*Turning the Wheel* 54–55).<sup>3</sup> Hindu, Taoist, and Buddhist allusions reveal how Johnson attempts to dissolve the dualistic thinking at the heart of what he calls the *samsara* of racial politics.<sup>4</sup> Johnson himself has provided guides to his use of Eastern thought in his 1995 introduction to *Oxherding Tale*, and in 2003’s *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing*, in which he opens one essay with: “The black experience in America, like the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, begins with suffering,” and ends the same essay with the observation that, “though the number of black Buddhists is small, they are growing in an increasingly multicultural America . . . For through the Dharma, the black American quest for ‘freedom’ realizes its profoundest, truest, and most revolutionary meaning” (46, 57). Johnson makes a good case for why Buddhism would be amenable to African Americans, who know something about *dukkha* or suffering, the First Noble Truth of the Buddha, from the history and legacy of slavery.

Where, though, does one go from this first realization? To get to the Fourth Noble Truth, which is the way to end suffering, one must go through several stages, the stages Johnson sees depicted in the Oxherding Pictures. From seeking a self (ox) that one thinks one has lost, to glimpsing the self that is first elusive and finally illusory, the seeker comes to realize that all identities are constructed and therefore temporary, including race and “self” itself. Describing his own journey in the introduction to *Oxherding Tale*, Johnson first discovered “the very zen truth that ontological dualism was one of the profoundest tricks of the mind,” and then began to wonder: “Was race itself an illusion, a manifestation of *Maya*?” (xi). His training in phenomenology only bolstered these conclusions and brought into doubt the substantial “self” upon which race is based.<sup>5</sup> Venturing into

<sup>3</sup>) It is appropriate that the slave narrative serve this function, since it already incorporates so many novelistic forms. Henry Louis Gates has shown that “the slave narrative does share resemblances to other narratives, especially the picaresque, the sentimental novel, and the spiritual autobiography” (Gates vi). In the “Narrative of Henry Bibb,” included in Gates’s collection of slave narratives, it is interesting that Henry Bibb, who often ran away, would explain that he was seeking a cow that had wandered away, and he’d be let off (Gates 7).

<sup>4</sup>) “...as a Buddhist, I’ve long viewed the sphere of politics—and especially racial politics—to be the perfect illustration of *samsara*, or what the two-thousand-year-old sutra *The Perfection of Wisdom* calls *kama-dhattu*: ‘the realm of desire,’ characterized by dualism and the hunger for power” (*Turning the Wheel* 43).

<sup>5</sup>) Johnson inserts parenthetically in an interview: “(Early Buddhism, by the way, has often

the “most primordial of meditations—What am *I*,” which he saw as the first question to raise and “provisionally answer” before moving on to other problems such as race, Johnson began to suspect that “the self might be a chimera impossible to empirically locate when we (like Gautama) take a hard look at our experience” (xii). The path of such experience—phenomenological and Buddhist—is outlined in the narrative of Andrew Hawkins in *Oxherding Tale*.

The first Oxherding Picture shows a man in search of the Ox. This marks the beginning of the path, when a person is only starting to realize that there is something to seek (fig. 1).

Master Sheng-yen’s chapter on the Oxherding Pictures in his 2001 book *Hoofprint of the Ox* discusses the pictures as a sort of map of the path to *kaiwu*, a Chinese word that means “to open forth and awaken” (199). He notes that this is not a philosophical path but an experiential way to “inves-



Figure 1. Max Gimblett. *Searching for the Ox*. Sumi ink on HMP Woodstock handmade paper. 23 × 31 ½ inches. Permission of the artist.

