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Disertační práce

Panoptical tropes and negotiations between art and politics in Charles Johnson's short fiction

Panoptikální tropologie a svár mezi uměním a politikou
v povídkách Charlese Johnsona

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Klíčová slova: Charles Richard Johnson, tropus, typologie, angažovaná literatura, tendenční umění, autonomní umění, esencialismus, asimilace, nacionalismus, exegeze, exhortace, aluze, intertextualita, panoptikon, farmakon, černošská síla, společenský vzestup.

Abstract

The dissertation traces the uneasy marriage between ideology and aesthetics in African American literature, and its reflections in Charles Johnson's short fiction. The historical introduction is an attempt to reevaluate the tradition of ideological self-policing in African American literature. Its central thesis resides in the claim that African American literature and its critical reception has still retained some of this ideological template, in a manner and degree that throws it out of sync with the mainstream trajectory of American literature. This lingering anachronism cannot be legitimately attributed to a single causative circumstance, yet one of the more obvious explanations for this residual trend is the living memory of overt discriminatory practices in many parts of the United States, which is why the centrifugal literary discourses of assimilationism and protest fiction are still very vibrant.

This simple argument alone provides a sufficient basis for contextualizing and understanding the thesis that ideological writing still inadvertently manages to find its way into African American fictional pursuits. This is also underscored by the observable fact that even the critical reception of African American writing is often guided by extra-literary criteria, a process which can be seen as a continuation of the self-policing trend that has had a long and turbulent history in black American writing and is best understood as a reflexive communal response to the ubiquitous white gaze.

The analytical part then proceeds from that premise in order to examine a representative section of short fiction by Charles Richard Johnson, an African American writer and critic, graphic artist and screenwriter, philosophy professor and practicing Buddhist, who ranks among the most articulate and erudite public advocates of non-partisan black writing in America. The analysis will scrutinize a segment of Johnson's short fiction which overtly displays features of ideological racialist writing. These overtly formulaic stories will be assessed against standard racial typologies, and against Theodor Adorno's and Roland Barthes's taxonomy of *tendentious* or *autonomous* ideologically committed writing. The aim is not to demonstrate that Charles Johnson the writer does not abide by the non-partisan tenets promoted by Charles Johnson the scholar and critic. On the contrary, the scrutiny will also seek to rehabilitate Johnson's claim on authorial autonomy by going beyond the literal frame of the stories in search of allusive connotations.

Abstrakt

Tato dizertace se zabývá komplikovaným vztahem mezi ideologií a estetikou v černošské literatuře, přičemž se zaměřuje zejména na způsob, jakým se tento vztah odráží v povídkovém díle Charlese Johnsona. Historický úvod popisuje vývoj tradice ideologické autocenzury v afroamerické literatuře. Ústřední tezí je tvrzení, že afroamerická literatura a její recepce si stále zachovává silný ideologický podtext, který se u ostatní americké literatury v takové míře nevyskytuje. Tento přetrvávající anachronismus patrně nemá jen jedinou příčinu, avšak lze jej vnímat i jako potvrzení skutečnosti, že v historické a kulturní paměti této komunity je stále živá vzpomínka na diskriminační praktiky, jimž byli černoši v mnoha amerických státech vystaveni. Patrně i díky této historické paměti se v afroamerické literatuře stále hojně vyskytují ideologické podtóny, a to jak asimilační tak protestní povahy.

Tento prostý argument vysvětluje, proč se do černošské prózy i nadále vtírají ideologická témata. Toto ještě umocňuje skutečnost, že i akademická a kritická veřejnost často hodnotí černošskou literaturu podle neliterárních kritérií, což lze též vnímat jako pokračování historického trendu. Politika a literatura se totiž zejména v rané černošské literatuře slévá, přičemž onu ideologickou autocenzuru lze vnímat jako reakci na všudypřítomný pohled bělošské většiny. Vnímání tohoto souběhu ideologie a literatury se v průběhu času měnilo, často za velmi bouřlivých diskusí.

Z této premisy vychází i analytická část práce, která se zaměřuje na reprezentativní část povídkového díla Charlese Richarda Johnsona, afroamerického spisovatele a kritika, kreslíře, scenáristy, profesora filosofie a praktikujícího buddhistu, který patří k výmluvným a erudovaným odpůrcům tohoto ideologického vlivu na černošskou literaturu. Předmětem analýzy jsou Johnsonovy povídky, které na první pohled vykazují znaky ideologické literatury s rasovou tematikou. Tyto zdánlivě konvenční povídky budou nahlíženy optikou taxonomie tendenčního a autonomního umění dle Theodora Adorna a Rolanda Barthese. Cílem analýzy není prokázat, že Charles Johnson se jako spisovatel neřídí tím, co hlásá jako akademik a literární teoretik. Toto zkoumání má naopak ukázat, jak Johnson díky aluzím dokáže překročit konvence žánru, a tím jeho uměleckou autonomii obhájit.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION	10
1.1 Research methodology	10
1.1.1 Primary methodology.....	11
1.1.1.1 Panopticon	11
1.1.1.2 Complementary classificatory tools.....	15
1.1.1.3 Dichotomy of committed art.....	17
1.1.1.4 Structured inquiry and summary assessment.....	19
1.1.2 Auxiliary theory and terminology	22
1.2 Outline of chapters	23
1.3 On sources.....	26
II. BLACK WRITING AS PHARMACON AND PANOPTICON.....	29
2.1 The trickster autodidact and other early tropes.....	29
2.1.1 Thou shalt not tarnish thy neighbor's life	34
2.1.2 Uncle Tom and Brother Karl: the classist divide	35
2.2. Remedial stage of black ideological writing.....	39
2.2.1 Signifying on Darwin: the white man's burden revisited.....	42
2.2.2 Counterpunch: mimetic shadowboxing in the early 20 th century.....	47
2.2.2.1 Chesnutt and Micheaux: ideological incongruity.....	53
2.3 Remedy, or poison? Modernist contestations of communal vigilance.....	59
2.3.1 Hughes versus Schuyler: The black mountain versus white molehill	62
2.3.2 The communal vigilantism of W.E.B. Du Bois	64
III. TENDENTIOUS TROPES AND TYPOLOGIES IN BLACK FICTION	71
3.1 Explicit panoptical tropes.....	71
3.2 Panoptical modal tropes	72
3.2.1 Exegetical tropes	73
3.2.2 Exhortative tropes	75
3.3 Biologist prism: essentialist typologies	76
3.3.1 Affirmative essentialist typologies.....	77
3.3.2 Derogatory essentialist typologies.....	77
3.4 Sociologist prism: assimilationism and nationalism.....	79
3.4.1 Assimilationist typologies	80
3.4.2 Nationalist typologies.....	82

IV. TRANSCENDING BLACK TROPES IN CHARLES JOHNSON’S FICTION	85
4.1 Charles Johnson’s endorsement of non-ideological writing.....	85
4.1.2 Reclaiming the mythological roots of philosophy	89
4.1.2 Johnson and the dilemma of publicity.....	93
4.1.2.1 One woman’s protest fiction is another man’s caricature	95
4.2 Tendentiousness and autonomy in Charles Johnson’s fiction.....	99
4.2.1 <i>Scriptor poeticus</i> or <i>scriptor politicus</i> :	
Johnson’s ventriloquist rendering of Phillis Wheatley.....	105
4.2.2 Interlocking readings: Exhortative <i>black-mail</i> in “The People Speak,”	
“Mayor’s Tale,” “The Plague” and “Martha’s Dilemma”.....	117
4.2.2.1 Anti-colonialism and democracy in “The People Speak”.....	118
4.2.2.2 Invisible men: black agency in “The Mayor’s Tale”.....	131
4.2.2.2.1 Exhortations and panopticisms in “The Plague” and “Martha’s Dilemma”.....	137
4.2.3 Meditations on Melville in “Executive Decision”	146
4.2.4 Disengaged or Disingenuous? Ascetic and bourgeois self-surveillance	
in Charles Johnson’s “Alēthia”	166
 V. CONCLUSION	 179
 REFERENCES	 176

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research methodology

This thesis singles out Charles Johnson's fiction and literary scholarship as the most recent synthesis of the discussion between racially and ideologically invested art on the one hand, and universalist and racially disengaged art on the other, a discussion which has percolated within African American community for at least the last hundred years. The analytical part seeks to examine Johnson's claim that African American writing should rise above the overtly political "racial melodrama"¹ and ideological tendentiousness. Selecting a representative segment of seven Johnson's short stories which look very racially invested on surface reading, the analysis seeks to establish two things. First, it assesses the ideological nature of these stories (tendentious reading), thereby contrasting them to Johnson's artistic creed. Second, it tries to redeem this apparent tendentiousness by exploring the larger allusive potential of the stories, thereby suggesting that the overt message is not necessarily the predominant one (autonomous reading), which is why even these pre-selected stories do not contradict Johnson's professed artistic universalism.

In order to ascertain the *tendentious* nature of the stories, we will use two basic methodological prisms, each reflecting one defining feature of African American writing. The feature of artistic and *communal self-vigilance* or *self-policing* is theorized via Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, as later adapted and abstracted away by Michel Foucault. The self-vigilant mechanism will be analyzed as a general theme and also in its typical rhetorical demonstrations, namely the exegetical and exhortative stance, expressed either towards other characters within the stories or towards the presumed readership. These two rhetorical stances, or *modal tropes*, as they are referred to within this thesis, are derived from Paul Friedrich's study "Polytropy" and from the linguistic sub-discipline of pragmatics, namely its definition of the affective function as used in discourse analysis.

The feature of *racial representation* will be assessed with regards to the most typical ideological typologies in early African American writing. A *biological* or *hereditary* prism generates the dichotomy of derogatory essentialism vs. affirmative essentialism (or race pride vs. racial self-deprecation). A *sociological* prism generates the dichotomy of assimilationism vs. nationalism, typically aligning with "integration vs. separation".²

The occurrence of any of these features, i.e. (self-vigilance, hereditary essentialism, and assimilationist or nationalist stance) will be regarded as a confirmation that the story is a tendentious and racist piece of writing.

This confrontational approach will be compensated by its antithesis, namely the effort to confirm the *autonomous* artistic nature of (even the most ostentatiously racist and didactic) Johnson's stories. The classification tool used to this end will be the dichotomy between *tendentious* and *autonomous* art as synthesized from ostensive definitions in Theodor

¹ Charles Johnson, *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) 22.

² The "integration vs. separation" dichotomy is frequently implied but not directly addressed in the analytical part, as it is regarded as an indelible part of the "assimilationist/nationalist" typology.

Adorno's essay "Commitment to Art" (1962) and Roland Barthes's essays in his *Mythologies* collection (1957).

This dissertation straddles literary history, cursory sociological overview and close-up literary analysis, which is why the main interpretive prism will also be complemented by *auxiliary* theory and terminology. Some of this theory will also seek to provide partial interpretive grounding pertaining to African American fiction (Marxist countercultural view of the development of pluralistic democracy, mimesis), others are only used as analogies that carry limited interpretive information (Derridean pharmakon). This auxiliary theory will also be briefly introduced within this introductory section so that it can be later referred to in a more offhand manner, thus eliminating digressions from the argument at hand.

1.1.1 Primary methodology

1.1.1.1 Panopticon

This section briefly explores the original context and intent of Bentham's Panopticon, its later theoretical rendering by Michel Foucault, and the potential deployment of this principle towards literary interpretation, with a predominant focus on African American fiction.

The term Panopticon has come to stand for the ubiquitous normalizing public gaze as theorized by Michel Foucault in his 1975 book *Discipline and Punish*. The crucial or defining aspect of this mechanism resides in the fact that a group or community is kept in check by a self-disciplining reflex which is maintained regardless of whether the presumed monitoring gaze is actually present or not. Foucault abstracted his Panopticon construct away from Jeremy Bentham's late eighteenth century (unrealized) concept of a circular prison system whose inmates, aware of the invisible monitoring gaze of the guards, reflexively invigilate upon each other. Jeremy Bentham conceived this prison as a physical entity, yet it actually yields itself to Foucauldian abstraction quite easily, because it was clearly born out of the neoclassical conviction that communal gaze (sometimes hardening into law enforcement) is here for a good reason, because it keeps people from giving in to their brutish natures. In addition to this, it partakes of the idea that an omnipresent rectifying communal gaze is a good thing that curbs people's passions, an idea whose universal validity has attracted some criticism over the two centuries that have elapsed since.

This is also the basic line of argument pursued by Michel Foucault in his seminal work *Discipline and Punish*, where the physical prison concept is re-fashioned as a metaphor.³ However, prior to drawing his own figurative conclusions, Foucault first scrutinizes Benthamian panopticon in its original setting, making a serious inquiry into the origins and ideological underpinnings of 18th through 19th century European thought on the ways of

³ Foucault sometimes back-references to Bentham's original physical entity, which makes it rather hard to think of the relation between the two as fully allegorical. Given the associative similarity of the two concepts, the pairing of Bentham's and Foucault's Panopticon could even be seen as metonymical.

policing the unruly population, which was in fact partly due to the adverse effect of the industrial revolution, as could be epitomized for example by the Luddite movement⁴. He imaginatively recreates the Benthamian self-surveillance system whose layout places the prison cells “opposite the central tower”, thus ensuring “axial visibility” while “the divisions of the ring, those separated cells, imply a lateral invisibility”.⁵

After that original inquiry, Foucault uses these observations as a springboard towards a multiple extrapolation of the panoptical principle, spiriting its “visibility is a trap” motto away from its original context (a self-surveillance prison system) and deploying it perhaps most canonically as a metaphor for the manner in which widespread public and political expectations⁶ shape the intellectual discourse of their time, in which case the semantics of original maxim should be updated to “(in)visibility is a trap”, denoting Foucault’s contention that the venues of intellectual discourse are pre-selected, i.e. unwelcome topics are rendered invisible in advance. This reading has semantic support in Foucault’s rendering of the original panoptical self-surveillance whose acknowledged purpose was twofold. Firstly, it sought to ensure “a pure community”, ostentatiously meaning a community rid of leprosy and plague, but covertly also seeking to quarantine the “pathological” element in the society. Secondly, it aimed at creating and maintaining “a disciplined society”. As a result, the authorities practiced “[t]wo ways of exercising power over men, of controlling their relations, of separating out their *dangerous mixtures*.”⁷

⁴ Bentham conceived and developed his Panopticon idea in late 1780s through 1790s, during the swing phase of English industrial revolution which saw a large scale transportation of English and Irish penurious underclass to penal colonies in Australia and the first inklings of the Luddite movement. Considering the fact that Bentham pitched his idea to the English authorities as a profit-making prison system, we may see the principle as inherently oppressive and elitist. However, we need to place the Panopticon (as both a prison and a workhouse) in the larger context of Bentham’s political and social thought. If we juxtapose the idea against the dominant utilitarian discourse of the late 18th century, it is easy to agree with Charles Bahmueller’s contention that panoptical arrangement was meant as part and parcel of a *reform* that sought to establish a visionary social system not completely unlike the modern welfare state, and his relativistic definition of poverty may have some currency even today. See Charles F. Bahmueller, *The National Charity Company: Jeremy Bentham's Silent Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) 86-88, 104-113.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) 200.

⁶ Even on close scrutiny it remains unclear how much Foucault’s panoptical concept validates individual contribution to the process of shaping public and intellectual discourse. It would be disrespectful to suspect Foucault of engendering conspiracy theories, yet his writings inevitably beg the question as to whether he thinks that invisible public surveillance simply oozes into existence or whether it can be attributed to the Machiavellian influence of some influential spin doctors. A perfunctory reading would suggest that the conspiratorial angle is already very much encoded by the elitist tilt of the original Benthamian panopticon, unless we choose to see it as a reformist step within a cruel utilitarian structure the way Bahmueller does.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 198. Emphasis added. Foucault’s list of generic candidates for social seclusion and surveillance includes not only “a madman, [...] a condemned man”, and a presumably revolting “worker”, but also a “patient [...] or a schoolboy”. The madman in need of seclusion and the schoolboy in need of disciplining provide particularly inspiring typologies for the modern figurative update. Foucault does not make any palpable connection between the two realms, yet it is quite suggestive to see the quarantined madman as an allegory for the practice of sidetracking or even ostracizing a “crazy” intellectual opinion that finds itself wildly outside of the predominant consensus, while the disciplined schoolboy may be seen as a metonymy of preemptive intellectual censorship. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200.

The Foucauldian panoptical reflex can be used across a wide range of social and literary scenarios.⁸ Generally speaking, panoptical paranoia may be regarded as a legitimate preemptive stance by any underprivileged or maligned group as a response to the fact that, as Foucault points out, “all the authorities exercising individual control function according to a double mode; that of binary division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal),”⁹ which kick-starts a slippery slope of stigmatisation and surveillance. That is also why the principle seems applicable to the African American community and its literary output.

Foucauldian panopticon and its bearings on African American literature

The dialectical tension between one’s artistic leanings and the implicit browbeating of the communal gaze is a perennial theme in Anglo-American literature. To single out one epitomical example, it made a classic appearance in American Romanticism and its cautioning against American literary deference to the “courtly muses of Europe”¹⁰ in Emerson and Whitman. In view of this broad base of eligible literary applications, let us now narrow our focus and briefly examine how the panoptical reflex may relate specifically to the African American literary and scholarly community.

The term Panopticon *as employed within this thesis* is meant as an analogy of the ubiquitous white gaze as a formative influence which tends to create a defensive knee jerk reflex within African American literary and intellectual community. The normative self-disciplining gaze is typically internalized by the African American middle class, whose values and anxieties align with mainstream American values, by means of (real or imagined) assimilationism and gentrification.¹¹ In the early development stage of postbellum America, this middle class segment dominated the African American literary output. It can therefore be argued that virtually all black literature written from late 18th through early 19th century communicated primarily to the presumed white readership, or that it was “panoptically induced” by the “white gaze”, to use my wordy terminology.

This self-vigilant panoptical default was eventually disrupted by the arrival of the New Negro literature in the modernist decades of the 1920s and 30s, even though the old self-policing paradigm did not go without a fight, as will be exemplified with reference to Du Bois’s attacks on McKay and other writers. This is why the developmental trajectory of black writing in chapter 2 does not stretch far beyond Harlem Renaissance, which should be seen as the primary battleground between ideological and non-ideological writing in African American literature.

⁸ A Marxist would use this prism to point out how a seemingly impartial argument is in fact slanted by the notion of neoliberal democracy as the unquestionable default, subliminally embedded in the speaker’s value system. A feminist interlocutor may find fault with historically encoded generic assumptions regarding gender roles, etc.

⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 199.

¹⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” *The Annotated Emerson*, ed. David Mikics (London: Belknap Press, 2012) 91.

¹¹ To a lesser degree, these assimilationist leanings also produced a counter-reflex within the black middle class literature, which sometimes deliberately emphasizes race loyalty across different social classes, in which case the self-policing connotes any paranoid response to the anticipated admonition from the larger black community, the “What will they think of me?” reflex. This is discussed in reference to Robert Bone’s class-based analysis in subchapter 2.2.

Panopticism is therefore used as an organizing principle that unites various discursive and defensive literary devices and self-policing scenarios found in African American fiction, outlined in chapter 3, an analogy which is then deployed as a fixed point of reference in the analysis of recognizably black motifs, typologies and tropes in Charles Johnson's short fiction. In short, the words *Panopticon*, *panoptical* or *panopticism* are used throughout the thesis as a quick way to communicate the argument that the production or critical reception of the literary segment under analysis has been influenced by the ubiquitous white gaze.¹²

Panopticism in African American writing does not need to gesture solely towards the presumed white gaze (outward self-policing). A frequent position of ideologically committed black writing rests primarily on the "credit to the race" motif which, in addition to engaging the presumed white readership, also tends to throw a cautionary or mildly reproachful glance towards African American community itself, thus resorting to inward communal self-policing. This basic version of inward self-policing, in which the writer effectively assumes the mantle of a "race leader" and speaks *ex cathedra*, also has its inverted typology, namely self-reproachful position. In this inverted typology, the writer is aware of his or her limelight position as an interface with the white audience, and shows concerns that this limelight in fact makes him or her pariah among his or her own people. This paranoia then results in a literary stance that emphasizes "race loyalty", thus seeking to heal the rift ensuing from the writer's or character's elevated status, verging on the liminal. Both of these positions (cautionary and self-reproachful) are responding to presumed audience, which is why they fit the description of *panopticism*.

Panoptical prison and the shackles of literary essentialism

As was adumbrated in the previous section, Panopticon as an interpretive tool for African American ideological fiction is not confined only to *explicit* communal self-policing browbeaten by the white gaze. The panoptical principle can also be used as an analogy of what Walter Mosley calls the "chain of reality", thus prefiguring Gene Andrew Jarrett's complaint that the creative decisions of African American writers have been "shackled" by the notion that a black writer must address *recognizably black topics* in order to earn a canonical position.¹³ Given the entrenched white privilege within the US publishing industry and literary criticism, even this notion betrays distinctly panoptical overtones.

The progression could be described as follows. Until fairly recently, African American writers relied predominantly on white readership. It was therefore up to the white critical and

¹² This "knee jerk" reflex of panoptical self-policing subsumes several taxonomic strands, all of which have had some bearing on the shaping of African American literary canon. One of them has to do with the self-policing reflex instigated by the self-appointed leaders of the black community, the other can be described as academic racial profiling. Both of them in effect insist that black writing should display distinctly racial overtones, be it social uplift (advocated by W.E.B. Du Bois) and overt confrontation (Richard Wright), or slightly less recognizably ideological typologies of so called *black realism*. This is prefigured in the subsequent section (Panoptical prison and the shackles of race) and elaborated in the final section of subchapter 2.1 and at the beginning of subchapter 2.2. The trajectory of the dissertation uses Du Bois's self-policing communal and literary reflex as the shared underlying motif, thereby largely relegating the essentialist typology to the background.

¹³ Gene Andrew Jarrett, *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007) 1.

literary establishment to elevate some books or writers and relegate others, thereby shaping the African American literary canon. This tendency to handpick authors or books according to an ethnic template was gradually internalized by the black literary community and it can be argued that it was, until very recently, understood as the publishing standard endorsed by many black writers themselves. This does not assume that every author writes with a clear cut idea as to who his or her intended readers are, yet it is admissible to assume that these formulaic expectations of a clear-cut African American canon inevitably exert certain panoptical pressures on an aspiring black writer. This has been attested to by many modern day authors, with the above quote by Mosley being just a tip of the iceberg. The decision to break away from this tradition and pursue palpably non-racialist (and therefore potentially non-canonical) artistic objectives can therefore be seen as a dissenting position within the African American literary community. This strand of panoptical concern relates primarily to the *reception* of black literature, yet a black writer's awareness of his or her audience occasionally even features as a literary theme, as will be discussed in chapter 4.

In summary, the word panopticon as used in this thesis, and as relating to the writerly choices of Charles Richard Johnson, stands for the self-disciplining reflex which early African American literature developed vis-à-vis its white readers, and also with regard to the increasing ideological pressures from the black community itself. At its most extreme, this reflex may amount to censorship, when some African American writers are explicitly asked to rein in their creative pursuits lest they tarnish the black community. In a less extreme (yet very prevalent) panoptical scenario, it can be surmised that the creative choices of African American writers are preemptively shaped in response to the canonical core of black literature, predicated on the formulaic notions of assimilationist *social uplift*, or nationalist *protest fiction* and *racial realism*.

Panopticon as a rhetorical trope

There are several ways in which panopticism can make an appearance in a piece of fiction. The most obvious way is intra-diegetic, when a character or narrator of a story overtly expresses concerns about the white majority view or, inversely, about the cautionary communal black gaze. The other is inter-diegetic, when the text itself is, explicitly or implicitly, communicating something that can be readily understood as an attempt to engage the white gaze. This is done typically by way of explaining something to the white readership, or by challenging or confronting the white readership. The explanatory position, later invoked by Charles Johnson as “spokesperson” interpretive position, will be referred to as an *exegetical trope* within the scope of the thesis. The challenging position, repeatedly referenced by Robert Bone or Gene A. Jarrett,¹⁴ will be referred to as an *exhortative trope* within the scope of the thesis. Both of these are implied within the content of Paul Friedrich's definition of *modal tropes*, which are defined solely on rhetorical basis. Friedrich defines this modal metatropes as “a group of tropes [which] includes expressions of mood that run from emphatic assertion to passivity to outrage to joy to command to sarcasm to threat to pathos to

¹⁴ This is addressed in some detail in subchapter 2.2.

assertion to question to[...] irony.”¹⁵ On a purely linguistic basis, his definition of modal tropes largely aligns with the *affective function* in pragmatics. This function characterizes the “affective involvement” of the speaker with a view to his or her relative position vis-à-vis the recipient of the conversation (typically organized along the *subordinate-equal-superior* scale). In other words, the “attitudinal lexis” and other nuanced linguistic devices reflect the tenor or emotional attitude of the speaker towards the presumed target of his or her utterance, with *subordinated status* generally producing a more formal discourse (less affectivity) and *equal status* result in a less formal discourse (i.e. more affectivity).¹⁶

The formal/spontaneous dichotomy is not very useful as a taxonomic instrument under our circumstances, as we are not aiming for a close up linguistic analysis. However, the extrapolated notion that the tenor of an utterance within a literary text may reflect the acknowledged *subordination* or presumptive *egalitarianism* of the speaker or character is very applicable to African American ideologically-tempered rhetorical tropes. This taxonomic prism therefore yields two basic attitudinal metatropes, namely the *exegetical* and *exhortative* attitudinal trope. The exegetical trope is typically defined as an attempt on the part of the literary character or narrator to explain some nuance about the black community to the presumed white readership or audience. The exhortative trope, on the other hand, expresses a putatively reproachful stance toward the presumed white readership or audience.¹⁷ The *exegetical trope* is singled out as a metonymic umbrella that connotes explanation, but also panoptical anxiety, subservience and defensiveness. The *exhortative* trope, on the other hand, metonymically connotes confrontation, agency and offensiveness, yet it is obviously also triggered by panoptical vigilance.

