

Disengaged or Disingenuous? Ascetic and Bourgeois Self-surveillance in African American Literature, exemplified on Charles Johnson's "Alethia"

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This paper traces the history of troubled negotiations between ideological and non-ideological writing in African American literature, with a special focus on the work of the novelist and philosopher Charles Richard Johnson as possibly the most recent synthesizing elaboration on the centuries old dichotomical tug of war between unrestrained artistic self-expression and ideological self-policing in African American literature. The argument is obviously most coherently addressed in Johnson's non-fictional writings, but different variations on the theme can also be discerned in his other creative pursuits which he himself tags as "philosophical fiction". One particular facet of this communal and personal self-policing, whose permutations run a gamut throughout black American fiction, is the schism between spontaneity and self-restraint. This variation on the classical dichotomy between ecstasy and asceticism permeates canonical 20th century African American writing, and is given a sporadic yet reasonably thorough examination within Charles Johnson's fiction, perhaps most explicitly in his early short story "Alethia".

The work of the African American writer and scholar Charles Richard Johnson spans many diverse topics, but the cohesive common denominator of all his artistic endeavours is their philosophical focus. Much like many other leading African American authors, he is at home with imaginative renderings of various events from black American history, but what puts him at odds with the standard ideological thrust of ethnic fiction is his vocal insistence on authorial detachment as the ultimate crucible of racially informed writing. Whether he ushers the reader into the hold of a slave ship in his *Middle Passage* (1990), or into the mindset of a successfully passing mulatto runaway in *Oxherding Tale* (1982) or whether he explores the inner workings of the mind of an underdog stand-in for Martin Luther King in his 1998 novel *Dreamer*, he always manages to smuggle in philosophical and Buddhist underpinnings that invariably (and purposefully, it would seem) subvert the deep-set conventions of black

fiction. And in so doing, he continually inhabits the minds of his historically grounded characters with “empathy [which] is always viewed with more suspicion than historian’s facts, even though both impose shape on reality” (Seymour 27) in a cross-breed between playful historiographic metafiction and plausible imaginative impersonations of Martin Luther King, Karl Marx, Martha Washington and Frederick Douglass.

Johnson quite rightly calls his writing “philosophical fiction”, thus proactively establishing the interpretive framework for his readers. However, apart from using narrative garb to deliver supraliminal lectures in phenomenology and Buddhism, his fiction also occasionally addresses one topic which he has frequently touched upon in his non-fictional writing, namely the question of whether African American authors should write fiction that explicitly engages ideological terrain, thereby resorting to self-policing.

African American literature has always been a marriage of convenience between poetic licence and fairly overt ideological concerns, and the schism between the partisan and universalist writing has always been inextricably intertwined with the literary and public discourse within the black community. African American literary lore largely sits on the cornerstone of slave narratives which were very unmistakably deployed for ideological purposes, and the same tendency has been, arguably to a gradually lessening degree, present in African American fiction ever since. This means that African American literature and the intellectual discourse within the community was, perhaps even more nakedly than other ethnic American literatures, widely regarded as a vehicle for promoting social uplift and for conveying political and ideological content. This claim of relative exclusivity can be substantiated by the fact that, with the sporadic exception of Native Americans, members of no other underprivileged ethnic group in 18th and 19th century America were legally classified as chattel and had to contend with the technical charge of being non-human or less than human. It can therefore be argued that black Americans had to start their plea for recognition from an exceptionally low point. This is why African American writing was, from its very onset, underpinned by ideological and often openly political intent, and typically invested with hopes for social uplift.

This extremely low starting point of black Americans in fact politicized even the act of writing and reading itself, namely as a protracted process of empowerment through the acquisition of literacy. Many slave narratives, a voluminous body of personal chronicles written by fugitive slaves in late 18th through 19th centuries, describe one pivotal point – the moment when the slave

