

## Chapter 5

### From Bondage to Nirvana: Love and Forgiveness in *Oxherding Tale*

#### 1. Philosophical Black Fiction

In his talk with Eric Sundquist at UCLA Hammer Conversations series, Charles Johnson tells us that his *Oxherding Tale* was “the hardest thing [he] ever had to do in [his] life,” but “nobody understood the book.” Johnson humorously adds that his “mentor John Gardner didn’t even get it.”<sup>1</sup> As the writer himself recognizes, *Oxherding Tale* is one of the toughest books by Johnson not because it is a book full of western and eastern philosophies, but because it utilizes the slave narrative form and tells us of something more than the conventional history of U.S. slavery. While his *Middle Passage* received numerous critical responses after it won the National Book Award, *Oxherding Tale* caught less attention. It took Johnson 12 years to finalize and publish the novel, starting the first version in the summer of 1970 and publishing it in 1982 after many denials from publishers. The author tells the novel’s history in his rather extensive introduction:

My agent, Anne Borchardt, tells me finding a home for this novel was one of the triumphs of her career. And little wonder: the 1980s began as a decade when the works of black male writers were systematically downplayed and ignored in commercial, New York publishing. For example, *Oxherding Tale* appeared in the same year as Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. (xviii)

Telling his readers “to decide” which book “pushes harder at the boundaries of invention, and inhabits most confidently the space where fiction and philosophy met,” Johnson is clearly

aware of the problems with the publishing market, where the value of literature is equated with its commercial, political and academic worth.

Of course, it does not sound fair to implicate that the fame of black men's fiction dwindled down because of black woman's fictions; however, his statement concerns commercial influences obscuring aesthetic standards. Black women writers have certainly pushed the boundaries of minority literature in the United States and beyond, bringing many important but previously unanswered questions into literary studies. While I do not doubt their significance, it also seems important to consider the issue Johnson raises in his introduction of *Oxherding Tale*. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, Mosley and Butler are the ones who challenged their racially designated literary genre by utilizing and appropriating Mystery and Science Fiction. Mixing literary genres allowed them to broaden their literary themes and questions, letting them explore the problems of and challenges for human relations. Gayl Jones in Chapter 3 is a good example of the discrepancy between African American women's literature and its criticism. Her novel embodies the difficulties of classification and the problem associated with the act of tradition-making. What Johnson problematizes here is the fact that African American literature has been inevitably involved in the world of economics and politics. Judging the aesthetic value of a literary craft is always a political gesture, and the standards for such evaluation always change.

When Johnson was writing and publishing *Oxherding Tale*, black feminist thought was at height of academic and commercial success.<sup>2</sup> Excluding African American male subjects from literary criticism may not be a conscious choice, yet it is the flipside of the effort to establish tradition in African American feminist thought. The masculine nature of Black Power in the 1960s had its backlash: black male writers were subsequently less focused on and rarely discussed in the 1980s and the 1990s. It is, then, interesting that Johnson's

*Oxherding Tale* has not come under scrutiny, considering Johnson's disappointment with the Black Power/Arts Movement.<sup>3</sup> One reason for downplaying *Oxherding Tale* is rooted in the same concern that arises from *Middle Passage*. As discussed in Chapter 4, *Middle Passage* was often criticized as misogynistic. *Oxherding Tale* also invites the same kind of uncomfortable criticisms because of its female characters' representation and some of the ideas expressed by the male characters. The protagonist, Andrew Hawkins, is a mulatto slave and his lineage already suggests promiscuous and corrupted sexuality under the institution of slavery. His desire for freedom starts when he first realizes that he cannot marry Minty, another slave girl. Andrew imagines a traditional marriage, which also invites harsh criticism from black feminists. His sexual servitude at Flo Hatfield's estate, Leviathan, is also problematic because in the end, Flo's sexual agency is shattered, together with her body, by Andrew's (domestic) violence. Furthermore, Andrew passes as white and marries Peggy Undercliff, whose seemingly conventional white femininity is problematic enough for critics and readers if the novel is considered to be African American literature.

Not only from the black feminist reading, but also from other critical perspectives, *Oxherding Tale* receives an ambiguous valuation. Investigating the differences between Rutherford in *Middle Passage* and Andrew in *Oxherding Tale*, Ashraf A.H. Rushdy opined "Rutherford Calhoun is more successful because he undertakes a more ambitious task: examining and then exposing the capitalist structures operative in the social definition of personal identity" (Rushdy 168). The way Andrew resolves his identity can be very problematic. Andrew passes as white and becomes socially stable in his marital relation with his white wife Peggy. This does not seem to be a criticism of the institution of slavery and its legacy, and therefore, invites the dissatisfaction from literary critics. Starting from bondage in the plantation and ending with passing as white and marrying a white woman, the plot of the