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been called a very rudimentary form of phenomenology—the two have much in common in respect to their forms of ‘radical empiricism’”) (Boccia 616).

tigate and transform the very ground of one's being" (199). An inkling that there is something to seek is only the beginning. "Often, persons in this condition," says Sheng-yen, "will feel more afflicted than they did before they ever began to think about religious practice. Not many people will be willing to seriously face up to this torment, much less to put themselves through the hardships required to tread the path to enlightenment" (205). In Andrew's case, his affliction comes as he realizes the absurdity of his conception (the result of a drunken moment when his Black father was invited into the bed of the plantation master Polkinghorne's wife, Andrew's white mother). By accepting his origins, however, Andrew also accepts his destiny, as he begins to set his sights on liberation, or more specifically manumission: "My argument was: Whatever my origin, I would be wholly responsible for the shape I gave myself in the future" (17). In Western philosophical terms, this represents the existential notion of his being doomed to the freedom of self-creation; in Buddhist terms, this is his opportunity to cut his karma.

The second Oxherding Picture shows the man seeing the tracks of the Ox (fig. 2).



Figure 2. Max Gimblett. *Seeing the Tracks*. Sumi ink on HMP Woodstock handmade paper. 23 × 31 ½ inches. Permission of the artist.

As Sheng-yen puts it: “This scene depicts persons who have come into contact with an enlightened teacher or who have read about Chan practice in Buddhist scripture. They have developed a firm belief that Buddha-nature is real and that Sakyamuni Buddha and the Chan patriarchs [scholars and wise men] experienced it and left valuable teachings to point the way” (206). Andrew finds his first “enlightened teacher” in Ezekiel Sykes-Withers, an Orientalist-Marxist-Transcendentalist, under whom he learns to read, to control his heart and “to leave no footprints” (18). Ezekiel is only one of many teachers whom Andrew meets along the Way, but certainly his teachings suggest that freedom (or Buddha-nature) can come in many forms, physical or metaphysical. “I did not want to deny the history of slavery,” Johnson has said, “but this book is not merely about legal or political slavery. It’s about other kinds of bondage: sexual, emotional, psychological, and metaphysical. The main character, Andrew Hawkins, has to work his way through all these types of bondage, some of which are even more fundamental than chattel slavery” (Lavasseur 174–75).

The third picture is called “Glimpsing the Ox.” Speaking of the narrative as something of a comic book manual on Chan meditation for the illiterate, Sheng-yen points out that this first glimpse might be nothing more than a “shallow emotional response” to the “conditional neurological reaction to meditative postures and techniques” (209, 208). Physical reactions can be mistaken for an enlightenment experience (*kensho* or *satori*). In Andrew’s case, his first experience of *kensho* is his sexual experience with Minty, the slave girl who seduces him in the barn (among the oxen). Like the boy in the third Oxherding Picture, however, Andrew glimpses only the “tail” of the Ox.

In the fourth and fifth pictures, the boy gets hold of and herds the Ox.<sup>6</sup> What was previously only imagined or glimpsed is now grasped and guided (fig. 3).

Yet he does not yet have total control. Here, Andrew gets hold of the Ox in the form of Flo Hatfield, the owner of a mine called Leviathan where her slaves are worked to their deaths. Although he avoids the belly of the mines, he is taken instead into the belly of Flo when he becomes, literally,

<sup>6</sup> The specific parallels I am drawing between Johnson’s narrative and the Oxherding Pictures will not be the same as those drawn by others (see, for example, Gleason). “As a Buddhist,” Johnson has said, “I believe deeply that all things are impermanent, transitory” (Boccia 617), including literary forms. Thus the interpretive parallels are freeform and shifting, with many possible tangent points, even for Johnson.



Figure 3. Max Gimblett. *Getting the Ox*. Sumi ink on HMP Woodstock handmade paper. 23 × 31 ½ inches. Permission of the artist.

her sex slave. The “spidery” wrinkles on her face evoke the image of a black widow that kills her lovers after mating with them. The irony of the *white* black widow is deliberate, since her prey are the black men she “saves” from the mines, at least until she has used them up. Descending into this relationship is as dangerous and as revelatory as any hero’s descent into the belly of the whale (Leviathan) or the underworld. During his time with Flo, Andrew is “in the service of the senses,” as two chapters are titled. Through an almost monastic discipline, in which Flo is the teacher-mistress and he the disciple of a regimen of sex and drugs, Andrew follows the Way of Love. Like the courtesan Kamala in Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, Flo instructs Andrew in a postmodern curriculum of slavish devotion to the senses, one of their textbooks being an illustrated *Kama Sutra*.