1.1.1.2 Complementary classificatory tools

The analytical part of this thesis combs through Charles Johnson’s short fiction with the aim of identifying short stories that seem to be built on the classic typologies of African American ideological writing, a feature which would contrast with Johnson’s scholarly endorsements of non-partisan writing. Johnson has frequently articulated his resentment at the way in which the white critical establishment saddles African American writers with the task of “interpreting the black experience,” thereby coercing them into the position of spokespeople for the race.¹⁸ This statement sits awkwardly next to some of his fictitious writings which seem to assume the very panoptical and exegetical position which he criticizes. Johnson has also repeatedly expressed his disdain for overtly didactic, socially committed and racially invested art, and yet some of his own fictitious writings seem to display these leanings, on surface reading. The practical part of the thesis therefore seeks to establish whether some of

¹⁵ Paul Friedrich, “Polytrophy,” *Beyond Metaphor: The Theory of Tropes in Anthropology*, ed. James W. Fernandez (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) 30.

¹⁶ Suzanne Eggins, *Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics: 2nd Edition* (London: Continuum, 2004) 100-101.

¹⁷ The constraints and depredations of a black writer’s implicit appointment as a communal exegete catering to the white audience are discussed with reference to Charles Johnson in subchapter 4.1.

¹⁸ Charles Johnson, “The Role of the Black Intellectual in the Twenty-first Century,” in *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing* (New York: Scribner, 2003) 85.

the most racially invested and didactic stories by Charles Johnson align with his proclaimed non-partisan artistic tenets.

While panopticism is a useful tool that subsumes many of these typologies, and its presence in a story will be regarded as a *prima facie* confirmation of its ideological nature, it still falls short of *explicitly denoting* all argumentative and mimetic positions in black fiction that can be legitimately seen as ideological. In short, not all ideological typologies within black writing can be *directly* attributed to panoptical paranoia. This is why the interpretive prism used to scrutinize Johnson's fiction needs to have an auxiliary component, one that would account for recognizably ideological situations which cannot be directly linked to panoptical anxiety, even though they most probably originated therein.

In order to build a comprehensible supplementary taxonomy of typologies that would subsume the plethora of ideologically induced literary scenarios in African American writing, the eclectic choice was a *sociologist typology* as recently theorized by Ethan Goffman (*nationalism/assimilationism*), and *biologist typology* based on the foundational phenotypic prism of natural inheritance as formulated in the 1900s by Wilhelm Johannsen, who codified the concept and semantics of the term "gene".

Drawing on Sander L. Gilman's seminal book *Freud, Race, and Gender*, Ethan Goffman defines the assimilationism as "[d]ouble consciousness, incessant self-perceptions through the assumptions of a hostile society" and, more importantly, the tendency of the underprivileged group to "project dominant cultural ideals upon themselves,"¹⁹ thus largely aligning with Frantz Fanon and W.E.B. Du Bois. The obvious logical and structural counterpart is the *nationalistic* typology, theorized by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* and, less overtly, in *Black Skin, White Masks*. This assimilationist/nationalist dichotomy is also a crucial component of Robert Bone's analysis in his foundational survey of African American novel up to the early 1960s. This dichotomy will constitute one complementary classificatory prism through which to assess the actions and pronouncements of characters that populate Charles Johnson's short fiction. A palpable demonstration of either of these typologies (overt leanings towards assimilation or the converse leanings towards nationalism, black agency and communal self-sufficiency) will be treated as circumstantial evidence that the story is written in the vein of *tendentious committed art*.

The second and possibly even more self-explanatory dualism ensues from the *biologist* or *phenotypic* prism which yields the antithetical typologies of *derogatory essentialism* and *affirmative essentialism*. Derogatory essentialism connotes phenotypically-informed *deprecation or self-deprecation*, and its extreme spinoff, *internalized racism*. Affirmative essentialism, on the contrary, connotes phenotypically-based racial loyalty and *race pride*.²⁰

¹⁹ Ethan Goffman, *Imagining Each Other: Blacks and Jews in Contemporary American Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000) 10.

²⁰ It is important to note that my deployment of the word *phenotypic* as synonymous to *racialist* is an intentional extrapolation beyond the original observation range. Johannsen's early genetics might have laid the groundwork for the widespread pseudoscientific racism of the 1900s and beyond, yet his research and conclusions, much like the research of his pioneering predecessor Gregor Mendel, pertained solely to plants. In addition to this, by endowing the as yet invisible "gene" with a name and linking it to "heredity" or "inheritance" (legalistic terms typically related to property transmission), Johannsen in fact created a catachrestic trope in its own right. Elizabeth Parthenia Shea, *How the Gene Got Its Groove: Figurative Language, Science, and the Rhetoric of the Real* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008) 8, 37.

This binary typology obviously tends to appear often (though not exclusively) in combo with the social dichotomy, as *derogatory essentialism* seems to be logically pairing up with ethnic *assimilationism* and *affirmative essentialism* with ethnic *nationalism*. As has been pointed out, a distinct appearance of either of these typologies in a piece of fiction is also understood as an indication of panopticism, as all four positions are triggered by the white gaze.

Literary epitomes of biologist and sociologist typologies, and modal tropes, are provided in chapter 3.

1.1.1.3 Dichotomy of committed art

This section will briefly characterize Theodor Adorno's notion of autonomous committed art, its partial convergence with Roland Barthes's connotations of myth, and the potential deployment of this combined classification towards rehabilitating the authorial autonomy of what may otherwise appear to be a piece of tendentious writing.

The primary grounding of this complementary prism ensues from Theodor Adorno's distinction between *tendentious* and *autonomous* committed art as expressed in his essay "Commitment to Art". Adorno formulates this dichotomy in response to proponents of overtly political writing like Jean Paul Sartre or Bertolt Brecht. This responsive critical stance presents a considerable methodological challenge, as Adorno does not attempt to demarcate a clear line between tendentious and autonomous art, he only seeks to dissociate his own autonomous position from those of Brecht and Sartre, invariably using ostensive definitions instead of precise conclusive statements. In doing so, Adorno clearly assumes that the readers will glean the difference from a string of examples linked in a free associative method. Also, while his implied distinctions are certainly applicable and valuable in their own right, they still do not specifically address the ideological dilemma of minority ethnic fiction. Adorno's ideas of ideological engagement are primarily centered on the issues of class struggle and anti-totalitarian dissent, not on ethnic emancipation or uplift. This is why the thesis only teases out Adorno's and Barthes's overlapping concept of *covert* artistic *signification* and then uses this principle as a basic assessment criterion and a fixed point of reference.

Since both Adorno and Barthes invariably prefer to make their points by ostensive definitions, i.e. by giving illustrative examples rather than committing to an explicit definition, this passage will proceed in a similar vein, eventually using these examples towards forging a rudimentary classification system.

Adorno distinguishes between *autonomous* and *tendentious* commitment in art, chiefly with respect to the directness of the communicated message. Tendentious art articulates an overt political statement or attitude, while autonomous committed art does not explicitly articulate any such message, yet it still manages to communicate it by covert or subliminal means. Even this implicit commitment still performs some ideological exposure, albeit only "at the level of fundamental attitudes".²¹ As opposed to unintentional caricature, Adorno emphasises the importance of art which covertly signifies on real life events, yet does so

²¹ Theodor Adorno, "Commitment to Art," *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Classic Debate within Marxism*, (London: Verso, 1977/2002) 180.

within its own hermeneutics. This artistic approach should not under any circumstance stoop to the pedestrian realistic representation which it could be held accountable for (by similarly pedestrian minds, needless to say). He illustrates this position by the following anecdote:

An officer of the Nazi occupation forces visited the painter in his studio and, pointing to *Guernica*, asked: “Did you do that?”. Picasso reputedly answered, “No, you did.” Autonomous works of art too, like this painting, firmly *negate empirical reality* [...].²²

Adorno’s definition of autonomous (as opposed to tendentious) socially engaged writing therefore hinges on the premise that the writer must not launch a direct mimetic attack on the target of his or her criticism, because in so doing, s/he is either dragged down to the level of social pamphleteering or, worse, misrepresents or trivializes the subject through metonymical overstatement or conflation.²³ Instead, the cautionary tale should not be directly administered but obliquely insinuated, ideally in a free associative way which effectively disjoins the literary work from the direct mimeticism of the cautionary message.

In contrast to Adorno’s deflation of metonymy as a means of communicating a cautionary message, Roland Barthes endorses the merit of metonymic shortcut in a very short essay “The Poor and the Proletariat” included in the *Mythologies* collection. This is what he has to say about Charlie Chaplin’s portrayal of an ever-hungry man in his 1936 film *Modern Times*.

For Chaplin, the proletarian is still the man who is hungry; the representations of hunger are always epic with him: excessive size of the sandwiches, rivers of milk, fruit which one tosses aside hardly touched. [He] roughly corresponds to the worker of the French Restoration, rebelling against the machines, at a loss before strikes, fascinated by the problem of bread-winning (in the literal sense of the word), but as yet unable to reach a knowledge of political causes[...]. But it is precisely because Chaplin portrays a kind of primitive proletarian, still outside Revolution, that the *representative force* of the latter is immense.²⁴

This anecdotal example endorses Adorno’s notion that *indirect signification* is the only way to go, otherwise the writer or artist will stoop to literalist muckraking that may successfully preach to the converted but will hardly spark up enthusiasm or empathy in indifferent or

²² Theodor Adorno, “Commitment to Art,” 190. Emphasis added.

²³ Adorno uses the unfavorable example of Brecht’s allegorical play *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941), a thinly disguised parable that mimics Hitler’s rise to power in Germany. Adorno argues that, despite its allegorical garb, the cautionary message is force-fed to the audience in a way that obliterates all subsidiary nuance, which does not only compromise the literary merit of the play but also makes it less effective in delivering the point. The congested symbolic plotline does not do justice to the “slow [and gradual] concentration of power” and, while the overall point is clear enough, the usurpation still looks like a “mere hazard, like an accident or crime.” Theodor Adorno, “Commitment to Art,” 184.

²⁴ Roland Barthes, “The Poor and the Proletariat,” *Mythologies*, transl. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957/1991) 38-39; emphasis added.

mildly hostile audiences. Barthes reiterates on his position in other essays within the *Mythologies* collection, emphasizing the importance of artistic understatement.²⁵

The definition range of autonomous committed art, ensuing from an overlap between Adorno and Barthes, can be boiled down to the following two maxims. Both of them presuppose some degree of *political* or *ideological commitment*, but differ in their accentuation of *mimetic veracity* and *overtiness of the ideological message*.

- (1) *Autonomous* committed art either understates or indirectly signifies, in an honest effort to avoid factually misleading metonymical connotations (the Chaplin example).
- (2) *Autonomous* committed art furnishes its own hermeneutic framework. Its *sole purpose* is *not* to mimetically signify on real life events (the Picasso example).

The one common denominator of *autonomous* committed art which we can tease out from these maxims is therefore its *indirect signification* on real life events that have some ideological resonance. Moreover, especially the second maxim allows the interpretation that autonomous art also includes works which are overtly political, yet they also *allusively engage topics beyond their literal meaning*. In that case, a piece of writing may explicitly address some explicitly ideological theme and still remain autonomous, as long as it also indirectly alludes to other issues of social consequence. In other words, allusive multiplicity or intertextuality, in the widest applicable sense, is a saving grace.

1.1.1.4 Structured inquiry and summary assessment

Let us see how this applies to Charles Johnson's fiction. Johnson identifies himself "first and foremost" as "a writer of philosophical fiction".²⁶ This is readily understood as a direct encouragement to read his stories as dramatized philosophical treatises. The unfortunate aspect of this interpretive pitch hinges on the word *philosophical*, which is a rather nebulous term, under closer scrutiny. Since Johnson also refers to Toomer's *Cane* as a philosophical novel, arguing that Toomer "looked at everything, beginning with the nature of the self,"²⁷ it

²⁵ This draws on Barthes's concept of strong and weak myths. Covert "mythical" narrative tends to dilute and weaken political vibrancy (with a growing distance from the source), but it can be resurrected under the right circumstances. This does not include writings whose mimetic attachment to real-life is so weak and ambiguous that it renders them ideologically neutral. Roland Barthes, "The Myth Today," *Mythologies*, transl. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957/1991) 143-144.

²⁶ Jim McWilliams, "An Interview with Charles Johnson," *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson*, ed. Jim McWilliams (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004) 275. William R. Nash, "A Conversation with Charles Johnson," *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson*, ed. Jim McWilliams (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002) 222. Johnson has used this self-definition on numerous other occasions.

²⁷ Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais, "An Interview with Charles Johnson," *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson*, ed. Jim McWilliams (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002) 246-270. Johnson credits Toomer as the first black "trailblazer" who made the "imaginative journey east" and became well acquainted with the teachings and philosophy of George Gurdjieff. Charles Johnson, "Sangha by Another Name," in *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing* (New York: Scribner, 2003) 51. By the same token, Johnson sees Jack London's "peculiar blend of Nietzsche and Marx" as a feature that gives his writing "a philosophical personality". William R. Nash, "A Conversation with Charles Johnson," *Passing the Three Gates*, 232. Neither of these two examples, however, connotes what we understand as a formal or established method of

may be assumed that he uses the term in a broader sense to denote fiction which goads the reader to ponder existential and philosophical problems (even though they may ensue from a narrow racialist narrative platform). However, when applied to his own fiction, Johnson quite noticeably employs the word *philosophical* in reference to *philosophical erudition*. This can be seen as a rather unfair and undemocratic interpretive pitch, as it presumes *niche audience* acquainted with the fundamentals of ontology and epistemology and, perhaps even more importantly, with the realm of phenomenology, which is Johnson's professional specialty.

If a novel or short story, ostensibly written on a racialist topic, also indirectly signifies on larger philosophical issues, this indirect signification can certainly prevent one-track tendentious readings. However, since this signification overtly relies on the reader's prior *expertise* in philosophy, it can hardly be seen as a universal antidote that can redeem an otherwise tendentious story. This is why the analysis generally tries to look for *intertextual signification* of the stories as a redeeming factor, relegating their possible *allusions to specific philosophical discourse* to the background.

To conclude: the first step in examining Johnson's stories will reside in establishing its explicit racial and ideological investment. The second compensatory step will reside in the attempt to rehabilitate the stories by establishing that they allude to things beyond the literalist frame of the story.

The analysis will seek to link the behavior and thinking of Johnson's characters to the panoptical self-vigilance motif, which is in itself seen as a confirmation of ideological leanings. It will be complemented by an inquiry about the modal or rhetorical stance assumed by the characters (*exegetical* or *exhortative*). As a complementary inquiry, an attempt will be made to ascertain the degree to which the thinking or behavior of Johnson's characters, or the musings of the narrator, *directly signify* on issues of race. The racialism of Johnson's stories will be assessed through a twofold taxonomy, namely the *biologist* dichotomy (race loyalty versus internalized racism) and *sociologist* dichotomy (assimilationism versus black nationalism). Both of these in fact constitute an indirect confirmation of panoptical anxiety, yet they will be treated as separate items.²⁸ Eventually, an attempt will be made to counter all these by intertextual or allusive meanings found beyond the literal narrative frame of the story, thereby reestablishing it as a piece of autonomous fiction.

All included, the tendentious or autonomous character of Johnson's short fiction will be assessed according to the following structured inquiry:

- 1) **Panoptical inquiry:** Does the story under examination display any overt signs of panoptical paranoia, delivered either through characters or the narrator? Are their actions or thoughts in any way shaped by the awareness of the white gaze or their own obligations towards the black community? If so, that aspect of the story supports the tendentious²⁹

philosophical inquiry, one which Johnson clearly presupposes in the reading of *his own* fiction.

²⁸ If the story under scrutiny displays very overt features of panopticism or racial investment, the first step of the inquiry (1-4) can be dealt with cursorily. As a general principle, distinct panoptical theme is enough to indicate the overt ideological nature of the story under examination.

²⁹ Tendentious writing is defined in opposition to (1) autonomous writing with covert ideological significations or (2) writing that either makes no mimetic claims whatsoever or is completely politically disengaged (art for art's sake).

ideological matrix of African American fiction, and therefore belies Johnson's universalist maxims.

- 2) **Panoptical modal inquiry:** Do characters or the narrator of the examined story communicate in either an *exegetical* or *exhortative* stance vis-à-vis the white or African American community at large? Do they seek to explain some aspects of the black life to the presumably uninformed audience? Do they caution or reproach the presumed audience? If so, that aspect of the story supports the tendentious ideological matrix of African American fiction, and therefore belies Johnson's universalist maxims.
- 3) **Essentialist inquiry:** Does the story under examination overtly invoke themes of race loyalty or internalized racism? Are these themes used in conjunction with the standard ideological typologies or tropes?³⁰ If so, that aspect of the story supports the tendentious ideological matrix of African American fiction, and therefore belies Johnson's universalist maxims.
- 4) **Assimilationist inquiry:** Does the story under examination overtly invoke themes of assimilationism or black nationalism/separatism? Are these themes used in conjunction with the standard ideological typologies or tropes? If so, that aspect of the story supports the tendentious ideological matrix of African American fiction, and therefore belies Johnson's universalist maxims.
- 5) **Intertextual inquiry:** Does the story under examination have allusive potential that goes beyond its immediate literalistic message? Is there any tangible textual evidence that would link the story to some other stories, thereby extending its interpretive potential? If so, it suggests that Johnson's writing does align with Johnson's universalist maxims.

The first four items seek to establish the *tendentious* nature of the story in question, while the last intertextual inquiry seeks to re-classify the story as *autonomous*. If a story features a distinct case of panopticism pertaining to an African American character or characters, the essentialist and assimilationist inquiries do not need to be used.

This roster cannot possibly aspire to taxonomize every single nuance of ideologically invested writing in Johnson's fiction, yet it can be quite productive as a basic frame of inquiry. As is further explained in chapter 4, one collection of Johnson's stories was explicitly commissioned for ideological purposes, in which case it can be presupposed that the tendentious nature of these stories, most of which directly signify on historical events, will be obvious. The standard prism will be applied even in these cases, yet it will also be complemented by the inverse principle, namely the attempt to find indirect significations which do not instantly reveal themselves. In summary, the analysis applies obtusely racist reading to stories which Johnson proactively labels as "philosophical" and, inversely, seeks to rehabilitate stories which overtly pose as racist and tendentious.

³⁰ These standard ideological typologies or tropes, as distilled from canonical African American fiction, are addressed and substantiated in chapter 3, with reference to concrete epitomical examples. The word trope as used throughout the thesis generally aligns with Friedrich's definition range which does not connote the narrow literary meaning but rather the larger meaning denoting "a common or overused theme or device" which borders on a "cliché".

1.1.2 Auxiliary theory and terminology

As has been pointed out, the thesis also makes at least sporadic use of several other theoretical outlooks. These may be relevant with regards to some specific phenomena discussed within thesis, yet they have virtually no bearing on the central argument.

Socioeconomic perspective (Michael Parenti, Robin G. Kelley)

The (largely Marxist) sociological perspective is sporadically mobilized by way of exploring the tentative claim that committed African American fiction has not become completely irrelevant today, with a view of the lingering underprivileged status of the African American community. This subsidiary socioeconomic analysis is built around Michael Parenti's distinction between *procedural* and *substantive* democracy. It subsumes the notions that African American community, by dint of its unrelenting underdog status, has sometimes functioned as (1) a litmus paper indicating the hierarchism that belies the egalitarian rhetoric of the Founding Fathers and (2) a catalyst of upward social movement for other (though considerably less) underprivileged groups, but also contemplates the possibility (3) that the African American community may have made significant upward strides in procedural terms, but not necessarily in substantive terms.

Derridean pharmakon

The tradition of ideologically induced self-correcting tendencies in African American literature, which can be seen as motivating or potentially stultifying in terms of artistic autonomy, can be analogically described by the Platonist/Derridean pharmakon, where one substance "acts as both remedy and poison"³¹. This can be used as an analogical way of describing several aspects of African American fiction and art in general. As has been indicated, African American literature and art were largely born out of ideological needs and considerations. It can therefore be argued that what proved remedial in the fledgling stages of black American literature and art gradually acquired rather noxious connotations along with the changing social and cultural climate, as the formulaic demands of ideology can become an unwelcome strait-jacket which actually hampers artistic development. This analogy is repeatedly used throughout the thesis, yet it does not constitute an interpretive methodology.

Mimesis

The word *mimetic* is employed in throughout the text to stand for two different meanings. The standard intended meaning draws Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics*,³² as later

³¹ Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981) 75.

³² Even this implies a purposefully selective reading, as the Platonic and Aristotelian notion of mimesis covers a wide range of distinct semantic phenomena. Some of these are rather negative, perhaps most obviously the artist's tendency towards what could be described as metonymic fallacy, i.e. misrepresenting a real-life object by emphasizing some of its features, thereby (unfairly) relegating some other features to the background. See Paul Woodruff, "Aristotle on Mimēsis," *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992) 73-97. The most relevant aspects are discussed on pages 74 through 85. The

extrapolated and re-contextualized by Auerbach.³³ It therefore connotes primarily the notion of art reproducing or even impersonating outward reality.

So when a novel is arguably making “mimetic claims”, it means that the work in question is not a self-referential system, but instead it comments on the surrounding reality, doing so in a palpable and overt fashion. This word forms a binary opposite with the word “diegetic”, which should be (in the context of our argument) understood as referring solely to the narrative itself in a rather insular fashion, i.e. making no (extra-diegetic) claims that overtly engage the real world at large. However, in the section cursorily dealing with the early modern film industry and its panoptical influences on the black community in late 19th and especially early 20th century, the word “mimetic” is understood as a pictorial representation of the written word. While this connotation is routinely used in film criticism, it is important to realize that such a definition is very reductive and potentially misleading.

1.2 Outline of chapters

The first segment of the first chapter establishes the theoretical framing of the dissertation. Its main focus is on the primary methodology which will inform both the expository and analytical part, namely the figurative concept of Foucault’s Panopticon which will be used as the most obvious feature of ideological writing. Panopticon will be complemented and developed by typical typologies and tropes³⁴ of ideological black writing (1.1.1.2). In order to pinpoint the dividing line between tendentious and autonomous writing, section 1.1.1.3 distills a rudimentary taxonomy of socially engaged art from Theodor Adorno’s “Commitment to Art” and Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies*. In addition to this primary interpretive prism, a separate section is also devoted to theoretical concepts which do not necessarily underlie the central argument yet they still have some bearing on several ideological aspects of African American writing discussed within the thesis (1.1.2). Subchapter 1.3 introduces the main sources which were employed in the process of devising this thesis.

Historical and expository chapter 2 offers a rather lengthy chronological review of circumstances that informed and tempered the *development of self-policing tropes* in African American literature. The first subchapter (2.1) provides a sweeping summary of the ideological uses of black writing, briefly spanning its fledgling stages and later development.

metonymic fallacy principle has a palpable bearing on the discussion about African American protest fiction, and will be briefly referenced in the pertinent section.

³³ The intended content of the term as deployed in the dissertation partly overlaps with Auerbach’s deliberations on the mimetic claims of French realist and naturalist prose, particularly in relation to the marriage of convenience between stark naturalism and mercantile sensationalism which Auerbach discusses in chapter Germinie Lacerteux. However, this dissertation does not explicitly refer to Auerbach because his perspectivist taxonomy, though fairly applicable to African American communal and literary development, would inevitably dilute the respective section of the dissertation and throw it out of focus. See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953/2013) 493-524.

³⁴ The thesis does not use the literary connotation of the word trope as a poetic figure of speech, but in the second meaning, namely “a common or overused theme or device” (Merriam Webster).