novel is, indeed, very much conventional.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, *Oxherding Tale* is provocative in the way that the novel explores the nature of literary form and the meaning behind the use of a narrative form. Why did Johnson feel compelled to write a narrative of slavery in such a way that it invited the conventional criticism? If the conventionality of the 19<sup>th</sup> century slave narrative is something to be radicalized, what exactly does Johnson do by experimenting with slave narrative? What does the emphasis of the protagonist's relationship with female characters in the novel mean? Furthermore, what is the ultimate solution to bondage in contemporary narratives of slavery? This last chapter looks at *Oxherding Tale* and its exploration of the slave narrative form and narratives of love in African American literature. While *Middle Passage* intersects the ship's log form with a slave narrative and transforms the meaning of bondage and freedom, *Oxherding Tale* takes the slave narrative form to its extreme; the novel questions the act of searching for literary origin in African American literature. At the same time, the novel also offers a way to negotiate with the identity politics of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the 21<sup>st</sup> century by redefining the meanings of freedom and love. In the following sections, I shall first discuss how Johnson is consciously utilizing the slave narrative and making it anew. I will also examine the ways in which he challenges the forms of identity. Finally, I shall show how *Oxherding Tale* offers a newer notion of freedom and love between human beings by exploring the most conventional and problematic of institutions: marriage and slavery.

## **2. *Oxherding Tale* and the Slave Narrative**

*Oxherding Tale* opens with the conventional slave narrative tone, the narrator/protagonist Andrew Hawkins introducing his origin. He was a slave on a cotton plantation in Cripplegate, South Carolina. His birth was promiscuous: his master Jonathan

Polkinghorne and then-house-servant George Hawkins switch their wives one night. It is an idea that came to Jonathan when he was drinking with his close servant, George, that “there’s no harm in switching places for one night . . . with [Jonathan] sleeping in the quarters, and [George] upstairs” (5). Jonathan’s wife Anna conceived Andrew, and George started working in the field after the incident. The narrator tells us, “[t]his, I have been told, was my origin” (7). The very incident here is casually and humorously written, yet this opening suggests some of the more profound issues behind writings of miscegenation. Johnson shows how easily the marital condition is corrupted, by letting George be involved in the master Jonathan’s marriage, and vice versa with Johnathan insinuating himself into George and his wife Mattie’s marriage. There is also the issue of black emasculation since George inevitably has to accept Jonathan’s plan. The scene is complicated because George “had never seen the old woman so beautiful” and he feels “violent” under the influence of alcohol (6). This scene reminds the reader of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, in which a black man’s sexuality and his violence against women are racialized.<sup>5</sup> Almost all the gender-based problems with slavery are condensed within Andrew’s origin: power relations between white men and black women, white men and black men, white women and black men, and black women and black men. About this troublesome origin, Andrew tells us that it seems that he belonged by error or accident “to both house and field, but [he] was popular in neither, because the war between these two families forced, as it were, on [him], and [he] found [himself] caught from [his] fifth year forward in their crossfire” (8). Andrew embodies the problems and mysteries of sexuality and marital relationships under slavery.

This opening is titled “My Origins, Précis of My Education. My Love at Cripplegate. The Agreement.” Similar to the 19<sup>th</sup> century slave narrative, the chapter title concisely explains what will happen in the chapter to the reader. One of the most experimental features

of *Oxherding Tale* is, however, its use of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century language that forces readers to be aware of the narrative perspective. In *Oxherding Tale*, there are two short chapters that abruptly cut into the narrative flow. These two chapters are meta-comments on slave narratives. Examining these chapters shall show how Johnson was conscious of the literary genre in which he was writing and its possibilities. These chapters are first person monologues, but it is not clear whether the voice is Andrew's or Johnson's. The first insert, Chapter 8, is titled, "On the Nature of Slave Narratives." The narrator explains that there are three kinds of slave narrative, "(1) the twentieth-century interviews, conducted during the Great Depression by the Federal Writer's Work Project, with black citizens born before 1863; (2) the fraudulent 'narratives' of runaway slaves commissioned by the Abolitionist Movement as propaganda for Negro manumission; and, finally, (3) authentic narratives written by bondsmen who decided one afternoon to haul hips for the Mason-Dixon line" (118). Emphasizing the literary flexibility of this third form, the narrator explains:

As a *form*, [the Slave Narrative] is related, as distant cousins are related, to the Puritan Narrative, a document written specifically by a member of a religious American community to show – as testimony – that he has accepted Christ. Here the narrative movement is from sin to salvation; it is with only slight variation that this narrative *oomph* becomes, in the work of a Douglass, a progress from slavery to freedom. In point of fact, the movements in the Slave Narrative from slavery (sin) to freedom (salvation) are identical to those of the Puritan Narrative, and *both* these genuinely American forms are the offspring of that hoary confession by the first philosophical black writer: Saint Augustine. In *The Confessions* we notice (and perceive also in the Slave and Puritan Narratives) a nearly Platonic movement from ignorance to wisdom,

nonbeing to being. No form, I should note, *loses* its ancestry; rather, these meanings accumulate in layers of tissue as the form evolves. (119)

The idea explained by the narrator here is basically the idea Johnson continues to explore from *Oxherding Tale* to *Middle Passage* and several other short stories. Not only is he experimenting with the slave narrative as a literary genre and form, he also emphasizes the importance of the literary power of the form itself. According to the narrator, modern writers have to “dig” into the narrative form “until the form surrenders its diverse secrets” (119). What does the narrator mean by “digging” into the form? Similar to *Middle Passage*, *Oxherding Tale* is also an attempt to transform the meaning of bondage and freedom conventionally used in the slave narrative into something different. Considering the style of *Oxherding Tale*, which is much more experimental in its use of the slave narrative form itself than is *Middle Passage*, I argue that Johnson tries to redefine the act of writing itself as a process from bondage to freedom.