But while Flo is certainly Andrew’s master (and mistress), Reb the Coffinmaker is actually Andrew’s foremost “enlightened” teacher. Thus, it is appropriate that some of the most illustrative and educative moments in the novel occur at this central juncture in the Oxherding narrative. Given that each picture is a microcosm of the whole journey, it would be an error to valorize one picture in the sequence over any other, much less over the sequence as a whole. Still, Sheng-yen says, “The fifth picture is the true



oxherding picture” because “The main focus at this stage is the development of one’s power of samadhi” (212, 213). Samadhi is the deep concentration during meditation that allows one to see into one’s own nature and into the nature of existence. This is where “one reaches down and uproots the suppressed seeds or predispositions of vexation” (213).

Another way of uprooting vexation is through koan (Chinese: *gong’an*) practice:

One can think of... *gong’an* practice as a method for gathering up one’s vexations or wandering thoughts and squeezing them all into one concentrated spot, one unified question or problem, until there is no place to push them anymore, at which point they explode. We use the sensation of doubt to focus the mind, draw together these vexations, and concentrate them until they explode... the goal is to concentrate the mind, and then—ultimately—to blow this concentrated mind to bits. (Sheng-yen 213)

This is what happens when Andrew concentrates the conundrum of his love-hate, master-slave, male-female, yin-yang relationship with Flo Hatfield into a single moment that erupts in violence, when instead of breaking his mind against a koan, he strikes Flo in the face (the equivalent of slaying the Buddha) and must flee with Reb. It is Reb who mentors Andrew through this shattering experience, pointing out, among other things, that Flo herself is a slave to her desires.

When Andrew first meets him, Reb the Coffinmaker identifies him as “fresh meat,” and the epithet is so apt that it attaches to Andrew as a nickname, turning the spondee of the phrase “FRESH MEAT” into the trochee of the one-word proper noun “FRESHmeat.” This tag acts like a Dharma name for the new disciple on the block, a gift from the master signifying the disciple’s ordination rite of passage. Andrew enters into his practice of serving the senses with his whole being under the tutelage of his apparent mistress, while actually being under the tutelage of his master Reb. But together, we might say, he gets the whole treatment: the Reb and Flo of existence. This is a new kind of education for Andrew. When he was studying with Ezekiel, his education was theoretical; it demanded critical thinking, reflected in his typical responses: “But” and “On the contrary” and “Do you mean to say...?” These are the hallmarks of a Western education with its demand that the student examine, analyze, criticize, contradict, and object so as to clarify the subject under scrutiny through a process



that is maieutic and dialectical. The Eastern education in the monastic tradition, on the other hand, demands discipline, a total devotion to the practice, complete obedience if not subservience to the master, a giving over of one's individuality to dissolve the thinking brain's egoistic presumption of domination and control over the truth. And so, having become a trainee of Flo's monastic eroticism, Andrew converts his vocabulary into such "scaled down" phrases as "Of course" and "Any fool can see that." It sounds a little like Socrates's interlocutors in Plato's dialogues, but Andrew says: "Philosophers may see this [change in discourse] as facile, and that is their privilege, but I merely sought, from my station, to serve" (61).

The new ideology reflected in his discourse is Andrew's devotion to the Mahayana Buddhist ideal of the bodhisattva, an ideal of altruistic "service" to others in this world of samsara, ruled by the senses. In order to serve others, however, one must lose one's own need to be served (or serviced). By tending to Flo's needs, Andrew is setting her free (temporarily) from her bondage to her desires. (One could also say that he is enabling her; but he is her physical therapist not her psychotherapist.) He has to give up his own Ego to go with (the) Flo, his own idea of a substantial Self in order to satisfy her need for a "polymorphous" lover who is "husband, ravager, teacher, Galahad, eunuch, swashbuckler, student, priest, and, above all else, always *there*" (61). The multiplication of selves is a way of becoming "no Self" (*muga* in Japanese, which implies "selflessness"; or *mushin*, "no Mind," which implies no conscious obstruction of reality with the delusions of mental constructs).