The implicit purpose of this segment is to provide a historical counterpoint to Charles Johnson's endorsement of non-partisan literature, thereby drawing attention to the fact that his notion of writing purged of all ideological concerns is wildly out of sync with the time-tested default of African American writing. The chapter then proceeds to distinguish between ideological typologies and tropes that characterized African American writing and art during the early postbellum period and the first decades of the 20th century (2.2).

The early defensive tropes and typologies in African American writing developed in response to the racist claims of late 19th century. It is therefore important to anchor the African American defensive reflex in the larger realities of the US in the 1890s through 1920s, namely to the biologizing racialism of that era, when eugenics assumed the status of conventional wisdom. Subchapter 2.2.1 therefore seeks to provide a wider basis from which to assess the defensive literary discourse that emerged in direct response to this racist mindset.

Considering the fact that the notion of using artistic expression as an overt political platform overlapped with the advent of new and far-reaching filmic medium, commensurate attention needs to be devoted also to ideological concerns in early black film. This also reflects the fact that the most obvious attestation to this trend, Oscar Micheaux, was also a published novelist whose career intersected with that of Charles W. Chesnutt, possibly the most canonical embodiment of assimilationism and communal self-policing in early African American letters. (2.2.2)

The last three segments of the chronological exposition begin with a significant *breakaway point* in African American writing, namely the modernist decades of the mid 1920s through 1930s. This era, characterized by Alain Locke's New Negro movement, saw the first palpable break with the ideological self-policing paradigm, punctuated by several iconic public disputes about the degree to which the freedom of African American writers should be tempered or hampered by considerations of their (presumably white) readership. The paradigm of self-policing was to a large degree replaced by the New Negro paradigm of ideologically unrestrained writing, typically drawing on black lore and spontaneous self-expression. It can be argued that this new paradigm was sanctioned, if not induced, by the (white) modernist reverence for spontaneity and primitivism as an antidote to repressive Victorian morality, in which case the New Negro paradigm would also be to some degree fit the panoptical template. However, from the older self-policing perspective, this new paradigm was typically seen as a careless or even ostentatious mannerism whose net result was to cement some entrenched essentialist stereotypes held by the white reading public. The modernist art versus politics debate in mid 1920s through 1930s can be understood as the classic "pendulum of literary evolution,"³⁵ yet it can be argued that it set the tone for decades to come. Seen through this prism, all the subsequent disputes concerning the ideological responsibilities of black artists can be seen as variations on the topics brought up during the

³⁵ The phrase is loosely referring to the notion that virtually every literary epoch, as articulated by its luminaries, tends to define itself in opposition to the preceding one. This "[s]hift of dominants" underlying the transition from the "expressive literature of the romantics" to the presumably more objective literature of realists and modernists, as a result of a "contrast between normative and individualistic epochs," is explored in a considerable detail by Jakobson, Mukařovský and, more recently, Lubomír Doležel. See Lubomír Doležel, "Structuralism of the Prague School," *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume 8, From Formalism to Poststructuralism*, ed. Raman Selden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 56.

modernist controversies. This is why the historical trajectory stops in the 1930s and only sums up the subsequent development. This applies even to the writerly positions of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, and the openly confrontational paradigm of the Black Power Movement. The basic ideological stances and typologies African American writing were firmly established by the 1930s, which is why no specific attention is paid to the period of late modern and postmodern writing.

Chapter 3 provides a very brief summary and illustration of most discernible panoptical tropes in African American literature. In addition to explicitly panoptical narrative stances (the character or narrator explicitly expresses or displays awareness of the larger audience), the taxonomy also exemplifies three other panoptical ideological typologies. Panopticism can be expressed in rhetorical or modal means, which yields a dichotomy between *exegetical* and *exhortative* narrative tropes, drawing on the linguistic category of affective function (the emotional tenor carried by a speech act). Panopticism is also implied by the dichotomies of assimilationism vs. nationalism (a sociologist prism) and affirmative derogatory essentialism (racial self-deprecation) vs. affirmative essentialism (race pride). These typologies are then illustrated with reference to canonical African American literature, frequently using excerpts from fiction or poetry. All of these tropes and typologies are understood as tendentious, which will be used in the course of the subsequent text analysis as a contrast to indirect and allusive significations in Charles Johnson's short fiction which subvert these fixed ideological positions.

Analytical chapter 4 then focuses on a pre-selected segment of Charles Richard Johnson's short fiction. The choice of Charles Johnson as a practical case in point for this type is based on a twofold premise, namely his outspoken criticism of partisan or ideological writing, expressed largely in his non fiction, and also the beneficial methodological vantage point ensuing from his liminal or amphibious position as both a literary scholar and a novelist. Charles Johnson is, by his own estimate, the only African American writer of fiction who has written a "book-length critical work of aesthetics",³⁶ thereby straddling the dual occupation of a novelist and literary theorist like no other African American author. And it is precisely this amphibian quality, plus Johnson's oft proclaimed endorsement of non-partisan art, which informed the choice of this author as the focus of my analysis. The introductory part of chapter 4 implicitly acknowledges that Charles Johnson was to some degree inoculated against openly political art and writing during his Black Power Movement apprenticeship years (4.1), yet his writing often reaches further back and creatively regurgitates older discursive tropes of black writing.³⁷

³⁶ "The M&C Interview 1: Charles Johnson, 6/07," *Wayback Machine, Monsters and Critics*, May 28, 2007 <URL> 22 Dec 2008
<https://web.archive.org/web/20081222043612/http://www.monstersandcritics.com/books/interviews/article_1308738.php/The_M%26C_Interview_1_Charles_Johnson_6_07> 13 Aug 2015.

³⁷ This distinction aligns with the Marxist dichotomy coined by Robert Bone in the 1960s, with the *self-policing* mode overlapping with *assimilationist* literary typology and the *confrontational* mode semantically overlapping with Bone's definition of *nationalist* literary impulse. On closer examination, both of these imply some aspect of panopticism, as briefly explained in chapter 3.

The close-up analysis sections in chapter 4.2 examine seven stories which display very overt didactic and racist overtones. A perfunctory reading of these racially invested and antithetical stories would suggest that they in fact concur with the formulaic template of “racial melodrama” as frequently criticized by Johnson. In six of these stories, the paratextual circumstances make it clear that they were to a limited degree commissioned for ideological purposes, even though Johnson dismisses the notion that this would compromise his autonomy. This alone makes them conducive to tendentious readings, thereby very palpably belying Johnson’s non-partisan creed. The creation of the seventh short story under examination was not surrounded by any ideological tampering, yet it overtly displays a similarly antithetical and racist message.

The basic structural and thematic similarities between the seven stories are established *prior to the analysis*, i.e. they are the selection criterion, not the focus of the analysis itself. The analysis tends to approach each story separately, seeking to do two things in turn: first, it seeks to confirm the overtly tendentious nature of the story (with the help of the tendentious typologies outlined above); then it seeks to rehabilitate the story’s autonomy, by looking for allusions and significations that either elude or subvert the tendentious literal reading of the story.

As has been pointed out, the analytical part examines Johnson’s *short* fiction. Novels are sporadically referenced within the respective sections, yet only at an ad hoc basis. This selective focus on short fiction ensues primarily from the fact that short stories generally lend themselves to formulaic templates and synoptic readings in a way that complex novels do not, thereby accommodating the chosen interpretive methodology. In addition to this, the choice was also influenced by the relative scholarly neglect of some of the stories, unlike Johnson’s novels, which have been subject to very exhaustive literary analyses.

1.3 On sources

The theoretical part of the thesis explores the discrepancy between the earliest and the most recent analytical summaries of the developmental trajectory of African American literature, namely the seminal 1958 book *A Negro Novel in America* by Robert Bone, and one of the most recent and comprehensive developmental analyses by Gene Andrew Jarrett, *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature* (2007). Jarrett’s insistence on a racist canon, inaugurated by what presumably provides an authoritative and accurate representation of the African American community, is a recognizably ideological position, one that has resonated through seminal 20th African American scholarship such as Houston Baker’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1984) and Henry Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey* (1988). In a broader perspective, this straddling of the ideological and aesthetic perspective is given a very thorough examination in *The Ideologies of African American Literature: From the Harlem Renaissance to Black Nationalist Revolt* (2001) by Robert E. Washington, some of whose conclusions and inferences are summoned in connection to the first major art-vs-politics clash during the modernist decades.

My discussion of the entrenched essentialist and pseudo-scientific stereotypes, which shaped the defensive communal reflex among African American race leaders, draws overwhelmingly on a uniquely comprehensive and informative summary *Sociology and The Race Problem* (1993) by James B. McKee. The respective section of the dissertation only utilizes the first chronologically organized sections of McKee's overview, in temporal alignment with the most pronounced art-vs-politics discussions within the African American intellectual and literary community of the 1920s and 30s. McKee's central argument springs from his incredulity about the fact that virtually no American sociologist in the first half of the 20th century anticipated the black Civil Rights Movement. Instead of such a *grassroots* cataclysmic event, these scholars envisioned "a slow, orderly development" on an evolutionary trajectory "from traditional to modern society",³⁸ or a gradual loosening of the Jim Crow by means social reform administered in a *top-down* manner.³⁹ This misleading paradigm of *top-down* racial uplift is later revisited within a larger context furnished by Marxist criticism of the foundational myth of American democracy, addressed very poignantly in Michael Parenti's *Democracy for the Few* (2011) and in a more oblique fashion also in his *The Assassination Of Julius Caesar: A People's History Of Ancient Rome*, both of which are sporadically used also in the close-up analysis.

Parenti's thesis that the developmental trajectory of Western pluralistic democracy has been shaped exclusively by a bottom-up process of grassroots campaigning that pits working class interests against entrenched oligarchic privilege inevitably also resonates with African American social uplift. This analogy has recently been comprehensively theorized by African American social historians such as Robin G. Kelley or Earl Lewis. In their jointly written introduction to 2005 book *To Make Our World Anew: Volume II: A History of African Americans Since 1880*, Kelley and Lewis foreground African American contributions towards the democratic populism of the Reconstruction and Progressive decades of late 19th century and beyond. Parenti's and Kelley's notions of bottom-up democracy are also invoked during the discussion of several analytical subchapters, perhaps most pertinently the discussion of Johnson's story "The People Speak".

In addition to Foucauldian Panopticon, the taxonomy of African American typologies, introduced in chapter 3, relies on an eclectic mix of biological, sociological and linguistic sources. The biologist or phenotypic typologies in African American writing are derived from Elizabeth Parthenia Shea's insightful and inventive rendering of Wilhelm Johannsen's theory of genetic inheritance formulated at the beginning of the 20th century. Shea's 2008 book *How the Gene Got Its Groove: Figurative Language, Science, and the Rhetoric of the Real*, which charts the cross-section between the physically impalpable texture of early genomic theory and the figurative language that was used to define genetic inheritance. The sociologist typologies used towards assessing the behaviour of characters along the assimilationist-nationalist scale were borrowed from Ethan Goffman's 2000 book *Imagining Each Other: Blacks and Jews in Contemporary American Literature*, while the modal tropes were distilled

³⁸ James B. McKee, *Sociology and The Race Problem: The Failure of a Perspective* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993) 11.

³⁹ James B. McKee, *Sociology and The Race Problem*, 39-43.

from Paul Friedrich's study "Polytropy," published in the early 1990s within a compendium *Beyond Metaphor: The Theory of Tropes in Anthropology*.

The close-up examination of Johnson's fiction is previewed by a representative inventory of his opinions as a literary scholar, relating to the benefits and depredations of political and racially informed black writing. This section relies largely on *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970*, Johnson's updated doctoral thesis which still remains his major accomplishment in the realm of literary and philosophical scholarship. This main source is then sporadically complemented with Johnson's observations from his most recent book of nonfiction, *The Way of the Writer: Reflections on the Art and Craft of Storytelling* (2016), some of which are overlapping with snippets of wisdom from his 2003 collection *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing*. The combined merit of *The Way of the Writer* and *Turning the Wheel* resides overwhelmingly in their ability to straddle various literary theories and philosophical/Buddhist axioms while at the same time providing insight into creative writing strategies. This becomes particularly relevant during the discussion of Johnson's employment of discursive fiction as a means of delivering a nuanced philosophical point in an appealing narrative package.

This introduction is then followed by subchapters based on the close reading sections by overtly political and autonomous typologies in Johnson's short stories, with an occasional comparative look at some of his novels. The analysis seeks to disjoint itself from the dominant *philosophical* prism typically deployed in the process of interpreting Johnson's novels and short stories, and instead opts for a more pedestrian and deliberately racist reading of Johnson's stories. Regardless of this interpretive idiosyncrasy, several books of literary scholarship dealing with Johnson's oeuvre were consulted as a complementary source throughout the process of conceiving and writing the analysis.

Jonathan Little 1997 book *Charles Johnson's Spiritual Imagination* provides an eclectic look at Johnson creative arc, with a predominant focus on prose written in the late 1970s through 1980s. More palpably than any other Johnson scholar, Little begins his survey with a long stop at Johnson's early career as a cartoonist, using this early entanglement with the tendentious art of the Black Aesthetic Movement as a catalytic and cautionary impulse that reverberates through Johnson's subsequent writerly pursuits. Little's analysis, although "hijacked" by the a priori philosophical interpretive prism as a fixed point of reference, has contributed several valuable insights towards my reading of Johnson's short stories. Like many other Johnson scholars, Little tends to structure the progression of his analysis predominantly around novels, with an occasional acknowledging glance towards Johnson's short stories, thereby providing an inverted pattern to my own interpretive roster. Regardless of this preemptive bias, Little's discussion of Johnson's prose provided useful context towards my analysis. Similar pattern of eclectic inspiration is also applicable to Gary Storhoff's 2004 book *Understanding Charles Johnson*, and *Charles Johnson: The Novelist as Philosopher* written by Mark C. Conner and William R. Nash in 2007. Linda Selzer's analyses in *Charles Johnson in Context* (2007) also tend to retain the loose interpretive frame of philosophical inquiry, yet they do not shy away from biographically informed or racist readings, thereby occasionally overlapping or intertwining with some fragmentary analyses within this thesis,

perhaps most obviously in our respective discussions of Johnson's story "Alēthia." Also my reading of Charles Johnson's "Executive Decision" marginally draws on William Gleason's article in 2009 anthology *African American Culture and Legal Discourse*.

II. BLACK WRITING AS A PHARMAKON AND PANOPTICON

"The strong, puritanical Protestantism of black religion has not been conducive to the production of pictures. For the same reason, there is a great belief in the power of the word, in literate acumen. In fact, writers are sometimes given too much status and become "spokespeople" for the race, which is ridiculous."⁴⁰

Cornel West

2.1 The trickster autodidact and other early tropes

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.⁴¹ This is why African American writing was, from its very onset, underpinned by ideological and often openly political intent, and typically invested

⁴⁰ Anders Stephanson, "Interview with Cornel West," *Universal Abandon?: The Politics of Postmodern*, ed. Andrew Ross (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 284.

⁴¹ To highlight the victim status of African Americans even in juxtaposition to Native Americans is a tentative and debatable proposition. The only tenable case for the relative significance of the African American cause can perhaps be made on the simple basis of demography. The African American plight is inevitably demonstrably in the public eye because African Americans (without combinations with other races) make up over 12 per cent of the US population, while Native Americans and Alaskans only account for less than one per cent. Arguing on such a populist basis is inescapably cynical, especially in view of the genocidal legacies of Manifest Destiny, yet it still constitutes a recognizably democratic method of classification. See US Census Bureau, Table 14. "Percent Distribution of the Projected Population by Nativity, Hispanic Origin, and Race for the United States: 2015 to 2060," <http://www.census.gov>, *U.S. Census Bureau*, 17 Nov 2014 <URL> 3 Dec 2014, <<http://www.census.gov/population/projections/data/national/2014/summarytables.html>> 12 May 2016.

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”⁴² 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”⁴³. 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.⁴⁴ 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”.⁴⁵ 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 teenage 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.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

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

⁴² Frederick Douglass, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave,” *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Penguin, 1987) 274.

⁴³ Frederick Douglass, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave,” 279.

⁴⁴ John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 231.

⁴⁵ Frank W. Sweet, *Legal History of the Color Line* (Palm Coast: Backintyme, 2005) 161.

⁴⁶ Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The life and times* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001) 44.

⁴⁷ Richard Wright, *Black Boy, A Record of Childhood and Youth* (New York: Harper, 1945) 293.

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.⁴⁸ 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”.⁴⁹ This trope is further enhanced by his retrospective comment that even “[i]n the 1960s and earlier, a black student had to be an autodidact, someone who became skillful at doing research on his own and teaching himself what our schools did not offer.”⁵⁰

The importance of literacy for African American communal progress does not only pertain to subversive strategies that challenge the status quo. In fact, the theme of literacy was often mobilized by many local registrars with the explicit aim of hampering black participation in the democratic election process in various parts of the United States. The post-Reconstruction introduction of literacy tests, generally paired up with “grandfather clause” to selectively disenfranchise black population in the South while retaining illiterate white constituency, had a drastic impact on the democratic legitimacy of many local state administrators and municipal councilors. Bertrall Ross singles out Louisiana as a case in point. Within several years after the introduction of literacy tests, “the number of black voters [in Louisiana] dropped from 130,000 in 1896 to 5,320 in 1900.”⁵¹ In an inverse scenario, “six southern states” saw more than a 1.1 million increase of black voters within five years of passing the 1965 Voting Rights Act which “temporarily suspended” literacy tests.⁵²

Perhaps even more ominously, even after the racially selective grandfather clause was officially declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1915, the literacy tests (which continued until 1965) were obviously still heavily lopsided against the underprivileged and undereducated black population, proportionally speaking. More importantly, this inherited demographic slant was further exacerbated by the fact the registrars of voters “administered the tests in a discriminatory manner” giving otherwise eligible black voters “more difficult provisions to read and write or *interpret*”, while also assessing their performance with less leniency than in the case of white voters.⁵³ Since this phrase actually invokes text interpretation, one may argue, with some overstatement, that a large number of African

⁴⁸ Charles Johnson, “Northwestern Commencement Address, 1994,” *I Call Myself an Artist: Writings by and about Charles Johnson*, ed. Rudolph P. Byrd (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) 141.

⁴⁹ Charles Johnson, “Northwestern Commencement Address, 1994,” *I Call Myself an Artist: Writings by and about Charles Johnson*, 141.

⁵⁰ Charles Johnson, “Afterword,” *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, eds. John Whalen-Bridge and G. Storhoff (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009) 232.

⁵¹ Bertrall Ross, “Literacy tests,” *Encyclopedia of U.S. Campaigns, Elections and Electoral Behavior, Volume 1*, ed. Kenneth F Warren (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008) 375–376, 375.

⁵² Bertrall Ross, “Literacy tests,” 376.

⁵³ Ross, “Literacy tests,” 375. Emphasis added.

Americans in many parts of the United States had to repeatedly prove their *literary* prowess in order to exercise their constitutional rights.

Such a testing of literacy and literary abilities by way of validating one's claim on first class citizenship or even humanity is prefigured by many earlier examples. Perhaps the most famous of these is the case of black colonial poet Phillis Wheatley who, in 1772, was asked to defend the authorship of her poems before a committee of eighteen notable white citizens of Boston who openly suspected her of plagiarism, loftily assuming that African Americans were generically incapable of this level of sophistication. Through this act of politicizing her literary endeavours, the self-appointed literary committee basically singled Wheatley out to counter the stereotype of the irredeemable intellectual inferiority of the "sable race",⁵⁴ to paraphrase her own words.

In all of these cases, literacy and literariness functions as a double-edged sword which may either *hamper* or *assist* African American social uplift. The dominant classes in the South (both before and after the Civil War) tended to use illiteracy by way of keeping African Americans *in the dark*, to torture a Manichean phrase. In response, many African Americans were confronted with the political relevance of writing and some famously resorted to trickster strategies in order to acquire literacy and empowerment.

The deployment of written language, literature and adopted cultural tropes as assimilationist or nationalist instruments towards social uplift is best seen in the larger transatlantic context. Franz Fanon sums up the trope of cultural appropriation very incisively in his seminal book on colonialism, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). A black person is routinely "appraised in terms of the extent of his assimilation," Fanon argues, it is therefore only logical that a black person striving for assimilation "will be whiter still as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool"⁵⁵.

In Fanon's mid 20th century context, this acquisition of the white cultural paraphernalia, beginning with literacy in the language of the colonizer, did not function only as assimilationist mimicry but also an instrument of confrontation. An articulate, literate and self-aware black person, Fanon argues, leaves any white interlocutor "completely baffled" by virtue of being impervious to the usual patronizing "game". Such a cultural appropriation leaves the white interlocutor with the uncomfortable realization that s/he is dealing with "a complete replica of the white man", which is why "there is nothing to do but to give in". Such cultural appropriation may smack of social opportunism, yet it should not be made synonymous with it. More typically, it should be regarded as an elaborate defense, a trickster strategy. "Nothing is more astonishing than to hear a black man express himself properly", concludes Fanon, "for the truth is that he is putting on the white world."⁵⁶

Fanon endorses the notion of articulate literacy as a defensive maneuver of the colonized people of the Caribbean and Algeria, which was technically not the case of the early postbellum American South, yet the general thrust of his observation is accurate even in relation to the peculiar institution in the US and its hierarchical legacies.

⁵⁴ Phillis Wheatley, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," in *Poems of Phillis Wheatley: a Native African and a Slave* (Bedford: Applewood Books, 1995) 12.

⁵⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986) 38.

⁵⁶ Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 36.

The politicization of literacy and the prohibitive tendencies towards literacy acquisition can be seen 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 readership⁵⁷ 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.

2.1.1 Thou shalt not tarnish thy neighbor's life

Throughout the antebellum, Reconstruction and Progressive periods the outward self-policing oscillated between struggle and accommodation, between a challenging and placating writerly

⁵⁷ Phillis Wheatley in fact did not need to *presume* the existence of the white normative gaze. In 1772, she was asked to substantiate the authorship of her poems in front of a committee of self-appointed Bostonian intellectuals who tested her poetic merit in a manner comparable to the Jim Crow literacy tests administered two centuries later. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003) 7. This is briefly addressed in the first close-reading section of the analytical part.

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”,⁵⁸ 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”.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹ 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

⁵⁸ Paul Laurence Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask,” *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, ed. Joanne M. Braxton (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1913/1993) 71.

⁵⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1903/2003) 9.

⁶⁰ Wayne F. Cooper, *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987) 244.

⁶¹ Darwin T. Turner, “Du Bois and the Theory of the Black Aesthetic,” *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: W.E.B. Du Bois*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 2001) 50.

improbable happy ending” and overly belaboured “defeatist theme”,⁶² 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 in 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”.⁶³ This challenging trend of protest fiction 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. Even this inverted typology can be loosely subsumed in the general description of ideologically motivated artistic self-policing, both inward and outward.

2.1.2 Uncle Tom and Brother Karl: the classist divide

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

⁶² Darwin T. Turner, “Du Bois and the Theory of the Black Aesthetic,” 51.

⁶³ Richard Wright, “Between Laughter and Tears,” *New Masses* 5 (October 1937): 23.

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-à-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 ostentatiously 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”.⁶⁴ 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”.⁶⁵

If we choose to approach this trend from a Marxist perspective, 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”. While

⁶⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth.” *The Negro problem*, eds. B.T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, P. L. Dunbar and C. W. Chesnutt (New York: AMS Press, 1903) 31-75.

⁶⁵ Henry Lyman Morehouse, “The Talented Tenth.” *The American Missionary* 50.6 (June 1896): 182.

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”⁶⁶, 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”.⁶⁷ 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”.⁶⁸

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”,⁶⁹ 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 descriptive analogy is the double-faceted Platonist/Derridean pharmakon, where one substance “acts as both remedy and poison”.⁷⁰ 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

⁶⁶ Rolland Murray, “The Time of Breach: Class Division and the Contemporary African American Novel,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 43:1 (2010): 12.

⁶⁷ Nicole King, “‘You think like you white’: Questioning Race and Racial Community through the Lens of Middle-Class Desire(s),” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 35.2/3 (2002): 212.

⁶⁸ Cornel West, “The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual,” *The Prentice Hall Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Rochelle Smith and Sharon L. Jones (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000) 1079.

⁶⁹ Philip Schofield, *Bentham: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2009) 93. For a more in-depth periphrastic rendition, see Greg Elmer, “Panopticon—discipline—control,” *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies*, eds. David Lyon, Kirstie Ball and Kevin D. Haggerty (New York: Routledge, 2012) 23-27.

⁷⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981) 75.

this principle assisted the very origin of African American literature, which was, broadly speaking, born out of historical necessity/convenience and midwived 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",⁷¹ 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*",⁷² 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 pharmakon 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".⁷³ 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, one which will be addressed in more detail in the respective chapter.