The second chapter on slave narrative explores this issue of the writer/narrator. The “second (unfortunate) intermission,” Chapter 11, is titled “The Manumission of First-Person Viewpoint” (152). Here, Johnson digs into the reason why he has written a slave narrative. According to the narrator, the slave narrative’s “only invariant feature” is its “first-person view point” (152). The first-person point of view indicated the firsthand account whose persuasiveness derives from “limitation” of being present at the time and place to experience the situation narrated. However, Johnson warns us of an assumption that the first-person viewpoint increases the authority for the narrator to describe the situation. The narrator of slave narrative has to renounce authority to be more immediate: “what we lack in authority, we gain in immediacy: a premise (or prejudice) of Positivist science” (152). Not only does he

explains first-person viewpoint in terms of positivist standard, but also find similarities between positivism and first-person narrative. Firsthand account in both slave narrative and positivist science could turn up sharable and immediate for others only when it does not claim a special right over what she or he witnesses. Johnson appropriates a premise of Positivist science to his narrative theory with a twist. The narrator further characterizes the first-person viewpoint:

He is, in fact, nobody; is anonymous, as Hume points out in his *Treatise*. Actually, he cannot be said to be *nothing*, for as all Kantians claim, the I – whatever we call the Self – is a product of experience and cannot precede it. The implications are worth noting. The Self, this perceiving Subject who puffs on and on, is, for all purposes, a palimpsest, interwoven with everything – literally everything – that can be thought or felt. We can go further: The Subject of the Slave Narrative, like all Subjects, is forever *outside* itself in others, objects; he is parasitic, if you like, drawing his life from everything he is not, and at precisely the instant he makes possible their appearance. This proposition will doubtlessly infuriate our Positivist friends, who will think it scandalous, but the “Kantian compromise,” as it is traditionally called, suggests that to think the Slave Narrative properly is to see nowhere a narrator who falteringly interprets the world, but a narrator who *is* that world: who is less a reporter than an opening through which the world is delivered: first-person (if you wish) universal. (152-153)

The important idea the narrator introduces is “the first person universal,” something Johnson tries to provide his readers with. This idea is problematic because the word “universal” is too utopian and unrealistic. For example, Rushdy explains this first person universal with



comparison to other contemporary African American writers. “Unlike [Isumeal] Reed and [Sherley Ann] Williams, though both of whom use intersubjective narrators as a means of protecting the text from cultural appropriation, Johnson uses intersubjective narrator as a means of opening up the text to “universal” appreciation (Rushdy 183). What the narrator suggests here is, however, not a simple universality of the text. By saying that the Self is always already outside of itself, the narrator is negating himself as an autonomous subject and becoming a media through which readers experience and consume the narrative. This position is different from the position of a witness, a reporter of the institution of slavery whose authority over the text is forever given. Manumitting the first-person viewpoint in *Oxherding Tale*, Johnson challenges the idea of obtaining identity through the act of writing with the very narrative form – the slave narrative, which is traditionally used to obtain black identity.

### **3. Problem with Identity: Bondage in *Oxherding Tale***

How, then, does Johnson actually manumit the first-person and engage the reader with this “first-person universal”? *Oxherding Tale* is plotted as Andrew’s journey to find a breakthrough for the paradoxical nature of narrative authority. Taking the idea Johnson proposes in the two intermissions quoted above, the matter treated in the novel is, obviously, identity. In order to have Andrew as well as the reader take on the “first-person universal,” Johnson first problematizes how possessing an identity can be a kind of psychological bondage through two historical examples, the Black Power and Black Feminist movements, from which significant identity politics emerged.

First, black cultural nationalism is embodied by George, Andrew’s father, and, second, black feminist thought is embodied by female characters in the text. As for black cultural

nationalism, Aida Ahmed Hussen calls George a “proto-black nationalist.” George’s racial pride and ambition for racial solidarity make him a caricature of black masculinity. The following conversation between Andrew and George shows how George is enthusiastic about his idea of blackness as power as well as how uncomfortable Andrew feels when he is faced with George’s beliefs:

“You know ain’t nothin’ as beautiful as yo own people?”

“Yessir.”

“You know Africa *will* rise again someday, Hawk, with her own queens and kings and a court bigger’n anythin’ in Europe?”

“Yessir.” I’d heard this so often before; my father spoke of it the way Prayer Circle sang Christ’s resurrection. “I hope it will.”

“And that you belong there?”

“Yessir.”

“You *could* pass,” he said, “if you wanted to. But if you did, it’d be like turnin’ your back on me and everythin’ I believes in.”

“I’d never do that.”

“Don’t,” he said. “Whatever you do, Hawk – it pushes the Race forward, or pulls us back. You know what I’ve always told you: If you fail, everything we been fightin’ for fails with you. Be y’self.”

“I will,” I said. “I promise.”