The sixth Oxherding Picture is called "Riding the Ox Home." The mood is all ease and security and confident control. Having broken with Flo, Andrew escapes with Reb, but of course there is no comfort or ease in being escaped slaves. The irony is intentional, since Andrew is neither confident nor riding home; he is, instead, riding north, away from the home he once knew toward the only home he can know: freedom. Yet this new home turns out to be still in the slave-owning South, in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Andrew never does quite make it to the North, although Reb does, all the way to Chicago, where he makes his masterwork, the coffin for Abraham Lincoln. Andrew's freedom is never complete, as he passes for white and finds what freedom he can as he recreates himself within the limitations of his own environment, and so finds himself, as the seventh Oxherding Picture depicts, at a place where the Ox is forgotten.

The seventh Oxherding Picture shows the Ox forgotten. Here, Andrew has passed over into "The White World" in Part Two of *Oxherding Tale*.

His journey is in one sense already over in that it is no longer about finding the “self” but about living in the world and, as Reb would have said, “doing beautifully what needs to be done.” But Reb, like the Ox, is gone. Andrew becomes a schoolteacher; he marries, and, in a twist that recalls *Candide*’s reunion with Cunegonde, he is reunited with his first love, Minty, who is now broken and diseased. He buys her at auction and takes her in, and although he is passing as a slave owner, he becomes her servant.

Chapter 8, “On the Nature of Slave Narratives,” speaks directly and pseudo-“apologetically” about the “*form* of this Narrative,” which Johnson says, “worries... the formal conventions” of the Negro Slave Narrative (118). He categorizes three types of slave narratives: 1) the WPA interviews; 2) the fraudulent Abolitionist propaganda narratives; and 3) the “authentic narratives.” It is the last that he is concerned with: “As a form,” he says, this third kind is related to the slave narrative and the Puritan conversion testimony; “the narrative movement is from sin to salvation,” which with a little “oomph” can become “a progress from slavery to freedom,” both of which can in turn be traced back to “the first philosophical black writer: Saint Augustine” (118–19), where the movement is “from ignorance to wisdom, nonbeing to being” (119). With just a little additional oomph, Johnson moves this Christian tradition into the realm of Buddhist belief without completely losing any of the traces or “tracks” of the previous forms. In fact, in Johnson’s art, “No form, I should note, *loses* its ancestry; rather, these meanings accumulate in layers of tissue as the form evolves” (119). These forms are just a few of those archaeological finds that Johnson has unearthed in his “spadework” (119).

Thus the eighth Oxherding Picture is an *enso*, an empty (or full) circle, where Ox and Oxherder are transcended. But the evolution of forms begs the question when we have such a clear depiction of emptiness in the eighth Oxherding Picture, which corresponds to this, the eighth chapter of the novel.<sup>7</sup> Johnson is working with Shandean irony in bringing form into the argument, because we are really dealing with the absence of form. As the Heart Sutra says, “form becomes emptiness, emptiness becomes form.” This chapter, like the eleventh, “The Manumission of the First-Person

<sup>7</sup> “Although the circle in this picture is blank, it would be more appropriate if there were no picture at all. The presence of a circle suggests that there is something still there—a great unity, an absolute. In Chan literature, there are anecdotes in which a disciple asks a question and the master responds by drawing a circle and then erasing it. If you have a circle, then attainment still exists, and that is not true enlightenment” (Sheng-yen 218).

Viewpoint,” is an “essayist interlude” (119) on the novel’s composition, bringing together Eastern religion with Western philosophy, the *enso* (*sun-yata, mu*, emptiness) with the phenomenological epistemology of Hegel, Heidegger, and Sartre, in which the consciousness of the first-person narrator creates an aporia into which the world flows as into a vacuum.