The pharmakon 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.

⁷¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Criteria for Negro Art," *The Crisis* 32 (October 1926): 296.

⁷² Linda F. Selzer, *Charles Johnson in Context* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009) 2. Emphasis added.

⁷³ Eric Walrond, "Art and Propaganda." *The New Negro: Readings on Race, representation and African American culture, 1892-1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007) 255.

Having taken a cursory glance at the overall characterisation of ideological infiltrations into African American literary discourse, let us now take a closer look at the most significant self-policing typologies and tropes as they proceeded from the changing zeitgeist of the American society at large and the African American community in particular.

2.2 Remedial stage of black ideological writing

As was mentioned in the introductory chapter, the development of ideological incursions into early black writing can be charted along two very different diachronic trajectories, depending on what we see as the dominant mode of literary discourse. The main thrust of our thesis tends to echo Robert Bone's position which perceives the ideological leanings of early African American literature as an artistic corollary or footnote to the socially upward aspirations of the black middle class. In this framing, the formation of tentative African American literary canon in late 19th century was occasioned by a bottom-up grassroots movement, ensuing largely from the nascent black middle class. The dominant ideology of this literary discourse was social uplift, underscored by literary attempts to counter negative essentialist stereotypes and insinuate the assimilationist notion that the "Talented Tenth" within African American middle class could and would buy into the American dream ideology of the Gilded Age. The "Talented Tenth" novelists might have been class elitists in the closet, yet their literary pursuits tend to emphasize "personal obligation to serve the race," a fact that Bone attributes to "repressed guilt" triggered by their own modest success. The most appropriate literary vehicle for this kind of didactic message was novelistic melodrama, a genre that looked painfully outdated when juxtaposed against the realistic and naturalistic milieu of the 1880s. This early literary anachronism arguably set back the entire developmental trajectory of black American literature, which is why its chronology keeps trailing behind the American literary mainstream, Bone concludes.⁷⁴ This "trailing behind" is also presumably the reason why African American writing has been so reluctant in parting with overtly ideological overtones, at odds with overall literary trends.

A very different view of this early developmental trajectory is offered by Gene Andrew Jarrett who singles out *realistic racial representation* as the linchpin of early black writerly ideologies. Perhaps even more importantly, Jarrett does not see this typology as percolating from the bottom up. On the contrary, he argues that the notion of "pure" black literary tradition was articulated and cultivated by self-appointed "deans", i.e. public and literary personages whose influence was sufficient to make or break an author or, on a larger scale, to single-handedly mould a new literary trend. The writers who did not fit the mould were typically dismissed as disingenuous anomalies. Jarrett rather playfully suggests that the first *dean* of postbellum black literature was William *Dean* Howells, a major white realist writer of the Reconstruction and Progressive era and, more importantly, a very influential literary critic. Regardless of the painstakingly realist thrust of his own writings, and despite

⁷⁴ Robert A. Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1965) 15.

his progressive political leanings,⁷⁵ Howells thought that vernacular black lore, in the vein of the black minstrel tradition, was where the soul of the black race dwelled. Through this essentialist prism he came to single out and reify the dialect poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar as an embodiment of the most pristine and resilient black artistic expression, thereby downplaying the merit of many African American literary works of the era which did not fit this racist template (which incidentally also included a significant portion of Dunbar's poetry and fiction).⁷⁶

Howells's essentialist canon-making prism, Jarrett concludes, is guilty of applying a different set of criteria in the critical assessment of white and black writers. While the literary merit of Stephen Crane's *novels* was adjudicated against mimetic veracity and other criteria dictated by the prevalent realistic aesthetics, Dunbar's collection *Majors and Minors*, published and reviewed less than a year after *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), was praised chiefly on the grounds of its presumed *ethnic authenticity*. Jarrett puts a question mark over this tendency on the part of the (white and black) critical establishment to use sociological or anthropological criteria as a critical yardstick towards the canon-formation of black literature, regarding it as the root cause of the delayed genre development in African American writing.⁷⁷

Hence the wildly discrepant views of early postbellum African American fiction. For Robert Bone, the assimilationist overtures towards upward social mobility found in the work of (phenotypally Caucasian) Charles Chesnut or Pauline E. Hopkins, or even Laurence Dunbar's socially invested novel *The Sport of Gods* (1902),⁷⁸ were the epitomes of African American literature of the last decade of the 19th century. In Gene Jarrett's analysis of the same period, the literary discourse (at least from Howells's mainstream critical perspective) was dominated by an eclectically defined strand of folksy racial realism "that came from the pen of "a pure African type"" like Dunbar.⁷⁹

Some effort will be made to maintain this binary prism throughout our diachronic discussion of ideologically informed black writing. However, the thesis focuses primarily on *explicitly* ideological overtones of African American literature, a definition which more obviously aligns with Bone's scope of inquiry. In contrast, Jarrett's concept of political writing is often used synonymously with *racial realism* sanctioned by the approving nod of the canon-makers. This is why Bone's dated analysis will generally be used as the first characterization, with the occasional corrective lens provided by Jarrett's book and other more recent scholarly renditions of the subject.

In order to provide a quick synopsis of the early development of African American fiction, we may therefore refreshingly delve into the pre-PC era of literary criticism, and borrow the

⁷⁵ Howells was a member of the Anti-Imperialist League, founded in 1898 as an attempt to offset the expansionist appetites of the US political and military establishment.

⁷⁶ Gene Andrew Jarrett, *Deans and Truants*, 28-32.

⁷⁷ Jarrett, *Deans and Truants*, 14-16, 32-33.

⁷⁸ As Jarrett points out, Laurence Dunbar, who in fact "viewed the world through racial uplift ideology", soon came to resent Howells's essentialist mantra, despite the fact that his well-meaning yet narrow-minded adulation had catapulted Dunbar to fame. *The Sport of Gods* can therefore be read as Dunbar's deliberate attempt to wrench himself free from the straitjacket of black minstrelsy and social amnesia. Jarrett, *Deans and Truants*, 55.

⁷⁹ Jarrett, *Deans and Truants*, 32.

scholarly lingo and perspective of the late 1950s and early 1960s, even though it may verge on the politically incorrect by today's standards.

In rather blunt language, Robert Bone describes the inception of early African American novel in late 19th century as a cultural spin-off produced by the nominally black middle class whose historical origins he ascribes to “the nocturnal escapades of countless male aristocrats who tried valiantly to wash a whole race whiter than snow.” Through this crass and racialist rendition of the “house Negro/field Negro” dichotomy, Bone suggests that even though manumission of mixed-race offspring was largely constrained by the Southern law, their liminal status was often tentatively recognized and cemented by selective division of labour.⁸⁰ As a result of this headstart, Bone argues, the aspiring African American middle class made good use of their relative advantage by “entrench[ing] themselves as small proprietors, white-collar workers, and independent professionals”⁸¹ in the postbellum decades, despite the tragic setbacks of the white supremacist backlash of the 1870s through 1910s, keenly felt in many parts of the country.

Having thus defined the *infrastructural* development of the social hierarchy within the post-slavery black community in the US, Bone proceeds in his proto-Marxist argument by identifying the early black novel as the cultural *superstructure* ensuing from the former. Within the social and cultural context of the “expanding economy” of the Gilded Age, mimeographed in the rags-to-riches stories of Horatio Alger (and their more realistic counterparts like Howells's *Silas Lapham*), the nascent black American social and cultural elite embraced the American Protestant pro-capitalist ethos, emphasizing the importance of “[t]hrift and industry, initiative and perseverance” and other “property acquiring virtues”. This “American success ideology” then invariably “finds its way into the early [African American] novels”, many of which openly promote communal vigilantism by cautioning against idleness and self-indulgence (within the black community, that is), thereby suggesting that racial uplift should be “regarded as synonymous with individual success”.⁸² This assimilationist and socially upward thrust is even more demonstrable in some early 20th century novels which, as Robert Bone puts it, seem to “treat the color line as nonexistent or unimportant [and] argue that there is no [racial] barrier to success which diligence and perseverance cannot hurdle.” The main black characters of these novels are often cast in the role of iconic 18th and 19th century American typologies, such as the pioneer or empire builder.⁸³ Perhaps even more importantly, the protagonists of these novels do not prove their mettle in opposition to whites, but in contrast to ““lazy” or “indifferent” members of the race who, in their view, willfully refuse to succeed”.⁸⁴

These intra-communal injunctions, which populate the novels of Chesnut, Hopkins, Micheaux and others, can be seen as the opening act of panoptical self-policing in postbellum African American fiction.

⁸⁰ Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 12.

⁸¹ Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 13.

⁸² Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 13.

⁸³ Bone refers specifically to Oscar Micheaux's *The Conquest* and *The Forged Note*, Henry Downing's *The American Cavalryman* and Mary Etta Spencer *The Resentment*. Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 49. Micheaux's literary and filmic work will be given some attention in the next section.

⁸⁴ Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 49.

In order to grasp the context of these black-on-black exhortations, or Howell's quasi-anthropological appreciation of Dunbar's poetry, and the narrative trope of racial uplift which partly ensued from this essentialist and supremacist attitude, we need to step back and briefly juxtapose this issue against topics which dominated the public discourse of the late 19th and early 20th century United States. The most prominent of these, at least in relation to the focus of this thesis, were the subjects of *social equality* and *biological inheritance*. Let us therefore briefly examine the biologist or hereditary public discourse, and the ensuing hierarchical contestations, both of which contributed toward shaping the panoptical defensive tropes among African American writers and public intellectuals at the dawn of the new century.

2.2.1 Signifying on Darwin: the white man's burden revisited

The traditional way of looking at the genealogy of the slowly improving status of the African American community is often rather solipsistic, as it generally perceives the pigmentocratic servitude system of the American South as a one-off aberration within the new republic where all men were presumably created equal. This kind of myopic outlook tends to relegate all the other social injustices and racial animosities in the 19th century United States to the background. It is of course hard to argue against the uniquely underprivileged social position of the black population during slavery, if only because of their chattel status. However, their relative situation during postbellum decades in the United States is best appreciated in a more pluralistic context, thus reassessing their plight as one of many similar (though not quite as pronounced) cases of underprivileged ethnic groups striving for their rightful place in America in the face of nativist and openly racist demagoguery.

There were certainly specific antebellum aspects which set the African American case apart from the other underprivileged groups, for example the routine justification of racial slavery by means of the allegorical hijacking of the biblical Hamitic myth, according to which the darker races are meant to be subservient for eternity. However, regardless of idiosyncrasies like the Hamitic myth, whose relevance died off with slavery, it is much more fruitful to see early post-bellum African American leaders who struggled for political recognition as part of a larger group of people of foreign extraction who, in the mind of some white supremacists within the US academia and administration, threatened to erode the national purity of the United States in 1890s through 1920s. Seeing African Americans as one of many such groups with similar concerns in turn helps address the stereotypes which African American leaders were struggling with, the very same stereotypes which African American art and literature sought to discredit, or at least not endorse. Incidentally, the African American post-slavery struggle for recognition makes a nearly perfect overlap with the period when the American sociological discourse was almost entirely dominated by two offshoots of Darwinian and Lamarckian biology, namely Spencer's Social Darwinism and Galtonian Eugenics.

So let us step back and make a sketchy summary as to how this originated. The postbellum decades saw an unprecedented economic growth in the United States. Clyde Prestowitz argues that "between 1870 and 1900, America surged ahead of Britain in virtually

every sector of economy”.⁸⁵ The booming economy of the Reconstruction, Gilded Age and the Progressive Era in turn increased the attractiveness of the USA as the land of economic opportunity, which resulted in an unprecedented influx of immigrants from less fortunate parts of the world, particularly from Europe.

This horizontal migration across the Atlantic, which brought 18.2 million new immigrants to the United States between 1890 and 1920,⁸⁶ also coincided with in-state vertical migration of rural black population from the South to Northern industrial cities like Detroit or Pittsburgh in search of better livelihood and less permanent racially induced social stratification. The Northerners had to accommodate a disproportionate bulk of immigrants of all ethnic backgrounds, be it African Americans from the South, or penurious people from Eastern, Central and Southern Europe. White Southerners, on the other hand, were trying to retain and validate their supremacy in the dramatically changed conditions of the post-bellum American South. As James McKee points out, the last decades of the century were marked by “the struggle of white Southerners to restore racial domination”, but also by “sustained effort in Europe and the United States to provide scientific evidence for the claim of a qualitative ordering of the human races,”⁸⁷ thereby buttressing white privilege. Early on, these pseudo-scientific theories generally made little distinctions between individual ethnicities within the Caucasian race, but with the continuing and increasing immigration from Europe, even more nuanced distinctions within the white race tended to be amplified.

Social Darwinism and also eugenics became an integral part of late 19th and early 20th century public discourse. Extreme hereditarian views espoused by Madison Grant, Lothrop Stoddard and many others reflected a wide spectrum of racist or racialist sentiments across the United States, ranging from xenophobic nativism of the presumably “Nordic” population mobilized in face of the increasing immigration from Central, Eastern and Southern Europe, or the rejuvenation of the Ku-Klux-Klan in the post-Reconstructionist South.⁸⁸ It is again important to mention the fact that this racist and elitist gospel in scientific garb did not discriminate solely against the darker races, but also phenotypically Caucasian ethnic groups from Europe which sought asylum in the States because of the Russian Revolution, and the gradual breakup of two large empires in Europe, the Habsburg Empire and the Ottoman Empire. In his 1916 influential essay called *The Passing of the Great Race*, Madison Grant included this following exhortation.

The prosperity that followed the war attracted hordes of newcomers who were welcomed by the native Americans to operate factories, build railroads, and fill up the waste spaces—“developing the country,” it was called. [...] The transportation lines advertised America as a land flowing with milk and honey, and the European governments took the opportunity to unload upon

⁸⁵ Clyde Prestowitz, *The Betrayal of American Prosperity: Free Market Delusions, America's Decline, and How We Must Compete in the Post-Dollar Era* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010) 59.

⁸⁶ Thomas J. Archdeacon, *Becoming American: An Ethnic History* (New York: The Free Press, 1984) 113.

⁸⁷ James B. McKee, *Sociology and The Race Problem*, 24.

⁸⁸ McKee, *Sociology and The Race Problem*, 55-80.

careless, wealthy, and hospitable America the sweepings of their jails and asylums.⁸⁹

If we read this paranoid drivel through the prism of modern linguistic sensibilities, perhaps the most interesting point is Grant's confident use of the collocation "native Americans", summarily referring to the WASP. Such roundabout categorical assessments of race and privilege informed the antebellum discourse in relation to the African American community.

Another contributive reason why the issue of African American public self-representation, plus the ensuing communal self-vigilance, became a nearly obsessive component of black middle class life at the turn of the 19th and 20th century, was the global colonial apologetics. Up until mid 19th century, the subservience of the darker races of the world had been regarded as self-evident, either in Manichean terms, often engrafted on Christian teachings, or through the messianic gospel of "mission civilatrice" and its more palpably predatory North American clone, the Manifest Destiny, concepts which were summarily invoked in Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem "The White Man's Burden". In late 19th century, these white supremacist notions were given a further boost due to the Darwinist doctrine of survival of the fittest, almost immediately metamorphosing into Spencerian Social Darwinism and Galtonian eugenics. Even before the rediscovery of Mendelian genetics, the racial hierarchies were seen as virtually immutable, sanctioned by biology as well as culture. As Bruce Nelson puts it, in reference to Ireland (the first victim of English colonial appetite), "science, history, and literature facilitated the construction of informal hierarchies of races based on the argument that racial traits were either in the blood, and therefore innate, or inculcated by centuries of cultural evolution until they became almost irreversible."⁹⁰

For a long while, American sociology, inculcated with popular eugenics and Social Darwinism, confidently relied on the biology of the day to lend credence to its large claims. And this was indeed the case until early 1920s, when the advancements in genetic research basically dismantled the notion of genetically endowed and innate racial superiority or inferiority. This rather abrupt withdrawal of scientific support and credibility took many heritagist pundits and sociologists by surprise and gradually forced the quasi Darwinian eugenicist supporters to relinquish biological endowment in favour of cultural inheritance as a driving factor of racialist social stratification. If we take a general assessment of the entire three decades between 1890 and 1920s, what is striking is that the notions of racialist superiority and inferiority were actually reinforced in the teeth of increasing scientific evidence to the contrary. As Lawrence A. Hirschfeld incisively sums it up, the Western "essentialist reasoning about race took on a more scientific mantle just when the natural sciences were abandoning essentialism as a biological doctrine."⁹¹

Even after the arrival of the new genetics, American sociologists of the early decades were, quite understandably, unwilling to part with what they perceived as hard scientific

⁸⁹ Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race, Or A Racial Basis of European History* (Inianapolis: The Palingenesis Project), 76-77.

⁹⁰ Bruce Nelson, *Irish Nationalists and the Making of the Irish Race*, 5.

⁹¹ Lawrence A. Hirschfeld, *Race in the Making: Cognition, Culture, and the Child's Construction of Human Kinds* (London: MIT Press, 1998) 60.

premises and testing methods and admit, for example, that the IQ tests performed by the Army may actually be culturally biased and thus deceitful, which was a point made for example by philosopher Walter Lippman. In other words, the withdrawal of genetics as an allied discipline to the eugenicists' cause did not fundamentally change the mindset of the mainstream American sociology of that era, particularly when concerning race. In fact, it can be argued, and McKee does argue, that "many sociologists in the late 1920s chose to straddle the issue", so while they conceded that culture was a major factor in shaping one's intellectual performance, "the still gave some credence to heredity".⁹² However, while the insistence on a qualitative difference between Nordic and other white races had been laughed off the table by late 1920s, some racist preconceptions pertaining to the African Americans lingered on. So let us take an inventory of some specific essentialist claims and stereotypes which presumably needed to be countered, not endorsed, in black art and literature. It is very instructive to survey these essentialist accusations hurled at the African community, as they obviously informed the defensive counter-propagandistic reflex on the part of African American ideological leaders like Du Bois.

Lady among the races

Pseudo-scientific claims about the irredeemable difference of African people had circulated even before Darwinism and various its updates monopolized the racialist debate. In the late 1840s and early 50s, physician Josiah Clark Nott tried to mount a scientific apology of black enslavement on the grounds that their "physical endurance and limited mental capacity made them a race especially suited for slavery". This apparently beat the path for some other proponents of "scientific" racism. Samuel Cartwright even argued that "the propensity of slaves to run away was not a natural desire for human freedom," attributing it instead to a disease he called *drapetomania*. Similarly, an illness called *dysaesthesia aethiopica* was deemed responsible for the "rascality" of some slaves.⁹³

James McKee identifies three overlapping stages in the effort of Southerners (and some Northerners) to lend scientific credibility to their deep-seated feelings of racial supremacism. These are: "a naturalistic effort to identify racial traits by measuring various dimensions of the human body", "an effort to fit ideas of racial superiority and inferiority into [then fairly recent] Darwin's evolutionary theory" and, the latest of all, the Lamarckian "theory of inheritance".⁹⁴

The most obvious example of the measuring attitude is the infamous phrenology, i.e. the attempt to infer human capacities from the shape of a person's skull. This system was not really replaced or upset by the newly arrived Darwinian framework. On the contrary, the evolution theory was promptly appropriated by white supremacists who saw it as a scientific confirmation of the White man's colonial burden which consisted in patronizing (and frequently preying on) the "nonwhite races [which] had proven incapable of evolving".⁹⁵

⁹² McKee, *Sociology and The Race Problem*, 91.

⁹³ "Slavery, Paternalism, and Antebellum Southern Culture," *Slavery in the United States: A Social, Political, and Historical Encyclopedia, Volume 1*, ed. Junius P. Rodriguez (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2007) 117.

⁹⁴ McKee, *Sociology and The Race Problem*, 24.

⁹⁵ McKee, *Sociology and The Race Problem*, 24.

The Darwinian selection mechanism, semantically tweaked by the social evolutionist Herbert Spencer into the famous “survival of the fittest” principle, thus became the backbone of scientific validations of supremacist tendencies in the US, the brunt of which was born by the African Americans. The smooth extrapolation of biological premises into social and economic human sphere should not come as a big surprise, as we must not forget that even Darwin’s notion of scarce natural resources as the driver of selection had been to some degree inspired by Malthusian economics and social science.

In the closing decade of the 19th and the opening decades of the 20th century, American sociology of race groped uneasily between the changing biological premises and the virtually unchanging public opinion. The bulk of US sociologists of that era responded to two very different stimuli when it came to assessing the prospects of the black community in the United States. On the one hand, their “nurture vs. nature” paradigm had been shaped by the inherited essentialist notions of race, firmly embedded in the opinions of expert and lay public, but they also had to contend with the new findings of genetic research which all but invalidated these essentialist claims. In order to bridge this chasm, some major sociologists of that period resorted to selective Darwinist interpretations of what they saw as culturally-induced race differences. These theories sought to explain some willfully perceived “character features” of African Americans, such as lax work ethic and unrestrained sexual behavior, as a cultural behavioral pattern which had presumably been shaped by the original African environment: the abundant resources were seen as conducive to laziness, while the dangerous life in wilderness might have fostered sexual proclivity as a way of offsetting high mortality rate.⁹⁶ These pseudoscientific theories, which had partly grown out of the Eugenic movement, held considerable sway up to the mid 1920s. It is therefore quite productive to use them as a backdrop against which to read the communal self-vigilance in early African American literary and public discourse.

The overall Darwinian public mindset relegated African Americans to the realm of spontaneity rather than rationality. This had several relatively benign aspects such as the insistence that African Americans were genetically endowed with kinesthetic talents and artistic gifts in general. However, in the binary logic of the late 19th and early 20th century sociologists, this relative benefit had to be counterbalanced by some deficiency. So when the leading American sociologist Robert Park, widely acknowledged as a friend of the black people, called African Americans the “lady among the races”, he presumably meant this as a conjecture that they “show a tendency to select from the complex American culture the artistic rather than utilitarian values,”⁹⁷ as Edward Reuter explained in his 1927 book *The American Race Problem*. This pseudo-compliment thus inevitably lends itself to the interpretation that the “ladylike” aestheticism of the African Americans is in fact a less socially contributive and more childlike preference than utilitarian pragmatism, despite the fact that Park himself clearly distinguished between “racial inferiority” and innate “racial

⁹⁶ McKee, *Sociology and The Race Problem*, 75.

⁹⁷ Edward Byron Reuter, *The American Race Problem: A Study of the Negro* (Crowell, 1970) 80.

temperament”.⁹⁸ The list of innate African American temperamental dispositions which Edward Reuter mentions also includes the claim that they are “sociable, [...] readily obedient and easily contented.”⁹⁹ Essentialist notions like these seem to have been the main reason why American sociologists failed to foresee the black emancipationist movement of the late 1950s and 60s, a scholarly myopia which feeds the central thesis of James McKee’s book *Sociology and the Race Problem*.

Escalating stereotypes: A spontaneous hedonist or sexual assailant

The oft proclaimed and theoretically codified spontaneity of the African American also had its darker side. The neo-Darwinian attempt to describe African Americans as more natural human beings also led to the allegations of their lack of sexual restraint. The early attempts to “theorize” this cultural stereotype used strictly Darwinian lingo. For example James Elwood unashamedly claims that African Americans developed in the tropics, which presumably abound in natural resources, which is why Elwood perceives them as “lazy and shiftless”. However, he further claims that the tropics are generally more conducive to premature death, which is why “nature fixed in the negro strong sexual propensities” in order to ensure a higher birthrate to offset that risk.¹⁰⁰ Sexual proclivity may sound vaguely flattering, but if we rephrase it as a lack of sexual restraint, it is obvious that the original spontaneity compliment was likely to deteriorate onto more sinister stereotyping. The most extreme racial stereotype that ensues from this kind of thinking is the black rapist bogeyman which, as Joel Williamson argues, developed in the American South in the 1880s as “a stereotype that reflected white fears about new black social and economic freedoms,” which was the trigger for a wave of lynchings in the late 1880s through late 1890s.¹⁰¹

These incendiary stereotypes, summarily attached to African American population at the turn of the 20th century, can be seen as a major impetus of the communal self-policing tendencies within the African American cultural community at the beginning of the 20th century, namely the widespread notion that ethnic art, and writing in particular, should be harnessed as a subliminal vehicle towards uprooting the negative stereotypes associated with the ethnic group and, in so doing, to assist the social uplift of the community. And this is precisely what some major writers and artists of that period did.

2.2.2 Counterpunch: mimetic shadowboxing in the early 20th century

It has been mentioned that many late 19th and early 20th century African American writers resorted to melodrama, even though it might seem a rather outdated genre. This assessment, however, is only true in retrospect, with the hindsight validation of canonical literary giants

⁹⁸ Robert Ezra Park, “Mentality of Racial Hybrids,” *Race and Culture: The Collected Papers of Robert Ezra Park*, ed. Everett Hughes et al. (New York: Free Press, 1950) 387. Quoted in McKee, *Sociology and The Race Problem*, 92.