learns to read and (possibly even) write. Slave literacy was a breakthrough on multiple levels. Classic authors such as Frederick Douglass point out that literate slaves in the antebellum South were the first to run away, having become “discontented and unhappy” (Douglass 274) due to exposure to arguments articulated in anti-slavery books, pamphlets and newspapers, supposing they were in the rare and privileged position of occasionally having access to these, typically in an urban setting. Douglass himself describes how Columbian Orator provided him with the verbal texture to articulate his uneasiness over the epistemological foundations of the peculiar institution and enabled him to confront “arguments brought forward to sustain [racial] slavery” (279). In addition to fuelling the resolve to run away, literacy occasionally contributed to the actual act of running away, as it enabled a fugitive slave to forge a pass that made it seem as if s/he were running a legitimate errand, thus increasing the chance of the runaway making it safely through the critical first miles (Franklin and Schweninger 231). There were even instances of slaves forging freedom papers whose falsity was hard to prove but easy to allege, given that “[c]redible documents were scarce in the messy real world of the early republic” (Sweet 161). Similar subversive strategy of reading and writing as a weapon resonates in many subsequent black American classics, typically in Richard Wright’s 1937 autobiographical account *Black Boy* in which he recalls, among many other racial slights of his youth, that he had to resort to a ruse to get much-desired books from a public library by forging a note which made it seem that the teenaged Wright was just running an errand for the wife of his Irish work colleague (for lack of a better word), as it would have been thought preposterous for a “black boy” in Jim Crow Memphis to want to read books by a liberal and (therefore) controversial author such as H. L. Mencken (Rowley 44). And the ruse was certainly worth it:

I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean, sweeping sentences. [H]ow did one write like that? [...] Yes, this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club. Could words be weapons? Well, yes, for here they were. Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as weapon. (*Black Boy* 293)

A more recent variation on the motif of subversive practices towards literacy acquisition and reinforcement is Charles Johnson’s 1994 commencement address at his hometown Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. The distinguished author and professor of philosophy used this venue to

reminisce how he used to devour orphaned second hand books cast off by female students at the very same Northwestern University, where his mother worked as a cleaning woman, with a view of complementing his own lower secondary school reading (Johnson, "Northwestern" 141). Through relating this yarn Johnson clearly pledges fellowship with the trope of subversive self-teaching which was almost a generic stamp of early African American fiction. Much like the teenage Douglass who challenged young Baltimore boys to a rudimentary spelling bee contest, or the teenage Wright who had to resort to a ruse and forgery in order to borrow books from a library, the teenage Johnson also retrospectively casts himself in a similar trickster role, as he is rather gleefully reminiscing how he gloated that the college trainees "would never be able to say they knew something their cleaning woman's son would not know" (142).

The illegal or near-illegal acquisition of literacy can be used as a metonymy for the historically induced ideological contamination of black writing which has, to a varying degree, accompanied African American literary and critical discourse until today. This ideological self-policing has taken many different shapes which can be boiled down to two basic distinctive types, namely inward and outward self-policing. Inward self-policing gestures towards the black community and would therefore encompass all writing whose perceptible aim is to assist either personal or communal social uplift. Outward self-policing, on the other hand, gestures principally towards the mainstream (i.e., predominantly white) gaze and rests on the premise that from late 18th century onwards, virtually every black American writer knew that what s/he wrote was likely to be seen as a generic example that impacted the overall image of the entire black community.

These two principles overlap in the bulk of black American writing, though 18th and 19th century literature tended to lean heavily towards outward self-policing, chiefly because of the relative scarcity of sufficiently literate black people and their virtually nonexistent political leverage. The obvious case in point would be the slave narratives, which were ostentatiously written with the aim of providing an eyewitness account of the brutal and corrosive nature of chattel racial slavery. Unashamedly propagandistic (obviously in a good way, as we now know with hindsight), they were meant to cement the indignation of the northern abolitionists and trigger the compassion of the uninformed or indifferent white public. In addition to this, the authors frequently chose to use the slave narrative format to denounce the slavery system from the pedestal of the moral righteousness of a fresh convert to Christianity, thus

possibly hoping to induce a sort of emblematic guilt in the concerned white audience. All this would qualify as outward self-policing.

The same general principle applies to the work of early Black Christian poets like Jupiter Hammon and Phillis Wheatley, whose work chronologically preceded classic slave narratives. Their poetry generally dodges racial issues and tends to be quite colour-blind, yet it often quite palpably caters to the self-complacency of the white majority and their inherited convictions of their own superiority. Christian undertones and the awareness of the presumed white readership are also clearly perceptible in the subsequent generation of black poets like Charles R. Reason or George Moses Horton who, however, partly relinquish the humble or even grateful tone and tend to be more open in expressing their longing for freedom and denunciation of slavery.