What the first-person viewpoint of the slave narrative lacks in authority it gains in immediacy. But Johnson questions even this advantage, which he says is a prejudice of Positivist science. He is more interested in “the transcendental nature of the narrator,” which has as much to do with the Age of Reason and Western philosophy as with Johnson’s Buddhist training. He begins, for example, by positing that the narrator is “nobody,” or in Hume’s terms, “anonymous.” This is not to say that he is “nothing,” but rather that his “I” or his “Self,” if not his existence, is, in Kantian terms, a “product of his experience and cannot precede it” (152). This, says Johnson’s essayist narrator, implies that a Subject can exist only in or through an Other in a parasitic relationship, epistemologically and ontologically. Such a “Kantian compromise,” as he puts it, suggests that the Slave Narrative sees “nowhere a narrator who falteringly interprets the world, but a narrator who is the world: who is less a reporter than an opening through which the world is delivered: first-person (if you wish) universal” (152–53). He then refers us back to Eastern thought by saying that all this Western analysis was prefigured in the Upanishads and Bhagavad-Gita, which, in their “preanalytic fashion: knew that ‘what we loosely call thought, or consciousness, or Mind is, far from being a ‘blockhouse,’ instead a restlessness that, refusing to be contained, contains everything” (153). Johnson might well have said that Buddhist thinkers had come up with the same ideas, for in the Hindu texts he mentions, in this if not in all ways having to do with Atman (or Self) and Anatman (or No-Self), Buddhists and their Hindu predecessors are, so to speak, of one mind.

But the path does not end here, for if it did, it would end in mere nihilism; similarly, if the novel ended here, it would end in essayistic abstraction. Instead the bodhisattva returns to the world of phenomena to become engaged in the struggle in a new way, without a sense of struggle. For Andrew, the ninth and tenth Oxherding Pictures depict this return to the source and to the world of men and women. His return to the source is shown in his reconciliation with the Soulcatcher, Horace Bannon, the slave hunter. Like Reb and Flo, Soulcatcher is another of Andrew’s teachers, a Shiva-like character who dances to the destruction of all creatures in the cosmic drama, a “mercenary of Brama [sic]” (173), who consumes and

destroys yet is also able to create. In Hesse's novel, Siddhartha ends up as a ferryman on the river, whose sound—OM—is his final teacher, along with his predecessor, the ferryman Vasudeva. Andrew's final teacher, however, happens to be his nemesis, Horace Bannon, a sort of malevolent Vasudeva, a Chiron-Shiva ferryman-destroyer, whose bloodstream itself, his very being, is a river of the dead, whose all-inclusive OM Andrew sees rather than hears.

The opening word of the final chapter, "Moksha," is "Fluid," and it evokes the "bloodstream" of dead freemen and slaves whom Horace has killed in his lifelong career as a predator. His face is a "crazyquilt of their features," and his pulse throbs with the blood of women and children whom he has "whipped suffocated lynched beheaded burned to death starved stoned bombed thrown from heights pushed into machinery drowned clubbed impaled killed by flame tortured" (169). The effect of the Soulcatcher is what we might expect not from a killer but from a wise man, a sage, a guru, a master: "the Soulcatcher's presence drove out every false possibility, stripped perception clean as a whalebone, freed it from the private, egoistic interests that normally colored my vision" (172). For the Soulcatcher in this final scene is himself a new man: he has in his turn been taught—by Reb, who is the true teacher of the story, the only enlightened master, if you will.

How did Reb defeat Soulcatcher? First, by giving him nothing to hold onto. The way Soulcatcher caught his prey was to fasten onto their desires, find out what they wanted. But Reb wanted nothing: "How the hell you gonna catch a Negro like that? He can't be caught; he's already free. Not legally, but you know what Ah'm sayin'" (173). This is *muga*, selflessness; it is *mu*, emptiness. The full self, the one with desire and accomplishments, something to identify with, with an identity, is static, unfree, already dead. This is Heideggerian "Being." Reb has no "position," no "home. No permanent home. He didn't care 'bout merit or evil," and this is why Soulcatcher can't get hold of Reb: "because you got to have somethin' dead or static already inside you—an image of yoself—fo' a real slave catcher to latch onto" (174). Like Andrew, Horace Bannon is in search of freedom, freedom from desire. Each is a seeker of the Ox. Soulcatcher is another name for Oxherder.