⁹⁹ Edward B. Reuter, *The American Race Problem*, 93.

¹⁰⁰ McKee, *Sociology and The Race Problem*, 75.

¹⁰¹ Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: Free Press, 1980) 85.

from that era. However, this is not necessarily the way an ordinary avid reader in early 20th century America would have seen it. As Robert Bone emphasizes, “for every copy of [...] Henry James’s *Portrait of a Lady* that was sold in the marts of trade, doubtless a thousand copies of Buffalo Bill’s desperate deeds were consumed.”¹⁰² Melodrama, the genre that thrives on hyperbole, a riveting plotline and scanty characterisation, was the order of the day in America at the turn of the century, at least if we go by democratic consumer criteria. The malleability of the genre also made it a powerful propagandistic tool harnessed for various ideological purposes, some of which were rather dubious. For example the post-Reconstruction Southern writers of the so-called plantation tradition typically employed melodrama by way of creating nostalgia for the “good old South,” a paradigm that was naturally accompanied by condescending racialism. Bone highlights the work of Thomas Nelson Page, who described the antebellum plantation economy of the South as an idyllic place inhabited by “devoted mammies and frolicking slaves who possessed the happy mentality of puppies.”¹⁰³ These portrayals of black life, though culturally obtuse, were nothing in comparison with a more coercive and paranoid strand of Southern melodrama that often portrays African Americans as dangerous and primitive savages who need to be held on a short leash, by force, if necessary. The most notorious examples of this vitriolic melodrama were the racist and self-righteous novels by Thomas Dickson which openly endorsed violence against the black population. African American writers and artists only had a limited access to public venues that could counter this apologia of slavery and pigmentocratic hierarchy of the last decade, yet they “traded blow for blow with his traducers, answering stereotype with a counterstereotype in an effort to stem the rising tide of anti-Negro propaganda”, even though this inevitably had “disastrous consequences for his art”, argues Robert Bone with reference to Pauline Hopkins, Laurence Dunbar, Sutton Griggs and Charles Chesnut.¹⁰⁴ The main thrust of this shadowboxing against the normative white gaze was assimilationist, yet it occasionally tipped over to a very confrontational stance, the best example of which is Sutton Griggs 1899 novel *Imperium in Imperio* which openly endorses racial separationism by prefiguring Garvey’s Back-to-Africa movement.¹⁰⁵

Let us now briefly explore the collusion of various art forms, most notably novels and early films, which were used as ideological leverage towards the social uplift of the African American community in the opening decades of the 20th century. This could be attempted either by way of parading moderate variations on “rags-to-riches” success stories with the aim of boosting the communal confidence of underprivileged ghetto audiences, or by countering the openly racist or essentialist stereotypes held by mainstream white audiences. It is rather intriguing to note that due to historical coincidence, the new filmic medium with considerable propagandistic and counter-propagandistic potential became available almost exactly at the time when African Americans completed their plight for nominal recognition as human beings and began their (back then rather quixotic) plight for recognition as first class citizens

¹⁰² Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 23.

¹⁰³ Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 22.

¹⁰⁴ Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 22.

¹⁰⁵ The novel is discussed in more detail in analytical chapter 4.2 devoted to Johnson’s story “The People Speak”.

of the United States. However, such ideological harnessing of art can be rather damaging, as it inevitably tends to fossilize the creative process through truncated and formulaic templates. The work of Charles Chesnutt and Oscar Micheaux can be used as an epitome of the happy yet limiting marriage of ideological and commercial concerns in African American art.

In the early decades of the 20th century, the African American community found itself straddling two mildly contradictory paradigms vis-à-vis social uplift. The more accommodationist strategy, famously advocated by Booker T. Washington, was predicated on the conviction that the African Americans should try to pursue social uplift within the established segregationist channels and, through gradual self-betterment and non-confrontational attitude, will eventually win adequate recognition of the white majority. The more confrontational path towards social uplift, advocated by W.E.B. Du Bois, resided in the conviction that the Black community should openly seek official recognition of equality, while also nurturing its “Talented Tenth”, i.e., its most gifted margin, which will in turn presumably clear the path for the remaining part of the black population. Despite the fact that the major early 20th century African American filmmaker Oscar Micheaux is generally perceived as a proponent of Booker T. Washington’s accommodationist strategy toward social uplift, himself emphasizing individual distinction over racial confrontation, many of his films displayed “candor about oppression and wrongdoing which was rare in early race pictures” as opposed to the default “self-congratulatory movies testifying to racial progress”, as Pearl Bowser and Louise Spencer posit in their comprehensive study of Micheaux.¹⁰⁶

The very suggestion that an early African American filmmaker was known as a proponent of a racially invested ideology is illustrative of the fact that a large contingent of African American literary and artistic endeavours of that time were defined by one ubiquitous trait – the notion that black art, and literature in particular, provides an ample platform for generic stories of social uplift, either by being populated by characters who can be seen as a ‘credit to the race’ or who successfully deal with social dilemmas springing from pigmentocratic social ostracism in the US.

This is particularly true of visual media¹⁰⁷. As Catherine Squiers posits in her comprehensive overview of the developing mass-media image of African Americans, even the writers and editors of black newspapers frequently sought to use their papers to portray a communal picture that would defy the stereotypes of an occasional white reader, guided by the “overwhelming sense of [sic] that blacks’ behaviour was under constant scrutiny by Whites – both friendly and hostile”.¹⁰⁸ This panoptical self-vigilantism largely applies to critical reception and public discourse, but with the late 19th century appearance of the first

¹⁰⁶ Pearl Bowser and Louise Spencer, *Writing Himself Into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2000) 106.

¹⁰⁷ Prior to the advent of cinema, the term “visual media” can be used to refer to pictorial means of assisting the social uplift of people of African descent. These would include for example the ‘Brookes’ diagram of a slave ship, packed to the brim with African captives, or Josiah Wedgewood’s anti-slavery medallion with the (diegetic) inscription “Am I not a slave and a brother”, both of which helped fuel abolitionist sentiments in Britain.

¹⁰⁸ Catherine R. Squiers, *African Americans and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009) 17.

motion pictures, this self-correcting tendency inevitably trickles down also to this new mimetic medium.

Countering unsavoury images

A historically rather significant element of the outward self-policing mechanism resides in the attempt of a black artist to counter some specific negative stereotype pertaining to the African Americans, often in response to some concrete act of racist derogation. The practice of using literary or artistic medium or commentary by way of countering the deep-seated stereotypes ran through virtually all 19th century African American literature, with the fugitive slave narratives being possibly the most obvious example, and it did not seem to dwindle at the turn of the century, which saw the overlap of lynchings in the post-Reconstruction South and the Social Darwinist and eugenicist theories that exercised considerable influence in shaping public discourse in the North as well as in the South.¹⁰⁹ And it is precisely at this juncture that the new filmic medium with considerable propagandistic and counter-propagandistic potential became available.

The earliest American silent films in the last decade of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century were produced by all-white companies, so they quite obviously did not make it their mission to counter any specific cultural prejudices and presuppositions. If we consider them in relation to the African American community, they generally leaned towards reinforcing the perceived beneficent stereotypes and even clichés pertaining to the Black community in the US. A fairly illustrative example of this trend would span the three early 20th century film adaptations of *The Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the ubiquitous abolitionist sacrosanct. These early adaptations, made invariably by white filmmakers, obviously tended to sanitize Tom's physical and mental torment and emphasize his docile and reconciliatory qualities. Barbara Tera Lupack argues that these films generally tended to follow the template established by popular late 19th stage adaptations of this protest novel, in which the original story was "routinely truncated to eliminate the harsh reality of [Tom's] suffering and martyrdom"¹¹⁰. However, even this truncation could be seen as a preferable alternative to the more demeaning portrayals of black characters on the American film screen in the first decade of its existence. It is easy to agree with the summary statement of Daniel Leab who claims that as of "the 1890s when the first motion pictures were produced for exhibition in penny arcade peepshows and for decades thereafter, moviemakers either ignored Negroes or with rare exceptions presented them as stereotyped characters who were objects of ridicule and condescension".¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹Social Darwinism and eugenics formed an integral part of late 19th and early 20th century public discourse. Extreme hereditarian views espoused by Madison Grant, Lothrop Stoddard (immortalized by F. Scott Fitzgerald) and many others, reflected a wide range of racist sentiments across the United States, ranging from xenophobic nativism of the presumably "Nordic" population mobilized in face of the increasing immigration from Central, Eastern and Southern Europe, or the rejuvenation of the Ku-Klux-Klan in the post-Reconstructionist South. See McKee 1993: 55-80.

¹¹⁰ Barbara Tera Lupack, *Literary Adaptations in Black American Cinema: from Micheaux to Toni Morrison*. (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2002) 2.

¹¹¹ Daniel J. Leab, "All-Colored"--But Not Much Different: Films Made for Negro Ghetto Audiences, 1913-

The first black production companies, like Douglass or Lincoln, catering largely to black audiences and distributed by a travelling circuit, naturally tried to counter these demeaning stereotypes by showing African American characters in dignified social positions, a visual scenario which may have also been seen as remedial towards the image of the Black community in the eyes of the occasional white spectator. But, in addition to these characters that were designed as a sort of “credit to the race”, some early African American films also used a slightly more confrontational mode, directly challenging some of the precepts of the white majority and visualizing some topics which might have pushed the mainstream audience out of their comfort zone. However, as has been mentioned, the earliest African American films were generally screened in all-Black ghetto communities and similarly limited venues, which makes the panoptical reading of this race credit card sound rather dubious. It seems illogical that their authors would exert particular creative energies with the specific aim of countering the stereotypes of somebody who only accounted for a miniscule contingent of the presumed audience. This interpretive prism, however, becomes rather diluted during the Harlem Renaissance era when African American films started to enter the realm of mainstream race movie networks hereto reserved predominantly to white filmmakers. The ideological presuming of white audience is in fact quite demonstrable in several works of early African American cinematography which will be addressed later. The panoptical aspect, i.e., the corrective and self-policing communal reflex, may not be as pronounced as it was in early 20th century African American writing which often presumed white audience in a way that self-funded black cinema did not, though both partly relied on white patronage.¹¹²

Monetary and ideological collusion of interests

If we consider the American protestant foundational ethos, in which the mercantile or financial success of a person or the entire community was seen as God’s blessing and, by extension, of his, her or their moral contingency, it can be argued that early African American silent films followed an analogical win-win strategy, as summed up by William Foster, an early showman from Chicago, who argued that “[t]he moving picture [was] the [African American] man’s only chance to make money and put his race right with the world”.¹¹³

Possibly the most shining example of this mildly schizophrenic mix of mercantile and ideological concerns in the fledgling black film industry of the first half of the century is the filmmaker and novelist Oscar Micheaux. Micheaux was incredibly prolific, shooting a total of 40 films throughout his career and, in so doing, he managed to fuse innovative low-budget

1928,” *Phylon* 36.3 (1975): 321.

¹¹² Zora Neale Hurston is presumably the most famous example of a Harlem Renaissance author relying on white patronage, a theme which is widely understood as having symbolically infiltrated her fiction. Needless to say, many other Harlemites also benefited from white patronage. Amy Sickles, “Voices of Independence and Community: The Prose of Zora Neale Hurston,” *Bloom’s Biocritiques*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 2003) 68. In contrast to that, the fledgling black film industry was relatively self-reliant. Catherine R. Squiers, *African Americans and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009) 53.

¹¹³ Daniel J. Leab, “All-Colored”--But Not Much Different: Films Made for Negro Ghetto Audiences, 1913-1928,” *Phylon* 36.3 (1975): 321.

filmmaking techniques with explicit or subliminal ideology, while also retaining commercial viability. The innovative edge is particularly true of his film adaptations.

Micheaux used sources for adaptation in a way which defied the (until recently) standard notion that film adaptations should be, by default, juxtaposed against the original book, with the preconception that the filmic rendition will be a reductive representation of the source book. This incessant variation on acknowledged or vaguely referenced sources of inspiration would actually place Micheaux outside the realist and early modernist tradition of his Harlem Renaissance contemporaries, as his adaptation methods are often closer to postmodernist pastiche and metafiction.

There is an easy way to explain Micheaux's penchant for literary adaptations. His filmic efforts were, chronologically speaking, predated by the first batch of his heavily autobiographical early novels, some of which can be legitimately seen as a variation on (1) American dream but also on (2) the myth of the Wild West survivor, itself a typological variation on the all-American foundational myth of forging identity by trial. The main character of *The Homesteader* manages to conquer a plot of wilderness and transform it into productive farmland. That is why novel, which he eventually adapted into a film, could be seen as the first ideologically challenging mode in Micheaux's oeuvre, as he basically appropriates the much cherished American myth of the white frontiersman. In artistically rendering this rugged African American frontiersman, Micheaux recognizably partook of the black social uplift sentiments, explicitly claiming that the African American community in the post-Reconstruction United States "needed models, heroes, to mold public opinion and for the elevation of public sentiment".¹¹⁴ The rugged frontiersman Jean Baptiste (Micheaux's alter ego) himself is fairly vocal about this, arguing at one point that if he "could actually succeed, it would mean so much to the credit of a multitude of others [...] who need the example".¹¹⁵ It can be summarily argued that early novels by Micheaux, and particularly his upstanding young westerner, Jean Baptiste, follow a two-fold ideological objective. They provide the larger black readership with a motivational boost for social uplift, while also trying to rectify the white gaze, to redeem the slanted opinion of African Americans on the part of the white readers and spectators. The former intention was again advertised very explicitly by Jean Baptiste himself when he mused that "[h]is race needed examples [and] instances of successes to overcome the effect of ignorance"¹¹⁶ and communal self-deprecation, thereby hoping to "convince the average colored man that Negro could ever be anything" which Baptiste saw as "the most difficult task".¹¹⁷ The character further reinforces this "credit to his race" motif by a kind of vicarious sacrifice, when he refuses to marry a white woman he loves for no other reason than his ideology. "[I]f he married now", we hear him think in a third-person inner monologue, he would cease to be the perfect model for his Black compatriots and "the example was lost".¹¹⁸ In doing so he implies that it is the communal responsibility of a

¹¹⁴ Pearl Bowser and Louise Spencer, *Writing Himself Into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2000) 21.

¹¹⁵ Oscar Micheaux, *The Homesteader: A Novel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994) 109.

¹¹⁶ Oscar Micheaux, *The Homesteader*, 109.

¹¹⁷ Oscar Micheaux, *The Homesteader*, 107.

¹¹⁸ Oscar Micheaux, *The Homesteader*, 147.

successful person of colour to marry an African American girl in order to create a family model to be cherished and emulated, while also casting a favourable light on the black community measured against the white gaze. Baptiste's exhortation that "[i]f he or any other man of the black race could acquire one thousand acres of such land it would stand out with more credit to the Negro race than all the protestations of a world of agitators in so far as the individual was concerned,"¹¹⁹ clearly endorses Booker T. Washington's strategy of communal self-development and uplift. In short, Micheaux's goal was to educate audience and inspire them to a life of hard work, discipline and financial success, thereby basically asking them to emulate his own success as a self-made businessman.

2.2.2.1 Chesnutt and Micheaux: ideological incongruity

So far we have mentioned two writerly and filmic attitudes which can be seen as ideological, namely the "credit to the race" card and the related theme of "social uplift". In these two cases, the ideology and commercial viability go very much hand in hand. These topics were fairly palatable to the intended black audiences without necessarily antagonizing the white mainstream. However, Micheaux also tackled certain topics that did put the white audiences out of their comfort zone, which sometimes might have made these cinematic efforts less remunerative. One of these is the topic of miscegenation (the mixing of the races), or the tragic mulatto phenomenon. Micheaux's early 20th century South Dakota had miscegenation laws, rooted in the one-drop rule which codified that every person with any African American ancestry was to be regarded as black by the law. Miscegenation had been portrayed or implied in numerous books, even in the pre-war period, but the diegetic narrative rendering did not prove to be quite as inflammatory as the mimetic rendering, i.e. the cinematic image. Perhaps the best example of this, which will also serve to demonstrate the self-policing mechanisms I mentioned earlier, is Micheaux's film adaptation of an early African American classic, *The House Behind the Cedars* by Charles Chesnutt, which deals predominantly with the topic of a light skinned African American passing for white and eventually persuading his younger sister to do the same, albeit with tragic consequences. Micheaux admired Chesnutt and managed to secure the film rights for the novel. However, he had a visceral dislike for the tragic ending of Rena, a beautiful mulatto girl persuaded by her brother, by then a successful white lawyer, to join him in his ethnic passing. Her African American background is, by chance, discovered by her love interest, and she eventually dies of an illness, presumably induced by the mental strain caused by moving in the liminal space between these two worlds. As can be gleaned from Micheaux's artistic maxims, this was not an ending to his liking. He clearly perceived it as an overly defeatist and socially unmotivating ending, not to mention the fact that such an ending would certainly make the film less commercially viable, as he was afraid it would alienate his audience.

Micheaux directed two film versions of Chesnutt's tragic novel of racial passing, *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), neither of which was preserved in its entirety. The first, completed in 1924, is entitled *House Behind the Cedars* and is a relatively faithful adaptation

¹¹⁹ Oscar Micheaux, *The Homesteader*, 132.

that was subject to some censoring, presumably due to its “ocular evidence of miscegenation”¹²⁰. The second is the recently rediscovered print of *Veiled Aristocrats*, which Susan Gillman calls “a remake with a happy ending”.¹²¹

Of the two adaptations, particularly the later version, *Veiled Aristocrats*, was for a considerable time banned from the local circuit cinemas, ostentatiously because of the fact that it was an open display of seemingly interracial relationships, or visually interracial relationships, though these would have been nominally sanctioned within the one-drop rule.

This uneasiness about mimetic representations of interracial relationships also applied to artistic endeavours of white writers, with Eugene O’Neill’s 1924 play *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* being possibly the most famous and controversial example. The objections to the marriage between a black man and white woman in O’Neill’s play were voiced by African American as well as white audiences. The abhorrence of white audiences about interracial liaisons in the mid 1920s needs little explanation. However, as Colin Grant points out, even African American spectators felt uneasy about the fact that, “soon after marrying the black protagonist, the white woman goes mad”. Though the logic of the play presents this as a correlation rather than direct causation, many black spectators still felt that “the playwright had cowardly loaded the dice” by “engineering” such an ominous correlation.¹²²

Re-blackening racially ambiguous heroes

It can be argued that Micheaux’s adaptation of Chesnutt to some degree swerves from the author’s typical preoccupation with mixed blood and enhances the mental appetite for social uplift in comparison, thereby slightly curtailing Chesnutt’s flagship topic, namely the critique of the one-drop rule and the covert notion that tragic octoroons and other mulattoes who would pass for white by mere ocular proof should be regarded as a special category. The sheer liminality of the in-between situation is very distinctly felt in the literature of “passing”, written about (and often by) African Americans of mixed racial origin who, as Charles Chesnutt observed in his journal, were often presumed “too ‘stuck-up’ for the colored folks” while obviously not being “recognized by the whites”, particularly in the Southern setting.¹²³ By insisting that light-skinned people of mixed racial descent should be regarded as a caste of their own, particularly in the realities of the post-bellum South, Chesnutt inadvertently endorses the early 20th century racist taxonomies. We may therefore argue that that skin

¹²⁰ The term “ocular proof” is used by Chesnutt scholar Donald B. Gibson to describe the prevailing practice in some US states, such as South Carolina in *The House Behind the Cedars*, where the one-drop rule was customarily ignored and one’s racial makeup was assessed only in terms of their looks. Charles W. Chesnutt, *The House Behind The Cedars* (New York: Penguin, 1900/1993) viii. Ocular evidence speaks in favour of the character of the passing light-skinned mulatto John Walden/Warwick, which creates the novel’s point of departure. Judging by the heated responses to Micheaux’s adaptations of the novel, it is also logical to assume that the same ocular evidence made the audience see the character of Rena as de facto white, so the overtures from her African American suitors, Jeff Wain or Frank Fowler, respectively, could have been seen as visually conducive to miscegenation.

¹²¹ Susan Gillman, “Micheaux’s Chesnutt,” *PMLA* 114:5 (1999): 1080.

¹²² Colin Grant, *Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey and His Dream of Mother Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 304.

¹²³ William L. Andrews, *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1980) 8.

elitism and social uplift can be seen as both symbiotic and competing (or even mutually corrosive) ideologies.

The tragic mulatto and the narratives of passing seem to match this classic dichotomy perfectly. John Walden/Warwick in Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars*, and to some extent also his sister Rena Walden, certainly cannot be blamed for achieving (or trying to achieve) a higher social plane at the expense of their less fortunate African Americans, yet there is an unmistakable strain of elitism in the novel. Micheaux certainly showed interest in the liminal dilemma of a tragic octoroon, yet his film renditions often seem to chastise the passing characters for their racial disingenuity rather than empathising with them in the way Chesnutt generally does (having visceral experience with the issue, unlike Micheaux). Micheaux therefore retains the basic framing of *The House Behind the Cedars* while toning down the tragic mulatto motif and possibly even partly depriving the racially disingenuous John Walden/Warwick of his laurels of self-madmanship, transferring these instead to the loyal and racially less tampered¹²⁴ Frank Fowler - the ultimate underdog of the original Chesnutt's story. In Chesnutt's novel, Frank Fowler is a patient admirer of the passing mulatto heroine Rena Walden, knowing full well that he would stand no chance if he declared his feelings for her. The idea of Frank becoming Rena's suitor does present itself several times in the book, but it is done in a tentative and timid manner which leaves the reader virtually no room for romantic projections as far as the relationship between the two characters is concerned.

He never spoke to her of love, - indeed, he never thought of his passion in such a light. There would have been no legal barrier to their union; there would have been no frightful menace to the white supremacy in the marriage of the negro and the octoroon: the drop of dark blood bridged the chasm. But Frank knew that she did not love him, and had not hoped that she might.¹²⁵

When Rena leaves with her brother for South Carolina, with the undisguised intention of passing for white, and when she almost immediately finds herself courted by the chivalric, handsome and conveniently suitor, Frank does not hold a grudge.

The surviving footage of Micheaux *Veiled Aristocrats*¹²⁶, on the other hand, presents Frank as an upstanding young citizen, a successful businessman and a perfectly legitimate suitor whose feelings towards Rena are reciprocated, even though the prospect of marriage is dismissed by her mother and brother on account of their pigmentocratic elitism (an element of the original novel which Micheaux retained and possibly even amplified).

Micheaux also infused the original story with his own ideological and imaginative purposes by promoting Frank Fowler into a successful black self-made-man, thus inevitably relegating Chesnutt's (cold and calculating, yet accomplished) John Walden/Warwick to the

¹²⁴ In an early line from the surviving footage, Frank is derogatorily referred to as "coal-Black negro from the street", thereby shunned by John Warwick as his sister's prospective suitor.

¹²⁵ Charles W. Chesnutt, *The House Behind The Cedars* (New York: Penguin, 1900/1993) 117.

¹²⁶ There is no surviving print of Micheaux's first adaptation of the novel, titled simply *The House Behind the Cedars* (1924). The *Veiled Aristocrats* remake was also presumed lost, until the recent discovery of two fairly coherent pieces of combined 40-minute footage. Susan Gillman, "Micheaux's Chesnutt," 1080.

background. Chesnutt's creative licence endowed John with the precocious discernment and audacity enabling him to choose a different life path while still a child, plus the stamina enabling him to self-educate himself into a lawyer. However, he also makes it clear that, for all his legal training, John Warwick basically married into wealth by dodging the Confederate draft and being in the right place at the right time, partly due to "the absence of better m[e]n", which made people hire him as a lawyer "in preference to the carpet-baggers".¹²⁷

Given Micheaux's ideologies, it is relatively easy to see why he would resent Warwick's oblique opportunism and rather obscure credentials, and commute the self-made card to the tenacious and meritocratic Frank Fowler, whose pigmentation would also make him visually more akin to Micheaux himself. This "re-blackening" of a light skin mulatto character can be seen as a striking if not iconic example of early 20th century emphasis on black agency or race pride.

R(e)aping the fruits of miscegenation: a lynch mob vs. social uplift

A host of black movies of the early decades were, in all probability, spawned by the inflammatory silent movie *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), an adaptation of Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman* (1905), which spanned the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the Reconstruction period in the South. Both the book and its adaptation presented a very degrading portrayal of African Americans and unmistakably glamorized the Southern patriots who, in the aftermath of the Civil War, allegedly had to suffer the indignity of being patronized by "uppity" Black Unionist soldiers who presumably helped the post-war elections to be lopsided in their own favour, with the local African Americans being brazen enough to make open insinuations of interracial liaisons vis-à-vis the white women.