Thou shalt not tarnish thy neighbour's life

Throughout the antebellum, Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction periods the outward self-policing oscillated between struggle and accommodation, between a challenging and placating writerly mode, the latter of which actually tended to reinforce white stereotypes as it often morphed into a mimicry of black minstrelsy or give-no-offence strategy whose basic principle is very succinctly captured by a famous allegorical phrase of Paul Laurence Dunbar. When he contends that the American blacks “wear the mask that grins and lies” and sardonically bids “the world [to] dream otherwise” (Dunbar 71), he makes it abundantly clear that his own poetry is not in perfect keeping with this principle, assuming he assumes white readership. Dunbar's image is both a description of physical reality and an allegory which stands for the self-inducement to avoid a confrontational or challenging attitude. One of the early prominent black scholars, W.E.B. Du Bois, singles out the very same dilemma, “this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of the other” and tacitly adjusting oneself to the gaze of the “world that looks on in bemused contempt or pity”, and describes the dilemmatic mindset by the term “double-consciousness” (Du Bois, *Souls* 9). To underscore this theoretical concept, Du Bois himself did not hesitate to act as a self-appointed cultural vigilante when he thought a black author committed the sin of catering to the stereotypes of the white majority. A stellar example of this prism is his vitriolic criticism of the 1928 bestselling novel *Home to Harlem* by Claude McKay, a major Harlem Renaissance author of Jamaican origin, and a very

radical and politically committed writer in his own right. Du Bois attacked the novel on the grounds that it was much too open about the nature of the night life in Harlem, including very open and untrammelled sexuality, and Du Bois argued that this reinforced the stereotypes of those whites who tended to see African Americans as sexually unrestrained people (Cooper 244). So, in conceptual terms, Du Bois is asking McKay to prioritize ideology over veracity, for propagandistic aims. Du Bois can be seen as the most persistent (though clearly not the first) early proponent of this line of thought which is perceptible throughout the entire bulk of African American literature and related public discourse within the black community. Du Bois made many other critical comments in a similar vein, lashing out not only against African American writers, but also against liberal and presumably sympathetic white authors. Apart from his much publicized criticism of Carl Van Vechten's novel *Nigger Heaven*, which partakes of similar overtones as his unflattering review of *Home to Harlem*, it is perhaps even more illustrative to mention a somewhat less heated case, namely Du Bois's mixed reception of *Congaree Sketches*, a 1927 collection of short stories by E. C. L. Adams. Du Bois's criticism boils down to the complaint that none of Adams's stories show an educated and ambitious black man who sees a future for himself (masculine not generic). By leaving this out, Du Bois argues, Adams fails to provide a representative palette (Turner 50). Du Bois's critical comments towards sympathetic white writers do not technically qualify as communal self-policing, yet the example is indicative of the range of proscriptive ideological vigilance involved. The Du Boisian scale of plausibility as pertaining to the life of the fictionalized black community in the 1920s oscillates between two almost equally deplorable extremes: "an improbable happy ending" and overly belaboured "defeatist theme" (Turner 51), which in effect means that the story should be neither too optimistic (for the sake of realism) nor too pessimistic (for the sake of mental appetite for social uplift).

The genealogy of ideological gesturing and self-policing in African American literary discourse can therefore be traced through several stages, from self-effacement, gratitude and almost flattery (Phillis Wheatley) through the purposeful inducement of guilt (slave narratives), and the presumed pandering to the tastes and cultural stereotypes of the white readership, all of which were gradually replaced by an inverted form self-policing going in the opposite direction. This switch from accommodationist to challenging artistic discourse resides partly of inward policing of its own community, such as Richard Wright's charge that his Harlem Renaissance predecessor, Zora

Neale Hurston, parades her writerly all-black communities as an intentional safe catch for white audiences, and thus she is effectively perpetuating the “black minstrel technique that makes the ‘white folks’ laugh” (Wright 1937). This challenging trend possibly culminated in the openly confrontational racial writing of the Black Power Movement spearheaded by people like Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Stokely Carmichael and Eldridge Cleaver, whose writings were at least partly meant to shock the white audience into introspection. All this can be loosely subsumed in the general description of ideologically motivated artistic self-policing, both inward and outward.

As has been indicated, this self-policing largely pertains to the critical reception generated by literature, though it sometimes even appears as a literary theme itself. The historically induced self-correcting tendencies in African American literature and the resulting predicament for artistic autonomy can be quite aptly described by two extrapolated theoretical principles. One is the Benthamian/Foucauldian panopticon, the circular and transparent prison arrangement in which all the inmates are aware of the presumed yet invisible presence of the “central inspection tower” which, however, “gradually disappears as artefact and as metaphor” (Schofield 93), yet the self-disciplining reflex continues nevertheless. This self-surveillance mechanism is a befitting metaphor for the communal self-policing in African American writing, induced by the normative white gaze which is presumed though not necessarily present. Another interpretive tool is the double-faceted Platonist/Derridean pharmacon, where one substance “acts as both remedy and poison” (Derrida 75). This, though somewhat extrapolated, signifies on two aspects of African American fiction. As the above quote from Wright’s *Black Boy* suggests, the pen was indeed often thought mightier than the sword, and this principle assisted the very origin of African American literature, which was, broadly speaking, born out of historical necessity/convenience and midwifed by ideology. It can consequently be argued that what proved remedial in the infant stages of black American literature turned mildly poisonous with the changing social and cultural climate.