No sooner than I said this I felt wrong. (21)

George “kept the pain alive,” because he “*needed* to rekindle the racial horrors, revive old

pains, review disappointments like a sick man fingering his sores” (142). The grudge George keeps becomes his identity; black cultural nationalism here becomes something that defines George, and therefore he cannot let his anger go. Hussen points out that in *Oxherding Tale* “identity politics comes to resemble the repetitive, self-defeating psychic apparatus of trauma. Fixed, compulsive, and dependent on an unintegrated past, politicized identity, like trauma, threatens to punish the subject through inflexible repetition” (245). The way in which George identifies himself with black cultural nationalism becomes his bondage. Hence the black cultural nationalism George embodies entraps and eventually kills him. Horace Bannon, the Soulcatcher who catches runaway slaves eventually kills George.

Black feminist thought in the novel is also problematized. The conversation between George and Andrew quoted above takes place after Andrew had asked for his manumission in order to marry Minty, when he departs from Cripplegate to Flo Hatfield’s Leviathan. Andrew’s master Jonathan does not immediately allow Andrew to be free. Instead, the master makes him serve at Flo’s place for one year before the manumission. Examining how Andrew’s concept of marriage is immediately connected to the idea of freedom, Hussen notes that “Andrew regards his manumission as the precondition for producing a freer world for his loved ones; he wishes, upon emancipation, to work to earn money that will enable him to purchase his lover, Minty, his father, George, and his stepmother, Mattie” (241). Jennifer Hayward also argues the importance of femininity and freedom in *Oxherding Tale*. “It is important that Minty ... first awakens his desire for freedom; in fact he doesn’t even seem conscious of his slavery until he realizes that, as a slave, he cannot possess Minty” (692). Minty is described as a heavenly beautiful woman when Andrew realizes he wants to marry her. The narrator uses almost an entire page to describe Minty’s appearance and how Andrew was utterly amazed by it. “Give me Minty,” Andrew prays. Strangely though, after this scene

Minty disappears and she is absent until the very last moment when she reappears as a deformed and dying slave (15). At this point, Andrew has changed his name to William, and he is married to Peggy. As Hayward suggests, Minty embodies the myth of black women; later Andrew reflects that he did not consider Minty's feelings or choice because he thought "it only mattered if [he] loved Minty" (40).

Furthermore, Johnson complicates the femininity in the text. The strange condition of Andrew as a mulatto lets him receive a formal education from Ezekiel William Sykes-Withers, who was "born to Transcendentalism by virtue of a peculiar quirk of cognition that ... lets him perceive the interior objects" (9). Ezekiel is a tutor Jonathan assigned to Andrew. From him, Andrew learns everything about the western and eastern philosophies. According to Ezekiel, men are spiritually weaker than women because women are "more essential to Being than [men] are" (30). Ezekiel continues to explain the reason for male spiritual weakness to Andrew: "All our works, *male* works, will perish in history – history, a male concept of time, will vanish, too, but the culture of women goes on, the rhythms of birth and destruction, the Way of absorption, passivity, cycle and epicycle" (31). Along with the image of Minty and Andrew's mother Mattie who is nurturing and enduring, this mythical vision of black women shows the prototype that is incongruent with contemporary black feminist thought.

This problematic view of black women is challenged by white women. At Leviathan, Andrew becomes a sex servant for Flo Hatfield. If George is a "proto-black nationalist," Hussen calls Flo a "proto-feminist" (240). Flo is notorious:

A widow, and forty if a day, she lived on a five-hundred-acre farm – she called it Leviathan – and often picked a slave, preferably male, from her fields. ... No other servants were permitted near the house. She kept her door barricaded. The

shutters were closed. For days, whole weeks, Flo Hatfield entertained him ... but eventually a black Maria eased in from the town, and a veterinarian examined the body. Then a mortician dragged a pine casket down her front steps, hauled it away, and her bondsman was listed among slaves who'd fled to Canada. (20)

Flo is “married eleven times” and her free sex with her slave “lovers” clearly indicates that she possesses agency as a woman. Yet she “ain’t free,” as Leviathan’s Coffinmaker Reb tells Andrew. He explains, “[s]ome women learn, like slaves, to study men. They learn to think like men.... [T]hey know what men are afraid of, what they *dream* about.... They have to keep one step ahead” (62). Concluding that Flo is “a slave” like Andrew and himself, Reb means that she is bound to her own identity. When Andrew asks Flo what she feels when she touches him, she answers that she feels herself: “I feel my own pulse. My own sensations” (53). Her answer suggests that this is her way of identifying herself. She needs the other (in this case her slave lover) in order to define herself. Yet the way she defines herself is to use others; she does not mutually communicate with her lovers. Lorde’s notion of the erotic is also useful here in order to understand this individualistic and liberated woman; Flo Hatfield’s practice is not the “art” she claims, but a mere act of identifying herself as a woman . After learning that Flo does not have any intention of manumitting Andrew, he literally punches her face and flees to the North with the Coffinmaker Reb.