One of the most eloquent endeavours at an eloquent and informed riposte against the dual literary and film propaganda of Dixon and Griffith was produced by a similar coalescence of African American literary and filmic creativity, namely by Charles Chesnutt's 1901 novel *The Marrow of Tradition* and its partial (and tentative) filmic rendition, *Within our Gates* (1920) directed by Oscar Micheaux.

The novels by Charles Chesnutt and their subsequent filmic renditions by Oscar Micheaux can be seen as a striking early example of this trend aimed at explicitly countering or outbalancing a specific tarnishing image promulgated by other parties. One of the key inflammatory pivotal events of Dixon's novel *The Clansman*¹²⁸ and its ostentatious film adaptation – Griffith's *The Birth of Nation* – is a creative rendition of what is widely referred to as the Wilmington race insurrection of 1898.¹²⁹ Both the novel and the film present this

¹²⁷ Charles W. Chesnutt, *The House Behind The Cedars*, 15.

¹²⁸ *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* was actually a second novel in Dixon's Ku Klux Klan trilogy, preceded by *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) and followed by *The Traitor* (1907). Dixon almost immediately adapted *The Clansman* novel to stage and also wrote the script for Griffith's film adaptation.

¹²⁹ The phrasing "Wilmington race riot/insurrection", as the event is generally known, is deceitful. As many studies point out, it was actually a coup d'état staged by the old Democratic elites against the "fusion ticket" of elected officials, some of whom happened to be African American. This rendition of the events is basically given also in Chesnutt's novel. LeRae Sikes Umfleet, *A Day of Blood: The 1898 Wilmington Race Riot* (Raleigh: North Carolina Office of Archives and History, 2009), 190-207. David S. Cecelski, Timothy B. Tyson, *Democracy*

mass lynching event as a self-justifying knee-jerk response to the unfair carpet-bagging Democratic government and the indignity of having to put up with what they perceive as interracial sexual overtures towards the white women of the town.¹³⁰ Chesnutt's commercially unsuccessful novel *The Marrow of Tradition*, which gives a less partisan reading of the events, was actually published before Dixon's 1902 bestseller *The Leopard's Spots* (the first novel in the Klan series), yet Chesnutt was asked to use his book as rectifying material against Dixon's nakedly segregationist and pro-lynching message. The impact of this attempt, however, was commensurate to the negligible commercial viability of Chesnutt's novel. Micheaux's 1920 film *Within Our Gates*, seems to have been an explicit creative response to Griffith's blockbuster, as Micheaux inverts the racial profiling vector and makes his heroine fend off an elderly white sexual predator, among many other subversive references to Griffith's much-applauded film.¹³¹

The Dixon/Chesnutt and Griffith/Micheaux wilfully interpretive dichotomies need to be read as a single instalment in a historical saga that imaginatively feeds on the essentialist image of a black male as a sexual predator and a threat to the virtue of white women. This would have been a fledgling cultural stereotype in early 20th century, though it can easily be seen as an extension of a much older essentialist notion of African Americans as more sexually unrestrained human beings. Let us not forget that Micheaux's subversive rendition came out in the same decade as Du Bois's vigilante attack on Claude McKay's 1928 bestselling novel *Home to Harlem* on the grounds that it was much too open about black sexuality.¹³²

The black rapist bogeyman and the insatiable Jezebel

There is one logically impeccable argument that has repeatedly been used as an antidote against the cultural stereotype of a black rapist bogeyman. Actually, even before this notion came to prominence, African American thinkers had already kept reminding the slaveowning population that the colour line in the American South was being diluted not because of the unrestrained sexual drive of the African American male (a topic which was obviously virtually nonexistent prior the 1870s), but because of the lack of sexual restraint on the part of the pale male ruling class, so to speak, i.e., the miscegenation was largely due to the fact that white slaveowners and overseers were in the position to impose themselves on slave women. This point was, however, proactively countered by the widely promulgated notion of the licentiousness of black women, the Jezebel stereotype,¹³³ which was clearly meant to insinuate that the slave women deliberately engaged in interracial plantation sex, which would

Betrayed: The Wilmington Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) 38-52.

¹³⁰ David S. Cecelski, Timothy B. Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed*, 41-49.

¹³¹ Susan Gillman, "Micheaux's Chesnutt," *PMLA* 114:5 (1999): 1085.

¹³² Wayne F. Cooper, *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance, A Life* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987) 244.

¹³³ Derived from the biblical Queen Jezebel, the Phoenician wife of King Ahab, the stereotype of African American women as hypersexual beings was used to justify or even normalize coercive sexual exploits of female slaves by white plantation owners and overseers. *Writing African American Women: An Encyclopedia of Literature by and about Women of Color, Volume 1*, ed. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006) 474.

make the slaveowners less morally reprehensible, though (in supremacist terms) still culpable for weakening the credibility of the Hamitic myth routinely used as a biblical justification of racial slavery.

Frederick Douglass gives a classic rendition of this issue in his 1845 fugitive slave narrative, contemplating the fact that “[e]very year brings with it multitudes of [mulatto] slaves” and, as a result “a very different-looking class of people are springing up at the south, and are now held in slavery, from those originally brought to this country from Africa”. As a freshly converted Methodist and a leader of Bible study, Douglass obviously cannot approve of such immoral manners, yet, as an Abolitionist, he is happy to conclude that this lack of moral scruple on the part of the white slaveowning class “will do away with the force of the argument, [sic] that God cursed Ham, and therefore American Slavery is right” which may in turn lead to the demise of the outdated pigmentocratic system as such.¹³⁴ In the much changed atmosphere of the Reconstruction years, approx. two decades after the emancipation, Douglass used an updated version of the argument in his denunciation of white-on-black lynching which was routinely justified by the (potential or imaginary) black rapist bogeyman. Douglass dismisses this justification as false, rhetorically asking why a “crime almost unknown to the colored man in the time of slavery seems now, from report, the most common”, flatly refusing the veracity of these reports.¹³⁵

This countering of the mainstream stereotype of a black rapist or murderer was akin to Micheaux’s recurrent filmic typology of exonerating an unjustly suspect and legally apprehended African American, be it his alter ego Jean-Baptiste in his 1931 sound film *The Exile* (an adaptation of his own novel *The Homesteader*) or, perhaps more poignantly, his reworking of the Phagan/Frank case in his silent film *The Gunsaulus Mystery* (1921) and its updated version with the sound titled *Lem Hawkins’ Confession* (1935), with the essence of both, as Matthew Bernstein argues, trickling down to his classic 1935 talkie *Murder in Harlem*. As film theorist Matthew Bernstein summarily argues, “Micheaux often favored the depiction of a falsely accused and ultimately exonerated black suspect in a murder case,”¹³⁶ which can indeed be seen as an example of Micheaux’s purposeful countering of the unsavoury stereotype of the physical and potentially violent black male.

As of the early 20th century, the reminder of white-on-black coercion or violence could be used (and in some cases was used) by way of neutralising the insinuation of the black-on-white violence argument. And again, a very fruitful and telling example of this attempt at racist propaganda can be found in the interpretive tension generated by very different renditions of the Reconstructionist South delivered by Dixon/Griffith on one side of the interpretive scales and by Chesnutt/Micheaux on the other.

¹³⁴ Frederick Douglass, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave,” *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Penguin, 1987): 257.

¹³⁵ Crystal Nicole Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Boston: Harvard, 2009) 87.

¹³⁶ Matthew Bernstein, “Oscar Micheaux and Leo Frank: Cinematic Justice Across the Color Line Author(s), *Film Quarterly*,” 57.4 (2004): 8–9.

This section has briefly visited several self-policing mechanisms demonstrably present major early African American fiction and film during the transition phase between realism and modernism. Epitomical illustrations of this communal self-vigilance and exhortative attempts towards the white gaze are the joint efforts of writer Charles Chesnutt and writer/filmmaker Oscar Micheaux, both of whom harnessed their artistic capacities by way of producing uplifting and sometimes even confrontational art, thereby often putting ideology on par with artistic autonomy.

2.3. Remedy, or poison? Modernist contestations of communal vigilance

Despite the pious lallygagging of sleek and well-paid professional uplifters, the future will, like the writer's complexion, be very dark.¹³⁷

George S. Schuyler

The modernist decades of 1920s and 1930s saw a major paradigmatic shift in the perceptions of ideologically invested black literature. For the first time, the notion of art as a vehicle towards social betterment came under severe criticism from within the African American community. This rift between artistic autonomy and tendentiousness can be crystallized into several public contestations which set the tone for the entire “art-vs-politics” debate in African American literature for decades to come. The subsequent renditions of this dichotomy can be seen as syntheses and elaborations on the two basic bifurcations publicly discussed in the 1920s, which is why our developmental trajectory does not need to venture far beyond this decade. While Charles Johnson's synthesis of modern African American writing, presented in 1988 book his *Being and Race*,¹³⁸ assumes and elaborates on the authorial and critical positions of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Amiri Baraka, we need to keep in mind that their own positions were informed by and synthesized from this basic antithetical dilemma climaxing in two public controversies in the 1920s. Based on this outlook, it can be posited that the modernist decades broke the paradigm of ideologically-invested fiction as the default of African American literature, despite its brief reassertion within the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 70s.

Each of the classic public debates can be aligned with one of the diachronic developmental perspectives we have used so far. Du Bois's criticism of McKay's novel *Home to Harlem* revolves around Robert Bone's classification of *ideological black writing* (the self-policing assimilationist impulse), while the public debate between Langston Hughes and George Schuyler is centered on Gene Jarrett's notion of *racial realism*.

Let us begin with a brief introduction of the new set of social circumstances that sent ideological African American writing on the collision course. The essence of the clash

¹³⁷ George S. Schuyler, “New York: Utopia Deferred,” *These “Colored” United States: African American Essays from the 1920s*, eds. Tom Lutz and Susanna Ashton (Rutgers University Press, 1996) 211.

¹³⁸ Johnson's synthesis of Wright, Ellison and Baraka in *Being and Race* is discussed in the introductory part of chapter 4.

between the tradition of harnessing artistic venues for social uplift on the one hand, and the new emphasis on authorial autonomy on the other, is succinctly characterized by Robert Washington in his 2001 book *The Ideologies of African American Literature: From the Harlem Renaissance to Black Nationalist Revolt*. Washington traces the art-vs-politics rift, caused by the arrival of the so called primitivist school, to the sharpened class inequality in the 1910s brought about by the uneven development and the nascent social hierarchy within the urban African American community after the first phase of the Great Migration.

While most urban black Americans shared the mood of guarded optimism, they hardly embraced a single, overreaching ideology. Urbanization created a more complex social structure, with widening divisions in occupational and social levels, which was reflected in an increased diversity of lifestyles and ideological perspectives. Yet despite the black community's broad spectrum of ideological perspectives, none approximated even remotely the primitivist ideology.¹³⁹

Washington then seeks to establish the root causes of the "hegemonic origin of the 1920s black primitivist literary ideology" by juxtaposing this literary phenomenon against the "ideological forces that formed the major modes of social consciousness within the black community" at that period. In order to make a qualified analysis of the different "social bases" within the black community, Washington uses two overlapping dichotomies. One base is defined by the criterion of "approach to racial reform", yielding the "activist versus nonactivist" dichotomy, the other criterion being by the class concerns or "orientation" yielding the "elite versus mass" dichotomy. By plotting these two against each other, Washington comes up with the following conclusion.

While most black intellectuals [...] were attached to only one of these social bases, several straddled social bases. For example, James Weldon Johnson, the civil rights leader and writer, was attached to both the political intelligentsia and the local cultural intelligentsia, a situation that made him more sensitive to the aesthetic dimensions of black American literature. By contrast, members of the political intelligentsia, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Walter White, and other civil rights activists, who were attached only to a political social base, tended to view black literary works as instruments to advance black political aspirations. *Aesthetic* considerations were at best *secondary*.¹⁴⁰

The basic problem of the self-appointed middle class leaders of the black community like Du Bois and White was their uneasy and schizophrenic relationship with the "black masses". Washington claims that these leaders were recognized as the spokespeople of the African American community (by influential white, that it), even though they "lacked significant black working-class following". The schizophrenic nature of their situation ensued from the

¹³⁹ Robert E. Washington, *The Ideologies of African American Literature: From the Harlem Renaissance to Black Nationalist Revolt* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001) 39.

¹⁴⁰ Robert E. Washington, *The Ideologies of African American Literature*, 41; emphasis added.

fact that they wanted to retain the spokesperson authority, yet they had no intention of rubbing shoulders with the black underclass by way of earning or substantiating that authority. And it was precisely this hypocritical position that made them a natural antagonist of “the black primitivist writers, who regarded themselves as authentic spokesmen of the black masses, a view which the civil rights intellectuals firmly rejected.”¹⁴¹ As Robert Bone points out, this uneasy blend of personal distaste and communal bonding also makes a sporadic appearance in the work of middle class African American writers of the era, as exemplified by the following snooty tirade in Jessie Redmon Fauset’s 1928 novel *Plum Bun*.

Those of us who have forged forward are not able as yet to go our separate ways apart from the *unwashed, untutored herd*. We must still look back and render service to our less fortunate, weaker brethren. And the first step toward making this a workable attitude is the acquisition not so much a racial love as racial pride.¹⁴²

The same “straddling of two social bases” was also the case with Alain Locke, the founder of the New Negro movement and, by Andrew G. Jarrett’s assessment, the second “dean” of African American literature, having assumed the mantle after William Dean Howells. That is why Locke, though generally a proponent of the New Negro spontaneity, occasionally found himself in the same boat with Du Bois.

It is undoubtedly this rift between the bohemian artist and the respectable black citizen that gave birth to the most epitomical arguments over the role of a black artist in the mid 1920s, public arguments the covered so much ground that the subsequent art-vs-politics debates in the 1930s through 1970s can be seen as their derivatives.

The most iconic part of this public dispute, as it unfolded throughout the mid 1920s, can be structured around the Bone/Jarrett dichotomy of black literary policies which was explained earlier. The controversy over Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* and Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* was primarily a clash between communal *self-policing* and *authorial autonomy*, while the less heated exchange between Langston Hughes and George S. Schuyler had to do with the benefits and limits of *racial realism* in writing.

2.3.1 Hughes versus Schuyler: The black mountain versus white molehill

The argument between Langston Hughes and George S. Schuyler, concerning the competing notions of essentialist versus universalist black art, was more academic and less controversial, yet despite this (or maybe because of this) it had an extraordinary ripple effect on the subsequent African American writing, perhaps even more so than the Du Bois vs. McKay debate. The debate between Langston Hughes and George Schuyler centers on the importance

¹⁴¹ *The Ideologies of African American Literature*, 41.

¹⁴² Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1928) 218. Quoted in Robert Bone, *A Negro Novel in America*, 62. Emphasis added.

of black writers addressing recognizably black topics. One consideration can be phrased as follows. Is the choice of depicting African American social environment as a primary topic a nourishing or constraining factor? Does this choice inevitably straitjacket the writer? And, perhaps most importantly, is there a specific “essence” to African American writing.

The “debate” was in reality an exchange of two essays published in *The Crisis* in 1926. It was triggered by George Schuyler’s stance on the existence of (and the need for) distinct African American art, expressed in his essay “The Negro-Art Hokum”. A firm believer in nurture as opposed to nature,¹⁴³ Schuyler argues that the notion of distinctly African American art is an artificial construct, as the long-term “exposure to our schools, politics, advertising, moral crusades, and restaurants” has turned an African American into “a lampblack Anglo-Saxon”¹⁴⁴ whose possible cultural idiosyncrasies are dictated by US regional differences rather than racial essentialism.¹⁴⁵ He further develops this claim by the argument that major black artists and intellectuals of the era are very obvious products of Euro-Atlantic cultural institutions.

The dean of the African American literati is W.E.B. Du Bois, a product of Harvard and German universities; the foremost Aframerican sculptor is Meta Warwick Fuller, a graduate of leading American art schools and former student of Rodin; while the most noted Aframerican painter, Henry Ossawa Tanner, is dean of American painters in Paris and has been decorated by the French government.¹⁴⁶

The intellectual and artistic accomplishments of these African American luminaries, Schuyler argues, simply cannot be ascribed to their “Negro soul.”¹⁴⁷ However, the modernist veneration of the spontaneous and primitivist created demand for “authentic” African American voice,¹⁴⁸ which in turn resulted in undue emphasis on folksier types of black artistic expression, many of them partaking of crude essentialist stereotypes.

Because a few writers with paucity of themes have seized upon imbecilities of the Negro rustics and clowns and palmed them off as authentic and characteristic Aframerican behavior, the common notion that the black American is so “different” from his white neighbor has gained currency.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴³ Incidentally, the mid 1920s was precisely the time when the advent of new genetics stripped the eugenicist movement of its pseudoscientific aura and generally turned the tables in the nature-vs-nurture debate. See subchapter 2.2.1.

¹⁴⁴ George S. Schuyler, “The Negro-Art Hokum,” *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994) 51.

¹⁴⁵ George S. Schuyler, “The Negro-Art Hokum,” 51.

¹⁴⁶ George S. Schuyler, “The Negro-Art Hokum,” 51.

¹⁴⁷ Schuyler, “The Negro-Art Hokum,” 51.

¹⁴⁸ The exultation of spontaneous African American cultural contributions is presumably built on the Freudian premise that “impulse to artistic creativity originated in the sex-impulse,” to use a succinct paraphrase by Otto Rank. Otto Rank, *Art and Artist: Creative Urge and Personality Development*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Agathon Press, 1968) 26. This is in itself a very crude and essentialist premise, even though it seeks to exult rather than derogate.

¹⁴⁹ Schuyler, “The Negro-Art Hokum,” 52.

Sophisticated urbanite Schuyler sees this accentuation of folksy culture as noxious to the overall image of African Americans, as it “conjures up in the average American’s mind a composite stereotype of [...] Aunt Jemima, Uncle Tom [...] and the various monstrosities scrawled by the cartoonists.”¹⁵⁰ Schuyler goes as far as to speculatively attribute this regurgitation and endorsement of artistic stereotypes to “Negrophobes” and eugenicists “like Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard” who are keen on emphasizing the ““fundamental, eternal, and inescapable differences” between white and black Americans.”¹⁵¹

One week after the printing of Schuyler’s essay, *The Crisis* featured a riposte called “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” written by Langston Hughes, then a fledgling writer.¹⁵² In contrast to Schuyler, Hughes does not see the American standardization of the African American people and artists as a self-evident and organic process of cultural blending in, but as a product of willful “urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.”¹⁵³ This is the attitude which Hughes sums up by the epithet “racial mountain.” In purely artistic terms, this tendency translates into nice and inoffensive mediocrity, as the black artist is up “against an undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group,” further exacerbated by “unintentional bribes from the whites.”

“Oh, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are,” say the Negroes. “Be stereotyped, don’t go too far, don’t shatter our illusions about you, don’t amuse us too seriously. We will pay you,” say the whites.¹⁵⁴

Hughes to some degree concedes Schuyler’s point in acknowledging that the new black writing was endorsed by the modernist “vogue in things Negro,” a scenario which he admits “may do as much harm as good for the budding artist.” However, he also points out that this white modernist veneration of the “primitivist” artistic impulse, insulting as it may be, endorsed the new, decidedly anti-middle class, artistic expression and helped bring the new artist “forcibly to the attention of his own people among whom for so long, unless *the other race* had noticed him beforehand, he was a prophet with little honor.”¹⁵⁵

In summary, Hughes legitimates the choice of African American writers to concern themselves with distinctly black topics without the embarrassment of endorsing provincialism or cultural backwardness. Both Schuyler’s and Hughes’s positions display some degree of

¹⁵⁰ Schuyler, “The Negro-Art Hokum,” 51. This quote has been singled out deliberately, and rather capriciously, in view of the fact that political cartoon was Charles Johnson’s first venue of artistic expression.

¹⁵¹ Schuyler, “The Negro-Art Hokum,” 54.

¹⁵² 1926 was also the year when Hughes published his first collection of poems, *The Weary Blues*.

¹⁵³ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994) 55.

¹⁵⁴ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” 58.

¹⁵⁵ Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” 57; emphasis added.

panopticism. Schuyler seems concerned with the deteriorative effect of the Uncle Tom and Aunt Jemima stereotypes, while Hughes's acknowledgment of the white modernist endorsement of New Negro art allows the interpretation that the "vogue" of artistic spontaneity might have coaxed this kind of expression from some black writers.

2.3.2 The communal vigilantism of W.E.B. Du Bois

Let us proceed to the second iconic case of intra-communal controversy that has already been alluded to within this chapter and also in chapter 2. W.E.B. Du Bois thought of himself, and was to some degree recognized, as a spokesperson for the black community in the early 20th century. With the awareness of this (self-)appointment, he sometimes chose to act as a sort of cultural vigilante when he thought a black author either pandered to the stereotypes of the white majority or otherwise failed to, as was the case of the 1928 bestselling novel *Home to Harlem* by Claude McKay, a major Harlem Renaissance author of Jamaican origin. 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 openly described sexuality. In a recognizably panoptical fashion, Du Bois presumptively argued that the novel endorsed the stereotypes of those whites who tended to see African Americans as sexually unrestrained people¹⁵⁶. So let us see how this story can be seen as harmful to the African American public image.

Home to Harlem was a bestseller novel by a struggling black writer which quickly got critical attention, both acclaim and criticism. The main protagonist, Jake Brown, is a 1st World War deserter, which is in itself deemed bad PR for any ethnic community with paranoid defensive reflex. Upon returning from the war, Jake loosens up in Harlem and then spends most of the novel looking for a prostitute he was with on the day of his arrival. Most of this searching takes the reader through various "joints" and "dives" in Harlem and several other destinations.

The novel does also feature Jake's ideological antithesis, a prim-mouthed college educated gentleman named Roy who overtly endorses racial pride, but even that character did not manage to mollify Du Bois's displeasure about the overall tone of the novel. Du Bois, who once remarked that he felt "distinctly unclean and in need of a bath" after reading the novel,¹⁵⁷ was not the only critic from among the conservative African American community. Another influential African American critic Dewey Jones from Chicago disparaged McKay on similar grounds.

"White people think we are buffoons, thugs, and rotters anyway. Why should we waste so much time trying to prove it? That's what Claude McKay has done"¹⁵⁸.

¹⁵⁶ Wayne F. Cooper, *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance, A Life* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987): 244.

¹⁵⁷ Wayne F. Cooper, "Foreword to 1987 edition," Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem* (New York: Harper, 1928/1987) Kindle.

¹⁵⁸ Wayne F. Cooper, *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance, A Life*, 245.

Rather surprisingly, Du Bois's and Jones's choir of criticism was also joined by Alain Locke, otherwise a proponent of unrestrained New Negro art, who thought that the novel displayed "a morbid amount of decadent aestheticism" and ostentatiously catered to white readership.¹⁵⁹ McKay countered this criticism as philistine and pedestrian objections to his artistic pursuits which led him to honestly exploit low-class African American life. "We must," he concluded in one letter, "leave the appreciation of what we are doing to the emancipated Negro intelligentsia of the future, while we are sardonically aware now that only the intelligentsia of the superior race is developed enough to afford artistic truth."¹⁶⁰

Du Bois's attack on McKay fits the template of inward panoptical policing, yet it can be argued that the heated debate of the mid 1920s might have been catalyzed not so much by McKay's *Home to Harlem*, but by an even more infuriating novel published two years before McKay's, namely *Nigger Heaven* by Carl Van Vechten, a liberal white author and critic, and a good acquaintance of virtually all Harlemites of some literary consequence. Van Vechten's novel was finished in March and published in August of 1926, and was caustically reviewed by Du Bois, as duly recorded in *The Crisis*:

Carl Van Vechten's "Nigger Heaven" is a blow in the face. It is an affront to the hospitality of black folk and to the intelligence of white. [. . .] The author counts among his friends numbers of Negroes of all classes. He is an authority on dives and cabarets. But he masses this knowledge without rule or reason and seeks to express all of Harlem life in its cabarets. To him the black cabaret is Harlem; around it all his characters gravitate. [. . .] Such a theory of Harlem is nonsense. The overwhelming majority of black folk there never go to cabarets. The average colored man in Harlem is an everyday laborer, attending church, lodge and movie and as conservative and conventional as ordinary working folk everywhere. I cannot for the life of me see in this work either sincerity or art [. . .]. It seems to me that Mr. Van Vechten tried to do something bizarre and he certainly succeeded.¹⁶¹

Du Bois does not see the novel's lopsided choice of venues and under-representation of the sober and workaday black Harlemites (much like *Home to Harlem*) as an accident. He ventures to speculate that the demographic disproportion might in fact have been Vechten's artistic intention, driven by his penchant for the bizarre. The most readily available evidence suggests otherwise. During the interim stage between collecting the raw material and fine-tuning it into a novel, Vechten shared his authorial intentions with Gertrude Stein. He described his work in progress as a novel "about NEGROES, as they live now in the new city of Harlem (which is a part of New York). About 400,000 of them live there now, rich and poor, fast and slow, intellectual and ignorant."¹⁶² Moreover, this intention was sanctioned by

¹⁵⁹ Alain Locke, "Spiritual Truancy," *The Works of Alain Locke*, ed. Charles Molesworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 226.