As can be surmised from Du Bois’s famous proclamation “I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda” (Du Bois 1926), but also from a 2009 observation by Johnson scholar Linda Furgerson Selzer who chooses to see Charles Johnson’s writing as an “attempt [...] to redefine cosmopolitan thought in order to make it a more effective *tool for social justice*” (Selzer 2, emphasis added), vocal support for ideologically-endowed black writing has spanned over two centuries of African American literature.

What was first considered a virtue (or remedy, to use the pharmacon framing) has arguably come close to being a straitjacket which hampers artistic development. This is rather brutally summed up already by Eric Walrond in his 1921 essay “Art and Propaganda”, in which he contends that it would be “very difficult for the American Negro poet to create a lasting work of art”, because if the poet is to attain a more unbiased artistic vantage point, “he must first purge himself of the feelings and sufferings and emotions of an outraged being, and think and write along colorless, sectionless lines” (Walrond 255). It is not technically possible to see this as a direct signification on Du Boisian advocacy of art as propaganda, partly because of the non-causal chronology (1926/1921), but also for two other complementary reasons: (1) Walrond’s essay focuses predominantly on poetry, which narrows down the scope of inquiry, and (2) Du Bois actually does not necessarily argue that black fiction should be explicitly and consciously written with the aim of promoting a positive image of the black community. But regardless of the causality, this exchange in the 1920s quite succinctly epitomizes the tension between these two contradictory standpoints.

The pharmacon principle may also be even further extrapolated, spirited away from its purely literary context and applied to the wider arena of general public intellectual discourse. Du Bois’s claim that *Home to Harlem* cements the unflattering stereotypes of African American licentiousness can be used to epitomize the ubiquity of the opinion that once an African American writer and/or a public intellectual has earned a certain reputation, it is certainly very rewarding and potentially remedial, but this limelight position is also poisoned by the fact that that very attention becomes a communal burden, because the African American community, and, more importantly, the white community, tends to see him or her as a “credit to the race” and some sort of herald speaking on behalf of the African American community, and his or her work therefore must not tarnish the image of that community. This self-vigilantism largely applies to critical reception and public discourse, yet the same general dilemma can be occasionally discerned as a topic within black fiction itself.

Uncle Tom and Brother Karl

Richard Wright’s dismissive remarks towards Hurston’s artistic attitudes heralded the general shift of attitude in the 1930s, which saw a veritable

backlash against the accommodationist self-policing in African American literary discourse. Some writers and thinkers started casting a cautionary glance towards the black cultural and intellectual community, accusing it of excessive timidity.

This inverse self-policing within African American letters and public discourse can be described as a partial overlap of two ideologies: cultural nationalism and Marxism. The ubiquitous culturally nationalist label which lurks throughout black American literary and intellectual discourse is the accusation of Uncle Tom-ism, in its various permutations. The Uncle Tom epithet, derived from the Uncle Tom character of the 19th century abolitionist novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, had come to be understood as a synonym for a black person who chooses to rationalize racist degradations instead of confronting them, and its extended connotation includes disingenuous African Americans who do not noticeably ally themselves with the social interests of their own ethnic group.

The recommended practice of using art as a vehicle for social uplift, in fact the very idea of a wholesale orchestrated push for social uplift, does not only bring the tentative suggestion that it may actually impoverish black American writing in the long run. It is also conducive to the Marxist prism that inevitably sees African American social uplift as an ostentatiously elitist and middle-class project.

The Marxist overtones within the African American intellectual community are often selectively reduced, typically to the one-dimensional opposition to black Christianity as a docility inducement. A more productive interpretive spin can be generated by revisiting the analogical dichotomies (Uncle Tom-ish appeasement vs. confrontational stance, integration vs. separation) and recasting them in terms of class, which is particularly relevant vis-a-vis the Marxist or neo-Marxist leanings of many 20th century African American intellectuals.