In the tenth and final Oxherding Picture, the bodhisattva enters the marketplace. The marketplace is not simply the economic world, as Marx or Adam Smith might have seen it, but it is a symbol for the world of desire and grasping, buying and selling, owning and stealing, gain and loss. In

other words, it is not the enlightened but the everyday world where all of us, including bodhisattvas, live and conduct our business. As Sheng-yen says of this picture, “In an odd way, roles are reversed here. Usually it is the itinerant monk who seeks and receives alms. But, here, the monk is doing the giving . . . the fully liberated practitioner is able spontaneously to generate great compassion and skillful means to meet the needs of living beings . . . Beings who encounter them may develop fixed ideas or images of them, but enlightened bodhisattvas will have no such fixed images of themselves” (221–22). Andrew, however, literally enters the marketplace when he buys Minty and becomes the servant of his slave, reversing their roles in a profound but very practical way. Such role reversals cut to the very heart of presumptions about identity—especially Black identity—because we usually assume that it is a good thing to know who we are. But “who we are” is a construct formed by others, a “fixed” idea or image of us, according to their uses for us: as property, as free man or woman. So we usually assume that there is another “true” identity somewhere underneath those constructs. In the slave narrative, borrowing from the picaresque, the string of assumed identities (constructs, disguises, masks) is replaced by the “true” identity of the author or narrator. Johnson, however, goes one step beyond, suggesting that this narrative voice is itself as empty as the circle of the eighth Oxherding Picture.

Alice Walker has called *The Color Purple* her “Buddhist novel without Buddhism” (192). Playfully, but less coyly, Johnson has called *Oxherding Tale* his “Platform Novel,” referring to the Platform Sutra of Hui-neng, the Sixth Chinese Patriarch of Ch’an or Zen Buddhism.<sup>8</sup> Parallel in some ways to Augustine’s *Confessions*, the Platform Sutra begins with a brief autobiographical chapter on Hui-neng’s early years and leads to his conversion or enlightenment, which prepares for the subsequent chapters on religious and philosophical questions. A famous exchange in the Platform Sutra might bring to mind issues that come up in the slave narrative about identity and the right to individual liberation. As a young man the Sixth Patriarch, then an illiterate woodcutter, was asked by the Fifth Patriarch: “You are a southerner, and an aborigine; how can you be a Buddha?” And the boy answers: “People may be southerners or northerners, but the

<sup>8</sup>) “I’m most proud of *Oxherding Tale*,” says Johnson in an interview. “I whimsically call it my Platform Novel, first because it is the foundation for all my books and stories that came after it, and second, I call it that as a playful reference to the Buddhist ‘Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch’” (Levasseur 173).

buddha-nature originally has no south or north” (Cleary 6). The question might be rephrased: “How can you be a Buddhist if you’re Black?” The answer is the same: There is no black or white in the Buddha nature, no black or white in freedom. South and north are not simply directions in this Zen classic; they are code words for two different schools of Chan thought about the nature of enlightenment: the gradual school and the sudden school.