¹⁶⁰ Cooper, *Claude McKay*, 212.

¹⁶¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Crisis*, vol. 32-33 (December, 1926), 81-82.

¹⁶² Carl Van Vechten to Gertrude Stein (6/30/1925), Yale University. Quoted in Mark Helbling. "Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance." *Negro American Literature Forum* 10.2 (1976): 39.

more free-thinking African American authors like James Weldon Johnson, who encouraged Vechten to go ahead with his probe into the black Harlem community, as “no acknowledged American novelist has yet made use of this material”.¹⁶³

If we adopt Harold Cruse’s perspective on Du Bois’s, the indignant and angry denouncement of Van Vechten’s novel matches his general understanding of the constraints within which liberal white authors may artistically contribute to African American public imagery. Cruse argues that Du Bois came very close to insisting that black authors should have monopoly on writing about black characters and communities, thereby in fact endorsing a kind of cultural separatism. Du Bois was guided by his conviction that white authors would inevitably court the approval of white readers who were unwilling to stomach portrayals of African Americans which contradicted their stereotyped preconceptions. Based on this premise, he naturally concluded that black communal life was not a safe topic for white authors to write about.¹⁶⁴

This mildly paranoid view, however, was clearly not shared by major Harlem pundits of a somewhat younger generation. Alain Locke, for instance, congratulated Vechten for having written a “corrective sketch for the white reader who takes Negro life underseriously and for the black reader who takes it over seriously”.¹⁶⁵ The first part of Locke’s assessment provides a 180-degree counterpoint to Du Bois’s criticism, while the final segment can easily be read as a playful jab at (what Locke might have seen as) ideological vigilantes such as Du Bois himself. Moreover, Du Bois’s criticism of Van Vechten, vitriolic as it seems, certainly did not burn bridges. Shortly after the unflattering review, Vechten was approached by Jessie Fauset, a co-editor of an influential magazine the *Crisis*, whose other co-editor was none other than Du Bois. Her request was to provide her with a list of several tributary questions that would, taken together, amount to the following query: “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?”¹⁶⁶

These are the questions as they appeared in *The Crisis*:

1. When the artist, black or white, portrays Negro characters is he under any obligations or limitations as to the sort of character he will portray?
2. Can any author be criticized for painting the worst or the best characters of a group?
3. Can publishers be criticized for refusing to handle novels that portray Negroes of education and accomplishment, on the ground that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting?
4. What are Negroes to do when they are continually painted at their worst and judged by the public as they are painted?

¹⁶³ James Weldon Johnson to Carl Van Vechten (2/28/ 1925), Yale University. Quoted in Mark Helbling. “Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance.” *Negro American Literature Forum* 10.2 (1976): 39.

¹⁶⁴ Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Knopf, 1967) 39.

¹⁶⁵ Alain Locke to Carl Van Vechten (9/2/1926), Yale University. Quoted in Mark Helbling. “Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance.” *Negro American Literature Forum* 10.2 (1976): 40.

¹⁶⁶ Leon Duncan Coleman, “The Contributions of Carl Van Vechten to the Negro Renaissance 1920-1930” (unpublished dissertation, University of Minnesota), 165. Quoted in Mark Helbling. “Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance.” *Negro American Literature Forum* 10.2 (1976): 40.

5. Does the situation of the educated Negro in America with its pathos, humiliation and tragedy call for artistic treatment at least as sincere and sympathetic as “Porgy” received?
6. Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid, and preventing white artists from knowing any other types and preventing black artists from daring to paint them?
7. Is there not a real danger that young colored writers will be tempted to follow the popular trend in portraying Negro character in the underworld rather than seeking to paint the truth about themselves and their own social class?¹⁶⁷

The overall appeal of the questionnaire is clear enough even without surveying the responses of individual authors and the circumstantial intent of the questions, yet Van Vechten’s presumed involvement in the process of producing the questions seems paradoxical, given the subsequent development. Mark Helbling claims that Van Vechten provided the questions “Under a cover letter from Miss Fauset,” ostentatiously as material “for the forthcoming series” of the *Crisis*.¹⁶⁸ However, the nature of the questions, as well as their association with the *Crisis*, made scholars routinely assume that the questionnaire was written by Du Bois, which is rather ironic, given the artistic and ideological differences between the two men. Perhaps the most canonical endorsement of Du Bois’s authorship was made by Edward Waldron in his 1978 book *Walter White and the Harlem Renaissance*. Waldron was actually aware that Mark Helbling had attributed the authorship of the questions to Van Vechten in his 1976 article (i.e. almost two years prior to Waldron’s book), yet he only gave a passing nod to this new discovery¹⁶⁹, while categorically stating that the questionnaire betrays Du Bois’s fingerprints, with some of the questions “quite obviously loaded to suit Du Bois’s own prejudices.”¹⁷⁰

Based on his assumption that Du Bois’s authored most if not all the questions, Mark Helbling speculates that since Van Vechten took an active part in the *Crisis* questionnaire, Du Bois must have regarded his subsequent publishing of the controversial novel not only as inconsistent, but even as “a betrayal, an act of exploitation”.¹⁷¹

These are the reasons why we are focusing disproportionately on the Harlem Renaissance era when discussing the art-vs-politics conundrum. As Mark Helbling puts it, “the controversy which Van Vechten ignited”, and Claude Mc Kay exacerbated, we might add, “was itself part of a larger and more general issue – How Shall the Negro be Portrayed in Art? – that was consciously and publicly being debated for the first time”¹⁷² in the mid 1920s.

¹⁶⁷ Carl Van Vechten, “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?,” *Crisis* 2 (1926): 219.

¹⁶⁸ Mark Helbling, “Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance,” *Negro American Literature Forum* 10.2 (1976): 39.

¹⁶⁹ Edward W. Waldron, *Walter White and the Harlem Renaissance* (N.Y./London: Kennikat Press Corp., 1976) 169.

¹⁷⁰ Edward W. Waldron, *Walter White and the Harlem Renaissance*, 33.

¹⁷¹ Mark Helbling, “Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance,” 40.

¹⁷² Mark Helbling, “Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance.” *Negro American Literature Forum* 10.2 (1976): 40.

The notion that a black artist of some renown is inevitably seen as a representative of the race and should act accordingly, is also sporadically reflected in African American writing from that era. One work of Harlem Renaissance even appropriates this theme as one of its central dramatic and comedic conceits. Wallace Thurman explores the ambivalence ensuing from limelight position of a famous writer in his novel *Infants of the Spring*. The novel was published in 1932 and can therefore be seen as a slightly delayed response or coda to the heated art vs. politics debate of the 2nd half of the 1920s. Thurman deliberately touches on this topic during a stand-off between the main protagonist, Ray (modeled on Thurman himself) and the well meaning Dr. Parkes (presumably modeled on Alain Locke), who is trying to dissuade the main hero, a popular writer, from earning himself and the African Americans a bad name.

“It’s a matter of protecting yourself from unnecessary attacks on your reputation. This is a new day in the history of our race. Talented Negroes *are being watched by countless people*, white and black, to produce something new and something tremendous. They are waiting for you to prove yourselves worthy so they can help you. Scandal stories in the newspapers certainly won’t influence the public favorably.”¹⁷³

Dr. Parkes even invokes the “white light of publicity” which is going to be “shed upon their activities,” thereby symbolically invoking the white gaze.

Terrell Scott Herring explores the outright refusal of Ray (aka Thurman) to submit to the “white light of publicity”¹⁷⁴, and theorizes it via Jurgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. He builds on Habermas’s premise that newspapers (and eventually also mass media) have gradually assumed a larger role for itself, changing from mere “merchant[s] of news” to “dealer[s] in public opinion”¹⁷⁵ Herring argues that while the proponents of the New Negro, like Alain Locke, were uneasy about the new phenomena of a public personality, white Modernists in fact courted this new medial celebrity era. In support of his argument, Herring invokes a study by Ann Douglass, who claims that “attention management and exploitation fascinated all the writers”.¹⁷⁶ It is conceivable that white authors like Fitzgerald would be intrigued by the possibility of “spin doctoring” their image in the public sphere, while it is also perfectly clear why some African American leaders would be ambivalent about this new channels of communal self-representation. After all, the society which was still predominantly prejudiced against African Americans and dismissive of their civic and intellectual contributions, which is why it was likely that the mass media mainstream would largely cement rather than challenge these prejudices.

It is not accidental that a full scale intra-communal dispute over the public responsibilities of an African American artist erupted in the modernist decades following

¹⁷³ Wallace Thurman, *Infants of The Spring* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1932/1992) 198.

¹⁷⁴ Wallace Thurman, *Infants of The Spring*, 197.

¹⁷⁵ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991) 107. Quoted in Terrell Scott Herring, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Manor: *Infants of the Spring* and the Conundrum of Publicity,” *African American Review*, 35.4 (Winter, 2001): 582.

¹⁷⁶ Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, 1995) 71. Quoted in Terrell Scott Herring, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Manor” 582-83.

WWI. Josef Jařab argues that the Jazz Age established the African American as the “representative or [even] model minority artist” whose “entitlement to such a role would be given by the artistic performance and by the behavior of the black artist as much as by the way black art would be perceived and evaluated in mainstream society.”¹⁷⁷ This debate therefore needs to be seen in a wider context, as it was held against the historical backdrop of the explosive modernist influence of modern technologies and the inauguration of new venues of addressing the public. A significant contributive reason why this became so much of an issue in late 1920s was the preponderance of yellow journalism and the relative novelty of mass media as shaping rather than vending news, i.e. the public usurping the private, especially in the case of a successful artist. Thurman’s novel is the most explicit writerly treatment of the subject.

Added to this, one must consider that the heated tug-of-war in the black intellectual community of mid-1920s took place against the literary-historical backdrop of waning Naturalism and ascending Modernism in the United States. *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Nigger Heaven* (1926) was published within years after *An American Tragedy* and *The Great Gatsby*, the former possibly a shining beacon of American realism and naturalism (with the fingerprint of sensationalist muckraking journalism) the latter an epitome of modernist symbolism. As has been pointed out by Bone and others, many black writers were still steeped in didactic melodrama in the first three decades of the 20th century. Considering the uncertain didactic appeal of most of these competing influences, it is not surprising that the main champion of writing for social uplift, W.E.B. Du Bois, would unintentionally swerve toward rather didactic and melodramatic fiction, perhaps most conspicuously in his 1928 novel *Dark Princess*.

The autonomous revolt of black modernist writers against the old ideological constraints can also be seen as analogical to, or even overlapping with, some concerns of the literary mainstream. Robert Bone sees Langston Hughes’s and Claude McKay’s rebellion against Du Bois’s ideological straitjacket as analogical to two landmarks on the trajectory of American literature, namely Emerson’s mid 19th century defiant refusal to “listen to the courtly muses of Europe,”¹⁷⁸ which heralded autonomous American literature, or with the synchronous impatience of Lost Generation writers with the normative Victorian values in the US.¹⁷⁹

A summary and outlook

The modernist decades of 1920s through 1930s saw African American literary community break away from the self-policing ideological paradigm (theorized by Robert Bone), yet it to

¹⁷⁷ Josef Jařab, “Modernity, Modernism, and the American Ethnic Minority Artist,” Series: W.E.B. Du Bois Institute, ed. Heather Hathaway, Josef Jařab and Jeffrey P. Melnick, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 10.

¹⁷⁸ Emerson’s address is echoed by Whitman’s conviction that the American difference from the Old World manifests itself most obviously through music, as an artistic conduit which can express “the subtlest spirit of a nation”. This reification of music makes Emersonian or Whitmanesque cultural separatism even more akin to the cultural awakening of the New Negro, which was overwhelmingly underscored by jazz. Emerson’s line and Whitman’s verbal echo are quoted in Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: The University of California Press) 97.

¹⁷⁹ R. Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 62.

some degree accentuated the essentialist paradigm (theorized by Gene Jarrett). The self-policing impulse has made several palpable appearances within the African American literary discourse since then, for example in response to some women writers in the 1970s and 80s.¹⁸⁰ As was adumbrated in subchapter 2.1, the self-policing paradigm is generally replaced by a more confrontational segment of ideological writing, namely protest fiction, which is also an inherited exhortative typology prefigured by Frederick Douglass, Sutton Griggs and others. Virtually all variations on the protest fiction are based on typologies that have been surveyed throughout this historical overview.

The “shackles” of racial realism have also been a very resilient typology. The Schuyler versus Hughes exchange was perhaps most canonically synthesized and reinterpreted by Richard Wright in “Blueprint for Negro Writing”, in which he complains that it is hard for African American writers to achieve artistic autonomy if they only choose to address African American realm of experience, thereby in effect practicing cultural segregation. Despite being most famous for his novel *Native Son* (1940), a seminal work of black naturalism with overtly confrontational overtones, Wright’s “Blueprint” endorses Schuyler’s integrationist position. This position is to some degree embodied in Wright’s later novels, such as *Outsider* (1953) or *Lawd Today* (1963), yet it is most classically rendered in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) which draws on Dostoevsky and T.S. Eliot.

This integrationist position, as defined by a major African American scholar Houston Baker, resides in the conviction that black and mainstream white literature should be judged by a “single standard of criticism.”¹⁸¹ The main breakup with this integrationist attitude arrives with the Black Power Movement in the 1960s which, as Houston Baker points out, switches back to essentialist position that amounts to political separationism. This radical “generational shift,” as Baker calls it,¹⁸² was the most pronounced reassertion of racial essentialism and communal vigilance (though in a confrontational mode), thereby aligning with Bone’s as well as Jarrett’s criteria. And it is precisely this last staunchly political movement within African American arts which oversaw Charles Johnson’s early artistic apprenticeship, one which he later distances himself from, while also managing to include it in his synthesis of engaged and disengaged black writing.

In 1955, an interviewer asked Ralph Waldo Ellison whether he thought his novel *Invisible Man* (1952) would still be of any interest. Ellison gave the following reply.

I doubt it. It’s not an important novel. I failed of eloquence, and many of the *important issues* are rapidly *fading away*. If it does last, it will be simply because there are things going on *in its depth* that are of more permanent interest than on its surface.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ This will be discussed in relation to Charles Johnson in subchapter 4.1.

¹⁸¹ Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 71.

¹⁸² Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, 73-74.

¹⁸³ Ralph Ellison, “Society, Morality and the Novel,” *Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995) 696; emphases added.

This self-deprecating reflection on what came to be known as possibly the most important African American novel clearly embodies the complaint of Adolph L. Reed, Jr. that “the distinction between cultural history and the history of social and political thought” has been blurred and these two distinct issues still often conflated.¹⁸⁴ In fact, this quote to some degree prefigures the inquiries undertaken in the practical section, which seek to go beneath the veneer of the most overtly ideological short stories written by Charles Johnson, with the aim of rehabilitating their authorial autonomy.

III. TENDENTIOUS TROPES AND TYPOLOGIES IN BLACK FICTION

The taxonomy of minority ethnic fiction tropes and typologies, characterized in the theoretical chapter, has been teased out from rather eclectic sources. Nevertheless, the relevance of this threefold prism can be substantiated by the frequency with which the three binaries of tropes and typologies, based on sociologist prism, biological prism and rhetorical/linguistic prism, respectively, appear in the African American literary canon. As was pointed out in the introductory subchapter on methodology, the biologist (hereditary) and sociologist prisms barely need any theoretical backing, as they have been intuited by Robert Bone, Houston Baker and other scholars of African American literature. Nevertheless, we need to clarify what kind of literary examples concur with each of the typologies and tropes.

Each of the respective sections will therefore first define the taxonomic prism and characterise the ensuing typology or trope, then it will proceed to give an epitomical example from African American literary canon. In most cases, the basic binary taxonomy will be confined to constitutive examples of tendentious (cliché) tropes and typologies, briefly examined throughout the sections. The term “cliché” as used throughout this analysis is metonymic and mildly hyperbolic, as it only adverts to the recurrent usage of certain tropes in African American literature, and is in no way suggesting that the real-life situations or events that gave birth to these repetitive tropes are insignificant or fraudulent. The examples will generally draw either on older and more obviously ideological American literature, or on classic items in African American literary canon.

3.1 Explicit panoptical tropes

Panoptical tropes in African American literature explicitly communicate the fact that the narrator or the character(s) are presuming that their performance is being watched either by the white gaze or by the black community. These are typically delivered intra-dietetically, i.e. the panoptical anxiety is informed by the fictitious white or black spectators of the story, not by the presumed readership. Let us demonstrate the inevitable fusion of outward and inward

¹⁸⁴ Adolph L. Reed Jr., *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 130.

communal policing subsumed in this trope, with reference to a segment from Sutton Griggs' 1899 novel *Imperium in Imperio*.

If a man of education among the colored people did such manual labor, he was looked upon as an eternal disgrace to the race. He was looked upon as throwing his education away and lowering its value in the eyes of the children who were to come after him.¹⁸⁵

In this case, the narrator mediates the musings of the novel's protagonist, as he is presuming a cautionary glance from the black community who would be frowning upon him for burying his "credit to the race" potential. However, he does not back up this anxiety with any tangible evidence, it is therefore panoptical. Since the communal "credit to the race" reflex is itself mobilized by negative stereotyping of the black community, it can be attributed to the white gaze. The segment also seeks to explain some (otherwise inaccessible) nuance of African American mindset, doing so inter-dietetically to the reader of the book, which constitutes an exegetical trope. However, the demonstrable presence of overt panopticism is a more obvious symptom of ideological involvement.

An even earlier example of this trope relating solely to the white gaze can be found in Phillis Wheatley's classic poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America" written in the second half of the 18th century.

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.¹⁸⁶

Even Wheatley, by virtue of presuming a white audience which *views* her and her dark compatriots through a certain prism, partakes of panoptical anxiety. Her presumption may have been drawn from a real life reference, yet she is preemptively addressing even potential readers whose reaction she cannot possibly fathom. Unlike the earlier example, Wheatley is using exhortative rather than exegetical tenor.

Such explicit and constitutive examples of panopticism are relatively rare in literature, as the stance is typically communicated to the presumed reader of the text in a more nuanced manner, typically via modal tropes.

3.2 Panoptical modal tropes

As was pointed out in the introduction, inter-diegetic modal tropes, derived from Friedrich's modal metatropes, relate to situations when the text itself is, explicitly or implicitly,

¹⁸⁵ Sutton E. Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio: A Study of the Negro Race Problem* (Echo Library, 1899/2006). Kindle.

¹⁸⁶ Phillis Wheatley, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," in *Poems of Phillis Wheatley: a Native African and a Slave* (Bedford: Applewood Books, 1995) 12.

communicating something that can be readily understood as an attempt to engage the white gaze. This is done typically by way of explaining something to the white readership, or by challenging or confronting the white readership. The explanatory position will be referred to as an *exegetical trope*, while the challenging position will be referred to as an *exhortative trope* within the scope of the thesis. As was also mentioned, this modal criterion of rhetorical stances is analogical to *affective function* in pragmatics which characterizes the “affective involvement” of the speaker with a view to his or her relative position towards the recipient of the conversation. In other words, the “attitudinal lexis” and other devices reflect the tenor or emotional attitude of the speaker towards the presumed target of his or her utterance, thereby indicating *subordinated* or *equal status* of the speaker.¹⁸⁷

3.2.1 Exegetical tropes

Let us first examine the exegetical trope, which is typically defined as an attempt on the part of the literary character or narrator to explain some nuance about the black community to the presumed white readership or audience. The *exegetical trope* connotes explanation, but also panoptical anxiety and defensiveness, sometimes even subservience.

As is the case with many other tropes and typologies, the origin can be traced back to the oldest African American literary canon of the antebellum South. In his *Narrative*, Fredrick Douglass reminisces how he sometimes listened to slaves singing while running an errand to the Great Farm. “While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, [...] reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness,” recalls Douglass, before further deliberating on the subject.

I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do. I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension [...]. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.¹⁸⁸

After this contemplative part, he proceeds to an explicit exegetical stance towards the white readership.

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. [...] At least, such is my experience. I have often

¹⁸⁷ Suzanne Eggins, *Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics*, 100-101.

¹⁸⁸ Frederick Douglass, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,” 263.

sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness. Crying for joy, and singing for joy, were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery. The singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singing of a slave; the songs of the one and of the other are prompted by the same emotion.¹⁸⁹

This particular variant of exegetical trope, which could be loosely (and somewhat insensitively) labelled “art as therapy”, is very pronounced in African American writing, perhaps most famously as the allegorical theme of a caged singing bird in Maya Angelou’s poem “*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*” from the 1970s, prefigured by “*Sympathy*”, a poem on virtually the same topic written by Laurence Dunbar in late 19th century. Virtually the same point in a much edgier version is delivered in Amiri Baraka’s 1964 drama *Dutchman*.

And [the whites] sit there talking about the tortured genius of [jazz musician] Charlie Parker. Bird would’ve played not a note of music if he just walked up to East Sixty-seventh street and killed the first ten white people he saw. Not a note! [...] A whole people of *neurotics*, struggling to keep from being sane.¹⁹⁰

The “art as therapy” motif is such a recurrent rendition of the exegetical trope in African American rendition that it can be used almost as an epitome of the exegetical position. However, the exegetical stance can be rendered in various other narrative scenarios. Perhaps the most comprehensive synthesis of the trope was provided by Bucklin Moon in his 1945 anthology *Primer for the White Folks*. As the title suggests, Moon openly invites the presumed white audience to read the anthologized items with the *explicit* purpose to understand black people.¹⁹¹

Even a fairly explicit exegetical delivery can be delivered to the audience via mimesis, not as a direct interdiegetic engagement, typically in direct speech. Let us consider the following vernacular monologue of “a poor, ignorant negro woman” who is getting her son ready for school, delivered within the already referenced novel *Imperium in Imperio* by Sutton Griggs.

“Cum er long hunny an’ let yer mammy fix yer ‘spectabul, so yer ken go to skule. Yer mammy is ‘tarmined ter gib yer all de book larning dar is ter be had eben ef she has ter lib on bred an’ herrin’s, an’ die en de a’ms house.”¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,” 263.

¹⁹⁰ LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), “Dutchman,” *Political Stages: Plays That Shaped a Century*, ed. Emily Mann and David Roessel (New York: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2002) 157; emphasis added. Baraka deliberately points to communal neuroticism, which can be seen as a variant of the neurotic artistic impulse briefly touched on in the previous chapter.

¹⁹¹ Bucklin Moon, *Primer for White Folks: An Anthology of Writings by and about Negroes from Slavery Days to Today's Struggle for a Share in American Democracy* (New York, Doubleday, 1945).

¹⁹² Sutton Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio*. Kindle.

The social uplift message dispensed throughout this talk partakes of a fairly comprehensible maternal attitude, yet the mother's readiness to die in an almshouse in order to ensure the best possible education for her child reaches levels of self-sacrifice that amount to explaining the communal mindset to the reader, doing so in indirect, mimetic means.

A wide plethora exegetical narrative or rhetorical stances runs like a red thread through classic African American fiction and poetry, and will be briefly addressed in connection with Charles Johnson in chapter 4.

3.2.2 Exhortative tropes

As has been pointed out, the exhortative trope expresses an explicitly or latently reproachful stance toward the presumed white readership or audience and connotes confrontation, agency and offensiveness. As has been pointed out, even this trope is triggered by panoptical vigilance. Let us again use a short segment from Douglass's *Narrative* in which he muses about the shocking treatment of an old slave woman who is left to her own devices when she is no longer deemed useful.

The grave is at the door. And now, when weighed down by the pains and aches of old age, [...] my poor old grandmother, the devoted mother of twelve children, is left all alone, in yonder little hut [...]. She stands-she sits-she staggers-she falls-she groans-she dies-and there are none of her children or grandchildren present, to wipe from her wrinkled brow the cold sweat of death[...]. Will not a righteous God visit for these things?¹⁹³

Virtually the entire passage can be read as covert reproachful gesturing towards the white American gaze (whose tacit consent with slavery makes such inhuman treatment possible), with Douglass's final rhetorical question making that exhortative position obvious.

Modern African American fiction rarely uses such an overt exhortative stance, yet it is fairly common in essayistic form. The exhortative equivalent of Moon's *Primer for the White Folks* is Richard Wright's collection of four essays entitled *White Man, Listen* (1957). In fact, Wright even commented on the overt panopticism of the title by famously claiming that "any black man who is not paranoid is in serious shape"¹⁹⁴

Possibly the most obvious fictitious rendition of intra-communal exhortation is Ras the Exhorter, the Marcus Garvey equivalent appearing on the streets of Harlem in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Ras's open mistrust of white Marxism as a vehicle towards black social uplift,

¹⁹³ "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass," 284.