These two ways of forming identity – black cultural nationalism and black feminism – are criticized as a cul-de-sac of identity politics. Furthermore, Johnson adds another dimension of identity politics. Dr. Groll, a veteran who practices quasi-medical treatments at Cripple Gate, does not believe in the notion of self. Andrew narrates: “It made me feel, if I may speak freely, that the Vet had everything backwards. No self, he said. But insofar as I

satisfied Flo Hatfield – and for a year I did keep her satisfied – I was, or felt myself to be, several selves, like the Coffinmaker’s polyhedral *kra*, which suffered all possible forms” (61). Dr. Groll, “the Vet,” embraces a kind of voluntarism, in which he fabricates the grounds for identification. For example, when one is suffering from one’s inability to identify oneself with any idea, he sells “life-assurance,” the objects of faith that a person can trust in in order to survive in this world. Identity as a solid notion he does not believe in. Dr. Groll, therefore, thinks a person “need[s] an unshakable faith – fiction or fact, it makes no difference, a life-assurance that will place everything in proportion, including evil” (70). This cynical view presents a world where there is no such thing as personal identity, but only the need for disguising oneself from the illusory and unstable characters of identity.

Dr. Groll’s view of identity as illusion has a common trait with Ezekiel’s notion of self. When Karl Marx makes a cameo appearance in the novel, visiting Ezekiel at Cripplegate, the two of them talk about Ezekiel’s paper on ontology. Ezekiel argues that “the Transcendental Ego is empty....and exists only through what it is *conscious* of,” which means, “as in Hegel, that alienation in the Other is necessary in every act of perception” (86). To this, Marx responds that Ezekiel is wrong; if Ezekiel’s theory were right, Ezekiel, whose idea it was, would not exist, and would, therefore, be dead. For both Dr. Groll and Ezekiel, there is no self, no identity which one can hold onto. Yet, the ideas they both present do not provide Andrew with a sufficient understanding of self and identity. Similar to *Middle Passage*, the meaning of bondage here changes from the bondage of slavery to the bondage of thought, the way one identifies oneself. Andrew tells us, “[t]here were rumors of a coming war between the states. Sir, we were *already* in the midst of Civil War. Blacks and whites, Blacks and blacks. Women and men – I was in the thick of diversity, awash in the world’s rich density” (50). None of the forms or non-forms of identity above satisfy Andrew; he is not content with

the identity politics of George or Flo, nor is he convinced by the ideas of Dr. Groll or Ezekiel, in which self is an illusion that you can envision only through your faith in the Other.

#### **4. Black Identity in a White World: Classical Dilemma Still Unresolved**

The problem with identity culminates as the narrative develops. After he acted with violence against Flo, Andrew and unfortunate Reb, the Coffinmaker, who also works at Leviathan, were sent to the mine where most of the workhands die within a short period because of the harsh working conditions. The two fled to the North, with Andrew passing as white and Reb as his servant. As Andrew becomes a runaway, identity becomes the final “trap” by which Bannon, the Soulcatcher, kills his prey. Bannon distinguishes a runaway slave by acknowledging the slave’s want for “[r]espectability” (115). According to Bannon, a runaway slave’s longing for mediocrity, the way he tries his best “to be *average*,”— to be a regular person – runs the slave down (115). This act of identifying oneself with a single, solid identity never succeeds: “Bannon... plays upon black fears – and a rigid, essentialist notion of the self – to trap his prey” (xvii). Bannon explains his strategy for catching a runaway:

When you really onto him, the only person who knows he’ a runaway – almost somebody he kin trust – you tap him gently on his shoulder, and he know; it’s the Call he’s waited for his whole life. His capture happens like a wish, somehin’ he wants, a destiny that come from inside him, not outside. And me, Ah’m just Gawd’s instrument for this, Master Harris, his humble tool, and Ah never finish the kill ‘til the prey desires hit. (115)

Bannon functions as a denominator, the one whose call releases the runaway from the act of

never-ending identification. The runaway is unable to achieve a solid identity, and Bannon is the only person who can understand this eternal and painful gap between one and one's identity. When the runaway is finally called by Bannon, it is a relief he feels the runaway no longer has to maintain his designated identity. This is why Bannon says the key to hunting the Negro is not "so much in overpowerin' him physically...as it is mentally" (114). Hence, his name: Soulcatcher.

The very strength of Bannon's soul-catching strategy is rooted in the African American's difficult relationship with the notion of identity. "Again and again, and yet again, the new World said to blacks and women, 'You are nothing'," Andrew thinks (75). The result of this longtime negation of blacks as well as women is the struggle to attain something that had not been there. "Predictably, we fought this massive assault on the ego, even *inverted* the values of white (or men) – anything to avoid self-obliteration" (76). For African Americans, the notion of identity is something they have always been deprived of; the history of the African American's search for a solid identity, therefore, is a longtime effort to recover what was never there to begin with. George's black nationalistic identity as an inversion of white masculine identity and Flo's feminism as an inversion of male supremacy are ways of avoiding their own "obliteration." Yet, Andrew continues to ask, "[a]nd if you embraced this? Absorbed it? Said 'Yes' to illness. 'Yes' to suffering. 'Yes' to liberation. 'Yes' to misfortune. What did you become?" (76). Defining oneself with identities inevitably leads one to accept the negative sides of those identities.