The basic question here, and in the Oxherding Pictures, is: Does enlightenment arise gradually after much study and meditation, much suffering and determination, or does it arise suddenly in a flash of inspiration? This is Andrew Hawkins’s koan in the course of the novel as he makes his way from slavery to freedom, but it is also a reminder perhaps for us not to choose between the sudden and the gradual schools, not to valorize one picture above another because every stage in the process contains the whole journey. D. T. Suzuki in “The Ten Cow-Herding Pictures” points out the contradiction in the gradual enlightenment of the sequence (what we might call the experiential education leading to enlightenment) and “one of the most characteristic tenets of Zen ever since the coming east of Bodhidharma in the sixth century,” namely that “‘seeing into one’s own nature’ was an instant act” and that there could be no process of “scales or steps of development” (363). Yet this process is exactly what the Oxherding Pictures narrate. Suzuki explains this contradiction in terms of practical and idealistic, time-bound and timeless ideas. He also mentions the relationship of these ideas to the Sudden and Gradual, or Northern and Southern schools of Zen in the time of the fifth patriarch in China (364). But it is, finally, “no contradiction” to say that “progressive realization” leads to “complete identification” of the truth of Zen (365). One is already enlightened while on the path, no matter which step one finds oneself on. Suzuki reminds readers of a *mondo* (question and answer) between two monks: when one asks “What is the Buddha?” the other answers: “It is like seeking for an ox while you are yourself on it.” And when asked what will happen after he sees, the answer is: “It is like going home riding on it” (370).

It is useless to valorize one picture in the sequence over the others. Nor is it valid to valorize one of Andrew’s teachers over another, yet Reb the Coffinmaker appears to be the foremost enlightened of his many teachers. Reb combines characteristics of the African shaman, the Taoist “immortal,” the Buddhist “bodhisattva,” and the Zen master. Reb comes from “a rather Buddhist African tribe” called the Allmuseri, who are like samurai in their devotion to disciplined and selfless action (Allmuseri is a near ana-

gram of samurai). Reb says that the griots of the Allmuseri advised men “to devote no more than five seconds to untangling any problem” (116). This paraphrase echoes the *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai* (lit. “Hidden by leaves,”) written by Yamamoto Tsunetomo c. 1716, which states that a samurai should with “intense, fresh and undelaying spirit... make his judgments within the space of seven breaths” (47). The selflessness of Reb’s tribe is reflected in their language: “The Allmuseri had no words for *I, you, mine, yours*. They had, consequently, no experience of these things, either, only proper names that were variations on the Absolute” (*Oxherding Tale* 97). The absence of pronouns, especially possessive pronouns, can be taken as Buddhist or Marxist (Karl Marx makes a cameo appearance in this chapter). The Allmuseri’s recognition of the interdependency of all beings, the identification of all things, de-emphasizes individuality and individualism, especially in terms of ownership, even the ownership of that “thing” called a “self.”

Early on at the plantation, Reb is confronted by two white hunters who point their shotguns at him. When he doesn’t run, one says: “Nigguh, you lookin’ at somebody who kin blow off yo head without battin’ an eye.” Reb answers: “You lookin’ at somebody who can *be* shot without blinkin’ an eyelash.”<sup>9)</sup> Like the Buddha, Reb has “no fear” because he has no desires, no attachments, indeed no “self.” This no-self—*anatman*, *muga* (no-self) or *mushin* (no-mind)—is one of the key concepts of Zen Buddhism, the attainment of true freedom through detachment, and through the attainment of *sunyata*, *mu*, or emptiness. Reb’s ability to empty himself of his ego allows his mind to be “unobstructed,” as the Heart Sutra says, and thus to be awake and aware so that he can perform the bodhisattva work of doing beautifully what needs to be done. Whenever he builds a coffin, for example, Reb first forgets all about himself and what he wants, and then goes looking for a tree that wants to be a coffin.

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<sup>9)</sup> *Oxherding Tale* 47. The source of many Zen stories is difficult to locate because their origins go so far back in the oral tradition and because they can appear in so many different forms, adapted to each teacher’s present needs (*upaya*, or skillful means). I am still searching for the source of Reb’s story, although I am sure I have read it somewhere. The story goes like this: A monk is confronted by a thief indoors or perhaps a samurai on the road, and the thief/samurai says, “Don’t you know you are looking at a man who can kill you without blinking an eye?” The monk answers: “Don’t you know you are looking at a man who can *be* killed without blinking an eye?” One of my students informed me that David Carradine tells Uma Thurman this story in a scene around a campfire in *Kill Bill, Volume 2*. This does not, however, solve the source question; it only defers it.