There seems to be general consensus on the historical fact that the early 20th century African American progress beyond second-class citizenship was largely carried through by self-made giants such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, while the later emancipationist efforts were spearheaded by middle-class leaders. Even Du Bois himself endorsed rather elitist strategies towards social uplift, as can be demonstrated by his request that the cream of the black community, the college-trained Talented Tenth of the nascent African American elite, should do its utmost to contribute towards the social uplift of the less fortunate nine tenths by “developing the best of this race

[in order to] guide the Mass away from the death and contamination of the Worst” (Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth” 33). This elitist approach drew on Du Bois’s predecessors such as the white reverend Henry Lyman Morehouse who advocated the downright Romanticist idea that since the progress of humanity had historically been the work of “a few gifted souls”, then the social uplift of the African American community is predicated on high-level college training provided to the one tenth of the community “with superior natural endowments” (Morehouse 182).

If we choose to approach this trend from a Marxist prism, we may infer that this process of uplifting the race built on the aspiration for a more racially just, if not colour-blind, society, has always been involuntarily imbued with middle class aspirations. This constitutes a formal contradiction in terms, when an egalitarian enterprise (i.e., the striving for racial equality) is pursued through elitist means, even though exclusionary elitism was clearly not what Du Bois (or Morehouse) intended. Every social movement tends to generate the dichotomy between leadership and rank-and-file supporters, which invariably translates into some degree of elitism. However, even this pragmatic objection cannot completely neutralise the contradictory duality of the African American striving for social uplift. The class bias in the leadership/following dichotomy is quite akin to the gender bias within the civil rights movement which has received considerably more critical attention.

A very interesting class-conscious synthesis of this theme is provided by Rolland Murray who epitomises this self-approving beneficent elitism by the high point of African American struggle for uplift – the black nationalism of the 1950s through to the late 60s. Drawing on the work of major sociologists and cultural historians of that era, he synthesizes their research by the summary statement that even throughout the most radical phase of the nationalist movement, the Black Power era, “the politics of racial uplift [...] were replete with middle-class endeavors to discipline and achieve hegemony over the black underclass” (Murray 12). While trying to dismantle the wholesale notion of the African American community, attacking its presumed homogeneity as a crude abstraction, Murray also points out the inescapable fact that the integration process actually brought about increased social stratification and geographical ghettoization within the black community, to which scholars such as Robin Kelley responded by the somewhat proscriptive argument that “the black intelligentsia has an ethical responsibility to overcome such divisions and forge alliances with the black underclass” (Murray 12), thus echoing Du Bois’s appeal to the “talented tenth”.

To reiterate on the simultaneously divisive and uniting Marxist logic, Nicole King essentially argues that the leaders of the first post-slavery generation like Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois were proponents of black advancement strategies which “[p]aradoxically [...] recognized specific class stratifications within ‘the race’ that could be both engineered and manipulated for the greater (racial) good” (King 212). In so doing, they clearly did not see elitist striving for success and the egalitarian solidarity towards universal racial uplift as mutually exclusive categories; quite the contrary.

Hierarchical tension within the African American community is one of the minor contributive reasons why Cornel West clearly perceives Marxism as an extremely productive medium which should at least partly inform the social self-awareness of African Americans, as can be demonstrated by his claim that “Black intellectuals must pass through [Marxism] and creatively respond to it if black intellectual activity is to achieve any recognizable level of sophistication and refinement” (West 1079). This certainly applies to early Charles Johnson, namely his MA thesis and his first novel *Faith and the Good Thing* (1974).

Johnson’s eventual departure from Marxist and cultural nationalistic tenets can be attributed to various influences. Linda Selzer goes on to identify the historically informed cultural roots of Charles Johnson’s uneasy oscillation between partisan and non-partisan writing as a combined product of several influences, a significant number of which resided in the fact that he “matured [at the time when] Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s nonviolent approach to reform became increasingly disparaged as insufficiently radical – as ‘Uncle Tomism’” (5) and in response to this divisive logic became attracted to Buddhism which furnished him with “an intellectual and spiritual pack to King’s nonviolence” (5). In effect, Johnson’s fiction and philosophical writings tend to walk a careful tightrope between civic engagement and intellectual disengagement, which can be seen, in hindsight, as progress from the divisive logic of Marxism and cultural nationalism towards the ecumenical (for lack of a better word) appeal of Buddhist and phenomenological permissiveness.

Riffing on ancient and modern dichotomies

Covert and overt self-policing, aimed either at promoting ideological endowment of the work of art or responding against it, can be described by means of various associative dichotomies. We have already briefly explored

the rather too obvious Marxist dichotomy between working class masses and middle class leadership. Another interesting and nearly ubiquitous facet of this communal and personal self-policing which runs a gamut throughout the entire bulk of black American fiction and which implicitly overlaps with the Marxist interpretive take is the schism between spontaneous unruliness and self-restraint. The anxious watchfulness for undisciplined (communal or individual) unruliness and the attempt to anesthetize the wild side may be seen as induced by “whitening” middle-class aspirations and/or by the internalized awareness of the normative white gaze, which constitutes a classic panoptical scenario.