Bannon's call for a runaway slave, therefore, represents the pitfall of identity politics. Once you respond to a call, however relieved, you are destined to be killed by the Soulcatcher; your soul is under the bondage of identity. One way to avoid this call is to desire nothing: Reb, the Coffinmaker, manages to maintain having no ego and eventually escapes



Bannon. Andrew describes how Reb maintained himself: “Desire was painful. Duty was everything.... It was, I thought a Way of strength and spiritual heroism – doing what must be done, dead to hope – but like Flo Hatfield’s path to the senses, it was not my Way” (76-77). While he acknowledges Reb’s “self-denial” as a respectable way to live, Andrew does not consider it as a way to live his own life.

How can Andrew escape Bannon’s call, then? Bannon’s call for identity synchronizes with the title of Chapter 10, “The Call.” In this chapter, Reb and Andrew separate; Reb heads to North while Andrew changes his identity to become permanently white and renames himself William, and then marries a white woman, Peggy Undercliff. This juxtaposition of the Soulcatcher’s call and Andrew’s married life leads the novel to its climax. Contrary to Rutherford in *Middle Passage*, Andrew in *Oxherding Tale*, whose name is now William (hereafter referred to as either Andrew or William, as appropriate), does not have a conscious desire to escape from marriage. Yet, despite his name – “Will that be *all*” – things beyond his control happen to William (131). He is hospitalized in Spartanburg, where Peggy Undercliff’s father works, and that leaves him in debt, he takes a job as a tutor, attracting Peggy with his intelligence, and he is half threatened by Peggy’s father to marry her. The chapter “The Call” highlights William’s dilemma – the dilemma between his two disparate identities: Andrew and William – through his life as a white man with his white wife Peggy. The pressure William feels is the pressure of his father George: “Lord knows, I was not the ideal husband for Peggy Undercliff. My life was a patchwork of lies. My personality whipstitched from a dozen sources” (139). Remember what George said when he parted Andrew: “Be y’self”(21). For George, being himself means being a Negro and uplifting the group. Andrew thinks about his marriage with Peggy, “[s]o contrary to [George’s] cracked vision that, if George lived, he would not forgive [Andrew]” (142). Nevertheless, Andrew finds a married life something he

can embrace:

... we felt – or at least I felt – the strange faith involved in being with another, the audacity behind placing oneself, desires and defects, at another’s doorstep like muddy boots, knowing they must take you in, but wondering if they should. After all, knowing yourself as well as you do, would you marry *you*? And since Peggy *had* taken me in, wasn’t that proof of there being something wrong with her? Had I married a loser? Had she? (145)

The answers to the questions are, of course, no. William discovers his “dharma,” the truth of the universe in his household, in his marriage with Peggy (147).

William’s “call,” his happiness in his marital life is, of course, interrupted by another call. One night Andrew’s his first love, Minty, reappears as a poor, sick and worthless slave; she is on the stage of a secret slave auction being held in the hall where William and Peggy had their wedding ceremony. Minty “was disintegrating,” her body literally decomposing because of the disease, pellagra (166). Juxtaposing William’s happy and white marital life with Andrew’s black and now-miserable first love, Johnson forces his protagonist to face the longtime African American problem: the black identity and this world. Of course, Andrew’s trouble is a classical one, the dilemma of the passing runaway slave like Mr. Ryder in Chesnutt’s “White of His Youth.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, Johnson does not simply depict this difficulty associated with the passing figure as one’s unresolvable oppressed social and psychological situation. In *Oxherding Tale*, Johnson explores this dilemma as his protagonist’s ontological question of how to love and forgive through two institutions; slavery and marriage.

## 5. “Marriage that Works”: Marital Bonds and Ways to Forgive

Of course, the running from slavery, passing, marriage with a white woman, and eventual appearance of the past lover in *Oxherding Tale* invite ambiguous criticism. Hussen concisely notes the problem with the text: “In what ways and to what degree is Andrew’s accomplishment of freedom/*moksha* dependent upon the elevation of his conservative desires for masculine privilege and hegemonic citizenship, and the subordination of his progressive desires for interpersonal responsibility and democratic life?” (242). Despite George’s death at the hand of the Soulcatcher, Gary Storhoff views the ending of the novel as Andrew’s return to his father’s ideal (Storhoff 92). Concluding that Andrew’s political freedom coexists with paradoxical conventionality, Hussen recognizes the difficulties in achieving freedom that Johnson proposes in the end. Rushdy is more critical of this transformation of meanings. “Slavery is not a way of seeing; it is a way of having one’s physical and mental labor appropriated, a way of having one’s children categorized as property, a way of having one’s social condition defined as chattel, a way of being wholly under the command of another, a way of having body and soul daily stolen” (Rushdy 191). So, how do we interpret miscegenation, passing and marriage in *Oxherding Tale*? Is this novel simply a bad attempt at humor within the slave narrative? Or is it an intellectual experiment full of conventionality hidden within its playful gestures?

Seeing Minty on the auction stage, William thinks it is “a distant Call I could not but answer, the final knot of the heart that is broken – as Bannon said – from inside, bringing difficulties thick and threefold, delivering destiny as your deepest wish” (151). The call from the inside of William is Minty, and she represents Andrew’s guilt for not being George’s ideal. The difficulty of this conflict between Andrew and William is represented in Minty, who is simultaneously his greatest desire and his most abominable fear. The former because William

still loves Minty and cannot help but purchase her from the auctioneer, the latter because she is “the kill,” the call from the inside, which Bannon can use to catch Andrew. Minty is the one whom he was first supposed to marry. Marrying Peggy, Andrew did not meet his father’s ideal. Here, what is at stake is black masculinity, not as an agency to achieve or deny, but as an idea in which problems of black identity are symbolized. George’s black and masculine nationalism is, as explained above, problematized in the novel as being a kind of bondage for George himself. Yet, Andrew comes back to the problems of his father in the end of the novel. Not only does George represent a black masculine identity, but he also represents the African American past because his grudge comes precisely from holding onto the African American’s oppressed past.