Another Zen story that Johnson applies to his characterization of Reb is famous because it is so memorable, and memorable because it is so accessible—so accessible, in fact, that it appears (somewhat bowdlerized) in a recent children's book called *Zen Shorts*, stories told to children by a mysterious panda in boxers. The original story—although it is difficult to find the true originals of these traditional and mostly orally transmitted narratives—goes like this: Two monks are walking from one place to another, when they come upon a woman waiting to cross a stream. The elder monk picks her up and carries her across, much to the astonishment of the younger monk, who is thinking about the precept that forbids monks to touch women. Farther along the path, the young monk asks how the elder could have done such a thing? The elder monk answers: “I put her down hours ago. Why are you still carrying her?”<sup>10</sup>

Johnson changes the details but the story remains an illustration of the problem of attachment, in this case applied to an even more profound problem: the attachment to the life of a loved one. After Andrew has taken Patrick's place as Flo Hatfield's love slave, Patrick commits suicide. When Andrew asks whether Reb blames him for his son Patrick's death, Reb replies: “I put his casket in the ground a month ago. You the one still carryin' it around, Freshmeat” (61). It is just this sort of detachment that had years earlier already made Reb “a saint in 1836” at the death of his daughter; it is this sort of detachment that allows him to do what needs to be done beautifully in his work; and it is this sort of detachment that will allow him at the end of the book to be saved from the Soulcatcher, who preys not on the person but on his attachments, his fixations, his desires.

In a larger application of the lesson on non-attachment, Johnson is equally suggesting that we should not be attached to all the other aspects of our lives that seem so important and yet are really abstractions, concepts, ideas, and therefore illusions. These include all the constructs of our everyday life of endless discrimination (this not that, good not bad, black not white), which is what retards the action of the samurai. The greatest construction of all, perhaps, is our identity (based on various discriminations in terms of appearance, gender, sexuality, nationality, profession, reli-

<sup>10</sup> The children's version, in which the monks are mice, sanitizes the story by making the woman rude and ungrateful instead of an object of sexual temptation (see Muth). It is her lack of gratitude that the young mouse-monk obsesses on and cannot let drop, while the elder mouse-monk needs no gratitude to justify his selfless action. A matter of morality (*sila*) is turned into a point of etiquette.

gion, and race). There are many ways—ancient and modern—to talk about such a dismantling of the constructions of identity. Sonnet Retman's essay on "The Protean Performance of Genre and Identity" in the novel effaces the Buddhist reading in favor of deconstruction, but only the terminology has changed. Charles H. Nichols's essay on "The Slave Narrators and the Picaresque Mode" puts the same idea another way, that in the slave narrative as in picaresque, "the ego rests on a shaky foundation" (284). In speaking of Richard Wright's 1953 novel *The Outsider*, Nichols emphasizes "the risks faced by the black picaraoon: personality disintegration, lack of identity, brutalization and at last paranoia or paranoid schizophrenia" (296). This is the negative pole, we might say, of the goal of Anatman (no-self) sought by Johnson and his protagonist. The danger of the disintegrated self is real: the solution in Johnson's view, however, is to embrace that disintegration as a universal experience rather than to struggle against it.

While Retman's terminology is poststructuralist rather than Zen, and Nichols's terminology relies more on Jung and Freud than on Buddha, they are expressing the same basic ancient Buddhist ideas: there is no substantial self here to rely on, no identity that is not preconditioned by the situation in which it finds itself and by the larger web of being in which it is entangled. In Buddhist teaching, the five *skandha* (or aggregations), all those ways by which we identify ourselves or convince ourselves that we exist in some substantial and lasting form—conception, perception, and so on—are empty and in the process of forming and dissolving and reforming endlessly. Only by transcending these concepts or constructs, by putting them away, letting them drop off, do we free ourselves of their false burden so that we can devote ourselves to the real business of life, which, according to Reb the Coffinmaker, is simply to do beautifully what needs to be done, just as Johnson has honored the protean forms of the novel in his novel, *con brio*.

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End of Special Section