This facet of communal self-policing can actually be described as a reductive rendition of the classical dichotomy between *ecstasis* and *ascesis*. This variation on the classical dichotomy between ecstatic abandon and prim asceticism permeates canonical African American fiction, and its cameo appearances can be also detected in Charles Johnson’s fiction, perhaps most explicitly in his early short story “Alethia”, first published in 1979.

The narrator of “Alethia”, a fifty-year-old black professor of philosophy at a university in Chicago, walks the reader through this point in an almost pedantically explanatory fashion. At the very outset, the narrator at the same time whets our expectation and reduces our credulity, when he says that he is going to tell “a first-rate tale of romance” while at the same time admitting that he has a failing memory. In fact, he chooses to embellish that warning by the claim that the story is so extraordinary it would be more fitfully told by “the pale lips of” Jean Toomer, “the poetic genius” (Johnson, “Alethia” 99).

The monkish professor is blackmailed by a failing African American student who insists that he give her at least a B grade, otherwise she is prepared to inform the school management that he has been “houndin’ [her] for a trim” (106), i.e., trying to coerce her into a sexual relationship. The teacher is technically innocent of the charge, though he has already related to us that, shortly before the accusation, he actually did suddenly become aware of her appealing physicality, after many lectures during which she had seemed nothing but “black blur” and “a whiff of sandalwood” (100). On a purely notional level, the professor attributes this sudden awakening to the objectified romantic injunctions of Max Scheler as a part-corrective to Immanuel Kant whom he happens to be teaching at that moment. In any case, it is not difficult to agree with Linda Selzer who suggests that Wendy Barnes, the blackmailer, actually singled out the professor because his amorous gravitation towards

her had not escaped her notice. There is certainly enough textual evidence in the story to substantiate this causal link (Selzer 35).

Once Wendy has made her mission clear, she suggests that since he already is *de iure* guilty of the illicit relationship, he may as well go for it. She takes the panicky scholar on a ride which ends up in the “squalid Fifth Police District” of South Side Chicago (107). When Wendy sees how scared he is, she knocks the fifty-year-old down from the pedestal of age and learning by second guessing him, retroactively, as “a lonely, fat little boy” who dreamed that he “could contribute to the uplifting of the Race” through ascetic enterprises such as the learning of “twelve foreign languages, two of them dead ones, [...] only to learn, too late, that nobody want[ed his] sacrifices” (108). After this brusque intro, she ambushes the scholar (and unsuspecting readers) with a slightly incoherent but impressive verbal rant which stuns the scholar into conceding that this level of sophistication alone would have earned her an A grade. Upon this, they enter a party, walking “down cement steps into a hallway of broken glass and garbage” (109). The professor is at first extremely cautious and reluctant to join in, but, after inadvertently taking a pellet of a hallucinogenic drug, he has what could be described as a Buddhist/phenomenological epiphany, which is classic Johnsonian turf: “There was an awful beauty in this. Seer and seen were intertwined – if you took the long view – in perpetuity” (110).

When the scholar eventually snaps out of the drug-induced reverie, he is still not certain whether he “dreamed the connectedness of Being the night before” (111), or whether he is actually “dream[ing] distinctions” now. He finds himself in bed, with Wendy sitting by. As she slips beneath the blanket next to him, he finally “let[s his] mind sleep” (112).

The story spans several different variations of self-policing, though it generally remains within the fold of individual self-policing, i.e., the narrator (and Johnson’s semi-biographical alter ego) restraining his unruly self.

This story is, first and foremost, a writerly treatment of a compact philosophical point which relates philosophy to objectified loving devotion, a notion which is also abundantly addressed by the character of Karl Marx appearing (improbably, though not completely implausibly) as a visitor to slave quarters in Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale*.