Johnson converges the problems represented by George with Andrew’s relationship with the two women, Peggy and Minty. At the beginning of his life with Peggy, Andrew tells the reader; “I had never seen a marriage that ‘worked’” (144). He is skeptical of the marital bond because of this origin and upbringings. He explains the reason for this fears about the impossibility of marital life “as if marriage were a *thing*, not a relation, and possessed Cartesian properties” (144). By saying that marriage is a process, Andrew is suggesting that for most of the characters in the novel marriage is also something to achieve, a solid condition that you stay within. For his father George, it was his black masculinity that prevented him from having a peaceful life with his wife Mattie. Andrew himself thinks; “For the men of my period the dream of contributing to the Race, of Great Sacrifice and glory, drew us back from desire ... We wanted trials. Test of faith. We could not live, the men of my age, without a cause. A principle” (43). Black masculine ego prevents them from having peaceful marital relationships. This black masculinity, as explained, comes from their longing for something that has not been there: black identity. George can serve “a greater sense of

purpose,” but he cannot serve his wife Mattie (91).

Instead of serving the purpose of black people, William finds his wife serving him. After taking Minty back to his house and hesitantly explaining the reason he bought her with a loan, he is surprised at Peggy’s response; she does not ask for details about his relationship with Minty, or his origin. Peggy says, “because I want what you want, even if your pleasure means I experience pain” (162). Although bewildered, Andrew takes Minty into their house, and there he takes care of her with Peggy’s help. In the chapter titled “In the Service of the Servant,” William describes how it was in their house:

Remarkably, we [Minty and Andrew-William] were not alone. With Peggy, whose fear of sharing love was tested, then transcended, we made it through more bad nights than I care to recall. Take my word on this: I believed, as I believed nothing else, that together we could see her safely to a world where no soul catchers, no driver’s pistol-cracking whip, would ever caa her into darkness again. (164)

Notice how Peggy’s sacrifice here – her service – overlaps with Bannon’s service in finding runaway: In order to call the runaway, Bannon “have to feel what he [the runaway] feels, want what he wants” (173). Bannon feels the runaway’s desire to be something, his desire to identify himself, and he mimics it in order to catch the soul. The difference between Bannon and Peggy is very slight; instead of mimicking and catching William, Peggy simply synchronizes with him. This is when what Marx advised Ezekiel during his visit to Cripple Gate is realized in the text. Marx delineates that if self exists through an Other, “*someone* must ... be central to your existence” and they realize a “reciprocal intersubjective life” in the world. “The universal name for this final, ontological achievement, this liberation

– Occidental or Oriental – in [w]hich each subject finds another essential is *love*” (86). Minty, now weakened with disease, recognizes Peggy’s love as not possessive, but as transcended love as Marx defined it. Saying that she did not at first think Peggy could handle Andrew, she nonetheless says, “I *approve*” (164). The approval Minty gives is an approval of Peggy, the person herself and her love. This is also contrasted with Bannon, who “approves everthin’ [and] [a]pproves nothing,” and who cannot love but must kill (173). Bannon’s way of serving is the same as Dr. Groll and Ezekiel, who negate their own subjectivity, and who therefore cannot reciprocate, but literary or metaphorically kill one another.

Andrew sees how this reciprocal, intersubjective life is something he wants to have, but his father could not have because of his black masculine subjectivity. At his reunion with Bannon, Andrew weeps: “Against my will, I wept. Not because I was to die: I wanted the kill. Nor again because I was returned to slavery; I have never escaped it – it was a way of seeing, my inheritance from George Hawkins: *seeing distinctions*” (172). He thinks Bannon will kill him because he recognizes George inside of himself. Andrew wants “the kill” not only because he recognizes George inside of himself, but also because of the way George’s black masculine identity could never be reciprocal because George could never have been intersubjective; therefore, he could not love. Feeling his father inside of him, Andrew continues to weep:

No, I cried because the woman I had sought in so many before – Flo Hatfield, Minty, Peggy – was, as Ezekiel hinted, Being, and she, bountiful without end, was so extravagantly plentiful the everyday mind closed to this explosion, this efflorescence of sense, sight frosted over, and we – I speak of myself; you will not make my mistake – became unworthy of her, having squandered to a thousand forms of bondage the only

station, that of man, from which she might truly be served. (172)

Andrew's weeping here is at his regret of not having served himself but of wanting to serve, and to have a reciprocal intersubjective life. Bannon eventually tells Andrew that he could not catch Reb and he will keep his word: Bannon once said he will quit soul catching when he meets a runaway he cannot catch (116).