Possibly the most exhaustive and insightful analysis of the story is given by Linda Selzer in the first chapter of her book *Charles Johnson in Context*. Selzer reads the story simultaneously as a part autobiographical and part

generic social probe into the “embattled position of black philosophers in a predominantly white profession” in the late 1970s and, naturally (with Johnson), as a philosophical argument in narrative guise which creatively explores the antithetical tension between impersonal formalist ethics, espoused by Immanuel Kant, and the embodied personally-rooted ethics as advocated by Max Scheler (Selzer 31). Regardless of the story’s ambiguous ending, Selzer essentially sees the progress of the story as the professor’s painful and stumbling development away from “abstracting formalism” and the rationalism of Immanuel Kant and its spin-offs (celibacy/denial of one’s communal roots, etc.) into the fold of lived and fleshly philosophy articulated by Scheler and its own spin-offs within the logic of the story (sensuality/recognizing and embracing the vibrancy of one’s communal roots). Selzer re-articulates this point by means of the Schelerian definition of the concept of *alethia*, namely “a guide away from symbolizing thought” to “the self-given phenomenon” (Selzer 42) which she sees as an inverted process of the symbolic abstraction from “the sensuous love of the beloved’s body to the rarefied love of the ideal forms”, as presented by Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium* (Selzer 43).

Apart from its massive interpretive implications as a piece of downright philosophical writing, the story offers various ideologically invested readings of the liminal predicament of an aspiring African American scholar. It is therefore interesting to consider the vantage point of a black professor of philosophy, in the terms established by the story but also in the larger framework of the essentialist charges of irredeemable inferiority which African Americans had to contend with in the past. The professor admittedly thinks of himself as “a kind of two-reel comedy”. By entering the ranks of the academy, he manages to pull himself away from the black urban Chicago, in an analogy of the way in which “Hegel’s anxious Spirit struggles against matter” (Johnson, “Alethia” 101), and in the process he feels “like a thief [who] hungrily grabs crumbs of thought from their genuine context” and chooses to rationalize or ignore the racist assumptions that often permeate classical and early modern philosophy (102). This textbook example of double-consciousness, a term which Johnson’s narrator himself invokes, very openly signifies on the historical dilemma of the first African American philosophy majors of the 1960s and 70s, including Johnson. It might be argued that their dilemma is in the same historical vein as the poetry of Phillis Wheatley which was politicized by the very fact that an 18th century black woman wrote poetry, thereby defying the essentialized concepts of her time. Analogically to this, the first black philosophy students were, as Charles W. Mills suggests, in fact politically engaging the system just

by virtue of studying philosophy, the field for which they were presumably not mentally equipped, as had been repeatedly pointed out by Aristotle, Hume, Kant and other seminal philosophers. This can be seen as a minor blip on a historical development trajectory: the 19th century plea for acknowledgment of blacks as sentient human beings is a natural prerequisite for the mid-20th century plea for recognition as first class citizens, and eventually the plea (or rather the illicit demand) to recognize African Americans as capable of navigating formal philosophical discourse, though many of its canonized luminaries would clearly consider this off-limits (Mills 17). Mills's point is again reiterated by Cornel West who in fact extends her argument and boosts it with neo-Marxist rhetoric by pointing out (in 1993!) that the inherited racist preconceptions of "bourgeois [...] white academic institutions" tend to approach black students with historically encoded mistrust, and virtually ask them to "assert and defend [...] their ability and capacity to reason logically" (West 1076). This in turn forces black intellectuals to assume an anxious and defensive stance which, Cornel argues, may contaminate their subsequent scholarly development (1076). This can in fact be seen as yet another re-casting of the pharmacon principle: The need to assert one's reasoning potential against essentialist mistrust may be an energizing boost to a fledgling black intellectual, yet such a defensive posture can become stultifying if it continues to underlie his or her further scholarly pursuits.

Consequently, when the narrator of "Alethia" decides to "blink [...] racial slurs" in David Hume, it may qualify as self-policing or self-restraint, albeit for slightly ambiguous reasons. The narrator may be restraining himself from showing his indignation because (1) he sees the overall thrust of (analytical Western) philosophy as largely universalist and colour-blind and is ready to stomach the relatively few and far between essentialist claims as the inevitable fly in the ointment (i.e., intrinsic motivation), or (2) he has already set off firmly on the path of this career and has very little choice but to "put [...] his shoulder to the wheel, pushing doggedly" (102) towards some academic distinction within the existing structures (i.e., extrinsic motivation).

Getting high: social uplift vs. spiritual elevation

When Wendy scoffs at the professor's (presumed, though unconfirmed) life mission of contributing to the uplift of his race, we are witnessing Johnson's imaginative riffing on the credit-to-the-race motif by mentioning the original

motivational impetus, examining and partly deconstructing the centrifugal and centripetal opposition as he goes. The narrator admits that he was both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated by black self-help books, “Lives that Lift” (Johnson, “Alethia” 102). This early admission sets up the interpretive framework towards understanding the contradictory duality of the main character.