Andrew, now relieved yet nervous, has one last thing to do: reinterpreting his father. Johnson introduces a rather abrupt, yet powerful solution to this. Andrew wants to know if George was disappointed with, or even hated him because of his marrying Peggy, so he asks Bannon what George said about him when he died. Bannon shows the tattooed tapestry on his chest, in which Andrew finds "One and the Many" (176). Johnson describes *Oxherding Tale* as "a modern comic, philosophical slave narrative – a kind of dramatization of the famous 'Ten Oxherding Pictures' of Zen artist Kakuan–Shien" (Stefani 235). Considering the author's comment on the novel and numerous Buddhist terminologies, we can say what Andrew sees is Mandala, the chain of lives in the cosmos. From there, Andrew feels his "father again and again, his love, in every being from grubworms to giant sumacs, for these too were my father," and eventually, he concludes, "I was my father's father, and he my child" (176) This final "*moksha* (enlightenment)" that Andrew achieves in the end is the awakening, his first step toward the state of Nirvana (xvi).<sup>7</sup>

Within this challenging resolution of a novel full of complex philosophical ideas, I argue that Johnson is proposing tolerance and forgiveness in order to love. While he was weeping in the quotation above, Andrew mixes you and I: "I speak of myself; you will not make my mistake." This indicates that the processes of writing and reading this narrative are also reciprocal acts. Here, Andrew is simultaneously narrating his and your (hence, our)

narrative as well as his father's narrative. The "distinctions," which he considers the source of his and his father's suffering, are banished: this is basically the condition of tolerance. It is, of course, something extremely similar to what Lorde explains with her idea of Eros as power, which I discussed in detail in Chapter 3. The way to tolerance is to undo the distinctions in *Oxherding Tale*. Furthermore, not only does Andrew finally understand his father George's suffering, but also he knows that the suffering is continuous, regardless of how George tried to define himself and how Andrew tries to escape it. The only way to attain freedom for Andrew is – and this simultaneously frees George – to reread and rewrite him through the first-person universal point of view. This is where the notion of forgiveness and *Oxherding Tale*'s narrative form resonate with each other. As I discussed in the Introduction, Derrida defines the pure pardon as the act of forgiving the unforgivable. In the novel, the unforgivable is the African American past embodied by George, whose black masculine identity needs anger and grudge to be constantly rekindled. Even though George suffers from his own black masculinity, he can never forgive it because it is his identity. Even though Andrew knows how George suffers from his black masculine identity, he cannot forgive him while he writes as an autonomous writer; he has to objectify George and George's anger as unforgivable, hence, the unforgivable past remains with George. It is only when Andrew writes as the first-person universal that he can tolerate, enmeshed within others, finally forgiving and being forgiven by his father. When the novel ends with the phrase, "After the war, [Peggy] and I turned to the business of rebuilding, with our daughter Anna (all is conserved; all), the world. This is my tale," Andrew knows writing a "slave narrative" is not only the way to testify to and define the past, but also to change the meaning of the past for the future (176).

Johnson, of course, does not underestimate African American history and the present condition. "The black experience in America," he writes, "like the teachings of Shakyamuni



Buddha, begins with suffering” (*Turning* 46). The author is, however, concerned with how to read and write African American literature and tries to show different ways. In “Philosophy and Black Fiction,” Johnson says:

Fresh perception easily sours into formulae, into typicality, which is the end of thought. We’ve reached a point where to *be* Black (and, yes, we are talking about Black literature and Being here) is to exist within the easy categories of racial existence outlined by Stephen Henderson’s *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, Eugene Redmond’s *Drumvoices*, or the visceral but truncated version of *Roots*.... Accepting this interpretation (which, like all true perception, is partial, one-sided, and badly in need of completion) kills as surely as a knife thrust the evolution – expansion and efflorescence – of Black life. (82)

Johnson notes, “[b]y privileging this vision of black life, writers restrict their creative possibilities and limit their readers’ ability to ‘see darkness differently’” (Conner xii). When we dig deep enough, in the most inner darkness of human mind we might find the love that connects one to the other.

## Notes for Chapter 5

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWm5YXqIiq0> (accessed on September 15, 2013)

The event took place on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009, and the video was uploaded on Mar 6, 2009 to the YouTube UCLA channel.

<sup>2</sup> The cinematization of *The Color Purple* in 1985 was significant example of the commercialization of African American women's narrative.

<sup>3</sup> As with the case of black intellectuals and artists in the 1960s, Johnson was also involved in the Black Arts and Black Power Movements. Yet he also expresses his feelings of discomfort toward these movements and discounts them as irrelevant in his criticisms and essays. See Byrd.

<sup>4</sup> For conventionality of the classical slave narrative, see Carby.

<sup>5</sup> In Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), the protagonist Bigger kills Mary Dalton, a young white woman who aspires to realizing a socialistic equality in society. Later in the novel Bigger rapes his black girlfriend and kills her.

<sup>6</sup> Charles W. Chesnutt, "The Wife of His Youth" in *Charles W. Chesnutt: Stories, Novels, and Essays* (New York: Library of America, 2002), 101-112.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson notes how he tried to write a novel, which was an earlier draft of *Oxherding Tale*, with an "end to which the Japanese call *satori*, the Hindus *moksha*, and we in the West simply refer to as 'enlightenment'" (xvi). Satori is considered a first step toward Nirvana.