Individual excellence contributes to the uplift of the race (in terms of individual distinction, communal image and self-image, and motivation for the reader or onlooker), but that very process also inevitably induces the excelling African American into a classic pharmacon scenario: his or her “gifts are a devastating weapon against racism”, but this very excellence (largely defined and validated by whites) separates the person from the larger African American community and creates the danger of “becoming a pariah among” his or her own people, as Charles Johnson suggests through the inner monological musings of Martin Luther King (Dreamer 49). This last aspect is briefly yet poignantly revisited by Cornel West in his 1993 essay “The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual”. “[The] deep distrust and suspicion of black intellectuals within the black community”, West claims, “stem [...] from the widespread refusal of black intellectuals to remain, in some visible way, organically linked with African American cultural life” (West 1074).

If we extrapolate and radicalize this principle, we may arrive at the stereotype of a disingenuous African American who, while pursuing the half-acknowledged aim of uplifting the race or defying academic racial profiling, cuts himself or herself off from the vitality of his/her own tradition. In order to conform to the panopticon of the normative white gaze, s/he is slanting visibly towards a mainstream (white) paradigm, thereby obliterating the nourishing umbilical cord that actually legitimates his/her sense of blackness; his/her communal belonging. Much like the double-faceted or ambivalent historical role of ideology in Black American fiction, the (middle-class) aspirations at social mobility are in fact a classic example of the double-faceted Derridean pharmacon which heals and poisons at the same time.

However, Johnson’s philosophy professor from “Alethia” only seeks to wrench himself away from what he sees as the crippling social constraint of the “bleak world of Chicago”, in a possibly disingenuous but understandable flight from a looming slippery slope “that led predictably to either (a) drugs, (b) a Post Office job, (c) Marion Prison, (d) Sunset Cemetery (all black), or (e) the ooga-booga of Christianity” (“Alethia” 101-2). So, apart from the dismissive allusion to the black church, there is no direct textual indication

that he feels contempt towards the black urban culture which he willfully left. His motives are chiefly extrinsic, not intrinsic.

The professor actually admits that he remains divided and sentimentalist about the urban environment that he came from, as he admits when he is “look[ing] back to the bleak world of the black Chicago” (101) right before the blackmailer barges in:

[T]o a plodding, tired man like myself, alethia meant the celebration of exactly that ugly, lovely black life (so it was to me) I’d fled so long ago in my childhood, as if seeing beauty in every tissue and every vein of a world lacking discipline and obedience to law were the real goal of metaphysics. (104)

A resurgent topic within the story is the policing against the haunting communal specter of insufficient self-restraint as an obstacle to social uplift. Classic historical precedents would include Du Bois’s criticism of *Home to Harlem* as reinforcing white racial stereotypes of African Americans as unrestrained people. However, the praise of self-restraint in “Alethia” is essentially a private strategy of social uplift which does not seem to be explicitly informed by the white gaze; the self-policing is informed by inward motives.

The professor is mindful of the fact that drugs are a major contributor towards the slippery slope in the black community which he came from, and his distaste for them flashes through his inner monologue. When Wendy waltzes into his office, she reminds him of the three “well-medicated” supporting vocalists of James Brown (Johnson, “Alethia” 105). Upon entering the party on the South Side of Chicago, he is first repelled by the “raw, *ugly* scent of marijuana hashish congolene”, and when later on someone presses the drug pellet into his hand, it “scare[s] him plenty”. His distaste for drugs and fringe hypochondria (“Music [...] played hob with my blood pressure”) is clearly just a footnote to his lifelong attitude of being in control of things. He refuses to abandon himself and mingle with the motley crowd, fearing that if “he linger[ed] too long [...] he would never regain the university” (Johnson, “Alethia” 109, emphasis added).

The gradual loosening and un-scrupling of the main character opens up into a narratologically neat yet morally inconclusive ending, in which the professor finally seems to have let go of his inhibitions and allows “mindless” sensuality to rule supreme. The ending seems to communicate a visceral acknowledgement of his sense of belonging to his native community; though

largely drug-induced. However, it does not give off any hints as to whether the cultural rejuvenation happened at the expense of the protagonist's allegiance to the (bourgeois and disingenuous pursuits within) academy or whether these two will coexist. In other words, should the story be read as a benign synthesis of the two principles or is the professor's reinvigorated ethnic self left in full possession of the field?

This aspect of Johnson's short narrative cannot be pinned down to an exhaustive denouement, yet this early story still remains possibly the most explicit imaginative rendering of this self-vigilant struggle between ascetic and ecstatic that can be found in Johnson's fiction.

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