¹⁹⁴ Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001) 491. In fact, *White Man, Listen!* also is engaged in communal exegesis, perhaps most obviously in Wright's essay "The Psychological Reactions of Oppressed People", in which he describes the unyielding presence of white racism as a phenomenon that may easily trigger paranoid genocidal delusions, thereby anticipating the "reactionary psychosis" later defined by Frantz Fanon. Calvin C. Hernton, "Between history and me: persecution paranoia and the police," *Even Paranoids Have Enemies: New Perspectives on Paranoia and Persecution*, eds. Joseph H. Berke, Stella Pierides, Andrea Sabbadini and Stanley Schneider (London: Routledge, 1998) 174-175.

and his dismissive attitude to racial integrationism in general, makes this character a very deft synthesis of the exhortative modal trope and the nationalist typological stance.

A slightly less tendentious variant of this trope is delivered mimetically, meaning that the readers are not overtly fed some exhortative point, but are allowed to witness something which also amounts to a reproachful stance. This is a classic trope in African American protest novel, when we are allowed to see the main character go down a slippery slope even though the original crime or offence is accidental, which makes the subsequent retribution morally ambiguous. This is classically rendered in *Native Son* by Richard Wright and, less classically but perhaps even more poignantly, in James Baldwin's novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1972). This trope is also built on antebellum sources, such as the motif of wanton white-on-black violence that goes unpunished, frequently engaged in slave narratives, or unprovoked lynching in the post Reconstruction times.

3.3. Biologist prism: essentialist typologies

When exemplifying the biologist binary of affirmative essentialism (racial pride) and derogatory essentialism (racial self-deprecation), it is appropriate to start with a brief overview of the attitudes and stereotypes that gave birth to both of these typologies. The assumption that these two attitudes are a response to normative tendencies from the white majority would clearly classify these typologies as panoptical.

In his explanation for the radical nationalistic impulses of the Black Power movement, Martin Luther King observes that “In Roger’s Thesaurus there are some 120 synonyms for ‘blackness’ and at least 60 of them are offensive—such words as ‘blot,’ ‘soot,’ ‘grime,’ ‘devil’ , and ‘foul’ . He indignantly juxtaposes these against the “134 synonyms for ‘whiteness’” all of which “are favorable, expressed in such words as ‘purity,’ ‘cleanliness,’ ‘chastity’ and ‘innocence.’” From this basic semantic pursuit, he goes on to inquire about the meaning and racial overtones of expressions like “white lie” which is, by inductive reasoning, always “better than a black lie”. Invoking a particularly inflammatory lingo (perhaps deliberately), King reminds the reader that the “most degenerate family member of a family is the “black sheep” not the “white sheep””. In echoing this covert linguistic tarnishing of all things black, he seems to come close to concurring with the radical suggestion of Ossie Davis that “maybe the English language should be reconstructed so that teachers will not be forced to teach the Negro child 60 ways to despise himself and thereby perpetuate his false sense of inferiority and the white child 134 ways to adore himself and thereby perpetuate his false sense of superiority”.¹⁹⁵

This lopsided understanding of race is the original impulse that gives birth to our two hereditary dichotomies, namely the affirmative essentialism (racial pride) or derogatory essentialism (racial self-deprecation)

195 Martin Luther King, Jr., *MLK on “The Other America” and “Black Power”* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016). Kindle.

3.3.1 Affirmative essentialist typologies

Several books by early 20th century and contemporary African American writers can be seen as a direct attempt at countering this racist skin-elitism. This countering reflex typically assumes the shape of “race pride through which [the black person] tries to rebuild what the whites have torn down“, as Robert Bone puts it, referring to the damage of personal self-esteem due to the fact that the person “constantly receives an unpleasant image of himself from his environment.” Charles Johnson somewhat capriciously opines that black “nationalism in its various forms reminds us that Pushkin and Dumas carried black genes” and “that Egypt had black kings,” yet he still validates the impulse in some of his writings.¹⁹⁶

Literary attempts at countering the deprecating racial images vary in the politically-charged intensity, ranging from fairly benign endorsements of black aesthetic criteria to a more aggressively anti-white rendering of the black communal pride delivered in Toni Morrison’s 1997 novel *Paradise*, which can be seen as one of the most comprehensive (and also subversive) fusions of racial pride and separatist ideology within African American literary canon. Morrison describes the founders of an all-black town Ruby in Oklahoma who do not only think of their community as a refuge from white racism, but also insist that their pristine racial heritage should remain untampered. The founders in effect practice racial essentialism, as they view their purely black heritage as a guarantee of self-righteousness, as opposed to white depravity. This essentialism makes them resentful even toward African Americans of mixed blood.¹⁹⁷ The inverted Manicheanism of Morrison’s black founding fathers had many literary and artistic forerunners, including the ostentatious preference for phenotypically black characters in Oscar Micheaux’s novels and films described in section 2.2.2.1.

3.3.2 Derogatory essentialist typologies

Having been pummeled by outright racism and subtle Manichean insinuations, not all African Americans manage to counter these with race pride, resorting instead to essentialist self-deprecation. The most extreme example of internalized pigmentocratic self-deprecation is what has come to be known and artistically digested as “internalized self-hatred”, resulting, as Richard Wright put it in 1950, from the following scenario: “Hated by whites and being an organic part of the culture that hated him, the black man grew in turn to hate in himself what others hated in him.”¹⁹⁸ And this self-deprecating attitude also trickles down to fiction, either as a faithful depiction or irony.

The topic of internalized-hatred makes a regular appearance in older African American fiction, but the most canonical example is probably the character of Pecola Breedlove in Toni

¹⁹⁶ Charles Johnson, *Being and Race*, 85.

¹⁹⁷ This is just a small segment of the novel’s tapestry, narrowly carved to match the definition of affirmative racial essentialism.

¹⁹⁸ Crispin Sartwell, *Act Like You Know: African-American Autobiography and White Identity* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1998) 92.

Morrison's 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye*, the young girl from a dysfunctional African American family who internalizes exposure to racism and outward beauty criteria to the point that she develops obsessive desire for blue eyes. A very different variation on the same theme is found in a scene from another 20th century African American classic, the 1968 novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* by James Baldwin, in which the main protagonist is entering an all black bar in the company of his white female colleague acting in a way that suggests mutual intimacy (even though that only materializes later that day). This is how Leo, the main participant, second-guesses the self-deprecating lust of some of his fellow African American men in the bar, a situation which inadvertently qualifies as *prima facie* panoptical:

Some of the men looked at me as though I were a fool, but, just possibly, looking at Madeleine with a cool, speculative, lewd contempt [...]. If a white woman would sleep with one black man, then, obviously, she had no self-respect [...]. It seemed to me that their swift estimate of Madeleine revealed their estimate of themselves, and this revealed estimate frightened me as being perhaps, after all, at bottom, my own. [...] They saw themselves as other had seen them. They had been formed by the images made of them by those who had the deepest necessity to despise them. The bitterly contemptuous uses to which they had been put by others was the beginning of their history, the key to their lives, and the very cornerstone of their identities.¹⁹⁹

Derogatory essentialism is often paired with pigmentocratic skin elitism, which permeates especially early African American literature. Plentiful textual evidence of this preference for light skinned "blue vein"²⁰⁰ characters is found in the short stories of Charles W. Chesnutt and also in major Harlem Renaissance writers, perhaps most obviously in Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) whose main dark-skinned heroine is once dismissively referred to (by an African American man) as "coal."²⁰¹ To point out a classic epitomical example, Charles Chesnutt uses Manichean skin elitist overtones very creatively for example in his short story "The Wife of His Youth", where he has the main character recite a fragmentary ode borrowed from Tennyson, with frequent references to the pallor of his female subject.

"O sweet pale Margaret, O rare pale Margaret."

He weighed the passage a moment, and decided that it would not do [even though] Mrs. Dixon was the palest lady he expected at the ball [...].²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ James Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (London: Penguin, 1968/1994) 166.

²⁰⁰ The pigmentocratic snobbery of some characters in Chesnutt is most demonstrable in their Blue Veins Society, which only admits African Americans who are so light that the veins on their wrists show through.

²⁰¹ Wallace Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry* (New York: Dover Publications, 1929/2008) 58.

²⁰² Charles Waddell Chesnutt, "The Wife of His Youth," *Tales of Conjure and The Color Line: 10 Stories* 50, ed. Joan d. Sherman (New York: Dover Publications, 1998) 50.

3.4 Sociologist prism: assimilationism and nationalism

The sociologist prism takes its basic clue from what is essentially a colonial dialectic, as aptly summed up by Frantz Fanon or Edward Said. In larger global context, this oscillation between assimilationism and nationalism is analogical to the birth of cultural self-awareness as a response to a “whole slew of theories and rhetoric” that sought to legitimize the colonialist plunder in the 19th century, to use Said’s phrase. These theories, Said argues, promote “the idea that some races and cultures have a higher aim in life than others.” Viewed through this prism, the colonization practices are ostentatiously not performed “in the name of brute force, or plunder,” even though these “are standard components of the exercise, but in the name of a noble ideal.” The rhetoric of ethnic identity as we see it today, Said continues, is a backlash against these legitimizing theories which, among other things, posit that “the Black race must be the bearers, the laborers of mankind because they are strong in physique and can work hard.” The development of black nationalism can therefore be read as an equivalent of “rhetoric [of self-determination] among the colonized people” developing simultaneously with the “cultural self-justification” of the colonizer.²⁰³

It cannot be overstated how much the official American history and sociology had underplayed the accomplishment and agency of African Americans, typically in their own plight for emancipation. As a response to this historical deprecation, the African American community developed not only the essentialist race pride, but also the creed of “black agency” which emphasizes the accomplishments and abilities of African American people without necessarily attributing it to racialist inheritance. Martin Luther King describes the responsive process as a journey towards “[p]sychological freedom, a firm sense of self-esteem,” which he sees as “the most powerful weapon against the long night of physical slavery.”²⁰⁴

It can be therefore summarily argued that the pressure from the dominant culture produced two centrifugal responses within the African American community. The assimilationist response can be seen as a process of disowning one’s cultural roots, typically in seeking social betterment within the dominant culture. This stance is predicated on the assumption that the dominant or host culture is superior. The opposite stance is nationalism, which emphasizes the resilience and viability of the black community without reference to, or sometimes in opposition to, the mainstream society.

The most iconic rift between the nationalist and assimilationist view again concerns W.E.B. Du Bois, namely his ideological clash with Marcus Garvey’s Back-to-Africa movement. Du Bois regarded Garvey’s pan-African nationalism as a defeatist gesture, a cowardly withdrawal from the white dominance, a stance completely antithetical to his own plan of fighting for social betterment from within the system. However, Du Bois openly acknowledged reliance on the “talented tenth” as the principle catalyst of racial uplift was dismissed as elitist and disingenuous.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Edward W. Said, “The Clash of Definitions”, *Comparative Political Culture in the Age of Globalization*, ed. Hwa Yol Jung (New York: Lexington, 2002) 367.

²⁰⁴ Martin Luther King, “Black Power,” *I Am Because We Are: Readings in Black Philosophy*, ed. Fred L. Hord and Jonathan Scott Lee (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995) 291.

²⁰⁵ Colin Grant, *Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey and His Dream of Mother Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 301-304. The classist animosity between Du Bois and Garvey was almost certainly underlain by their phenotypal differences, with Garvey, whose separatist ideology made him staunchly

3.4.1 Assimilationist typologies

The previously referenced analysis of this typology by Robert Bone very baldly conflates assimilationism with middle class aspirations. “The ideal [...] is not to behave like a white person, but to behave like a middle class white person [by] eradicating one’s “Negroness”,” he claims. In that process, “[j]azz is replaced by Beethoven, shouting baptism by staid Episcopalianism, and the matriarchal family by that of the dominant male.” Bone goes even further by directly linking this to the phenotypic trope, suggesting that the assimilationist strivings of the new African American middle class “has its biological equivalent in the slogan “lighter and lighter each generation.”²⁰⁶ While this categorical accusation of skin elitism may sound too insensitive and inappropriate when uttered by a white scholar, its mimetic veracity is nevertheless supported by many assimilationist and skin-elitist characters in African American fiction. The internalization of mainstream aesthetic or behavioral standards both fall well within the outward panoptical topography. The collusion of striving towards social uplift and aesthetic refinement according to white matrix has innumerable renderings in African American literature, with Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* being a very palpable example.

The main character, Pecola, and her mother, can be both seen as the victims of mainstream aestheticism. However, the symbiosis of aesthetic as well as behavioral assimilationism is more pertinently demonstrated with reference to a minor character in the novel named Geraldine, whose generic nature Morrison underscores by describing her “kind” in plural. Deftly, the author starts the description with unequivocally good physical and character traits, so it takes a while before the edge of the character’s assimilationism dawns on us.

They straighten their hair[...]. They go to land-grant colleges [...] and learn how to do the white man’s work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children *in obedience*; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. Here they learn [...] how to get rid of funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions. Wherever it erupts, they wipe it away; [t]he laugh that’s too loud; [...] the gesture a little too generous. They hold their behind in fear of a sway too free [...].²⁰⁷

In Geraldine, Morrison portrays a variant of classic social self-restraint motivated by middle class respectability, yet she endows this self-vigilance with visible racist connotations, in match with out definition of black communal panopticism. The internalization of mainstream aesthetic or behavioral standards both fall well within the outward panoptical topography, and so does our next example of literary rendition of black assimilationism.

opposed to racial mixing, dismissed Du Bois as a “mulatto” and “white man’s Negro” Colin Grant, *Negro with a Hat*, 304.

²⁰⁶ Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 5.

²⁰⁷ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Picador, 1993) 64; emphasis added.

Another character in *The Bluest Eye* who displays perceptible assimilationism is Soaphead Church, the pedophile palmist who tricks the main tragic character into believing that she has blue eyes. The nickname that Morrison uses for this character may also be symbolic, because the black Church does feature quite prominently as an instrument of assimilationism in African American literature.

The theme of Church as a docility inducement towards assimilation makes an appearance in several works by James Baldwin, including the already referenced *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*. The narrative backbone of the novel, told in an orderly flashback during the main protagonist's convalescence, is the evolving relationship between two brothers growing up in Harlem during the Great Depression, plagued by poverty and white-on-black institutionally sanctioned violence. Each of the brothers manages to transcend this social hindrance and the accumulated pain in his own way, and in so doing the two partly swap their respective positions. Leo Proudhammer, the monopoly narrator and main protagonist, initially idolizes his older brother Caleb, falsely accused of burglary and later soldiering in the European Theater.

After a life-changing experience during the war the older brother finds God and becomes a preacher. In doing so, he seems to have commuted all his pent up rage to his younger brother, an aspiring actor who eventually becomes a film star of nationwide and possibly international renown, by then struggling with his bi-sexual orientation and the notion that his life could have been spent in a more worthwhile manner. Leo realizes with shock and pain that he has mentally outgrown his brother, whose transformation from a raw and enraged soul into a self-righteous preacher he has come to resent. The following passage (one of the last interactions throughout their love-hate relationship) has double signification with regard to Baldwin's recurrent topics, as it touches on the Marxist "religion as placebo" theme, but also on the biographically grounded motif of personal *gotterdammerung* – the violent rejection of an erstwhile role-model.

Once, I wanted to be like you,' I said. 'I would have given anything in the world to be like you.' [...] Now I'd rather die than be like you. I wouldn't be like you and tell all these lies to all these ignorant people, all these unhappy people, for anything in the world [...].²⁰⁸

Caleb embraced Christianity as a therapeutic panacea to counter his accumulated hatred against white people. To recontextualize a phrase uttered by the teenage narrator in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Caleb's assimilationist decision to become a pastor is an "adjustment without improvement."²⁰⁹ Caleb does seek reconciliation on his own terms and at his own moral expense like his brother does, he only lifts himself up by "tell[ing] lies to ignorant people" (as his brother Leo accosts him), thereby transcending his pain and hatred at someone else's expense. Baldwin chose to address this notion of a black church as an assimilationist instruments in several of his writings, including the novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), widely regarded as his masterpiece.

²⁰⁸ James Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, 361.

²⁰⁹ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 16

3.4.2 Nationalist typologies

The nationalistic impulse, triggered by constant deprecation by the dominant class, can take various shapes. A fairly benign version is the emphasis on black achievements and black agency, as indicated in the introductory passage by Edward Said. A more extreme version of nationalistic typologies is cultural or even geographical separatism. All these have featured as themes in black fiction. In addition to these, cultural self-sufficiency can also assert itself not as a theme, but as a choice of venue to write about, with some authors deliberately opting to address solely or predominantly black topics. Even this can qualify as a nationalist typology.

Let us first address the theme of black agency or black self sufficiency as a standard typology in African American writing. This typology was already discussed in subchapter 2.2.2 in reference to Oscar Micheaux, yet we may add several other examples from older African American literature. A classic theme within the black agency typology is “credit to the race” motif, which tends to emphasize the accomplishments of noteworthy African Americans. One such early literary attempt to earn the black race a more honorable position on the scale of human achievement was performed by William Wells Brown, the author of *Clotel* (1853), the first published African American novel. His essayistic treatise, titled *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*, lists the accomplishments of people of African descent, clearly in a panoptical defensive stance against 19th century white gaze.

Almost at the outset of his tractate, he seeks to make his case against the white supremacists by asking the following question: “From whence sprang the Anglo-Saxon? For, mark you, it is he who denies the equality of the negro.” By way of substantiation, he invokes Thomas Macaulay’s²¹⁰ assertion that when Phoenician sailors first beheld the inhabitants of the Britain, they were deemed “little superior to Sandwich Islanders.”

After thus leveling the field, Brown continues to enumerate many noteworthy people of African descent, among them inventors, medical doctors, mathematicians and linguists and military heroes such as Crispus Attucks, the first martyr of the British colonial massacre in Boston of 1770, thereby becoming an icon of anti-British patriotic fervor and unwittingly also an anti-slavery icon.²¹¹ The black agency and credit to the race typology can be applied to many other literary scenarios, several of which have been touched upon in chapter 2.

Drawing attention to African American accomplishment is a fairly benign version of black nationalism in comparison to the separatist impulse, which also sporadically features as a literary theme. James Tyner distinguishes between *communal* and *transnational* separatism. By communal separatism he means “separate communities [...] wherein African Americans retain political economic, and social control of their surroundings,” the most obvious example of which are all-black towns. The term *transnational separatism*, as employed by Tyner, refers to pan-African tendencies, namely the desire of “diasporic people” to return to their

²¹⁰ Referring to Thomas Babington Macaulay and his five-volume *History of England*, widely read in late 19th century United States.

²¹¹ William Wells Brown, “The Black Man, His Antecedents, His genius, and His Achievements,” *William Wells Brown: A Reader*, ed. Ezra Greenspan (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008) 288 – 289.

“African homeland”.²¹² Both of these have had several canonical re-enactments in African American literature.

Somewhat less dramatic communal separatism is portrayed in all-black town communities that populate the novels and short stories by Zora Neale Hurston. Ironically, Hurston does not dream these all-black towns as a refuge and respite from white racism. She just writes from experience, as she grew up in a very prominent family in the all-black town of Eatonville in Florida and, by her own admission, did not experienced any racial prejudice until she was an adolescent.²¹³

Outside of Hurston’s universe, the all black communities are seen as performing a twofold function: quarantining the white people, by way of sanitizing historical pain, and providing the testimony of the generic worth of the black people.²¹⁴ This is also the case of the most recent canonical rendition of black communal separatism in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*, even though we have discussed it primarily with the inverse racism of their founders.

Tyner’s transnational separatism, namely Marcus Garvey’s back-to-African movement, has also been rendered in African American literature, most recently by Wilson J. Moses’s *The Wings of Ethiopia* (1990). Older examples of this radical nationalist typology include Sutton Griggs’s *Imperio in Imperia*, some of whose characters contemplate migration to Africa, and several other renditions of the theme.

Nationalism as a divisive literary theme is only one connotation that this expression has had within African American literature. Literary nationalism can also connote what can be misrepresented as the writer’s myopic focus on African American community. This position was considered the norm until the Harlem Renaissance dispute, namely the exchange between Langston Hughes George Schuyler. The exchange, which pits racial exclusionism (Hughes) against universalism (Schuyler), sets the tone for the later syntheses of these positions, perhaps most comprehensively done by Richard Wright in his *Criteria for Negro Art*. It is important to realize that Hughes’s argument, namely that it is perfectly legitimate for an African American writer to focus predominately on racially related themes, is still very vibrant within the black literary community, and so is the conditional reflex against this cultural myopia. Both of these impulses are very elegantly summed up by John Edgar Wideman in his fairly recent interview with Charles G. Rowell. The interviewer suggests that the economic poverty of the African American community has led to a lack of autonomy and the resulting economic censorship “played a major role in canon formation in and outside of African-American literature,” a notion in itself constitutes a perfectly legitimate variation of the Foucauldian panopticon. Wideman subscribes to this argument by invoking the economic marginality principle in the following reminiscence.

[I]n my experience as a kid, the people around me, the black people, were of crucial importance to my life. These were my folks, these were the people from

²¹² James Tyner, *The Geography of Malcolm X: Black Radicalism and the Remaking of American Space* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 115.

²¹³ Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Scribner, 2003) 50.

²¹⁴ The second point is distinctly panoptical.

whom I'd learned to walk, talk, dance, and love, and that was my world. So of course these people weren't marginal in any sense of the word. Nor were they a minority, because they were mostly the majority people I saw. But from somebody else's point of view they were marginal, and we were a minority. And as I grew up the message was passed along to me: that my people were marginal and I was a minority, and that we really didn't count for much. [...] And that maybe if you wanted to write about something important, surely you wouldn't pick these people off here in this little quadrant, in this little camp over here. You want to write about the big life, about Europe, Sartre and all that shit. So at the very beginning there's an invidious effect, a drastic loss of self-worth caused by economic marginalization and class consciousness and all that.²¹⁵

Wideman's reminiscence in effect explains both positions, the "ghettoized" focus on African American communal life as the one topic that the writer can comment on with authority of experience, and the defensive embracement of cosmopolitan topics (like Richard Wright's rapprochement with French existentialism) by way of warding off this embedded artistic provincialism. A virtually identical point ensues from Toni Morrison's admission that she briefly considered black culture "backwoods and uninformed" after her first year in college.²¹⁶

These epitomical literary examples of nationalist/assimilationist typologies, as well as those of affirmative and derogatory essentialism, are representative and canonical enough to be used as a representative yardstick and a point of reference. The same applies to panoptical tropes and modal tropes outlined in this brief survey. All these typologies can be used as a basic starting point for confirming the overt ideological nature of Johnson's short stories under examination.

IV. TRANSCENDING BLACK TROPES IN CHARLES JOHNSON'S FICTION

4.1 Charles Johnson's endorsement of non-ideological writing

One of the primary contentions of this thesis described the work of Charles Richard Johnson as possibly the most articulate and erudite synthesizing elaboration on the centuries old dichotomical tug of war between unrestrained artistic self-expression and ideological self-policing in African American literature. This 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".

²¹⁵ Charles H. Rowell, "An Interview with John Edgar Wideman," *New Bones: Contemporary Black Writers in America*, ed. Kevin E. Quashie, Joyce Laush and Keith D. Miller (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 2001) 1036-1037.

²¹⁶ Black Creation Annual, "Conversation with Alice Childress and Toni Morrison," *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille K. Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 174.

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”²¹⁷ in a cross-breed between playful historiographic metafiction and plausible imaginative impersonations of Martin Luther King, Karl Marx, Martha Washington and Frederick Douglass.

The choice of topics alone would seem to suggest that Johnson is very much steeped in the 20th century African American literary tradition, a significant part of which deploys Black American history as a vehicle for social criticism, overt or covert. However, Johnson’s non-fictional writing unambiguously indicates that, despite his brief love affair with the radical posturing of the Black Aesthetic Movement of the 1960s, he has repeatedly argued for a more universalist black writing untainted by ideology. His detached poise has probably been attained intuitively, yet it may also be seen in purely methodological terms, as a result of his formidable expertise in phenomenology and his penchant for Buddhism. The combined input of these two (potentially overlapping) influences – the phenomenological reduction plus the Buddhist notions of nonattachment (*vairagya*) and withdrawal from suffering – is a plausible progenitor of an ideologically detached (though not dispassionate) African American writer. In addition to being a novelist, his artistic stance is also explicitly addressed in his philosophical and critical writings, most importantly in *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970* (1988) and *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing* (2003).

Johnson 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. Johnson touches on this topic in several of his fictional pursuits, perhaps most explicitly in “Poetry and Poetics,” a very short story from his 1998 collection *Soulcatcher*, which will be addressed in section 4.2.1.

²¹⁷ Gene Seymour, “Mirror to Memphis,” *The Nation* 27.4 (1998): 27.

Over the course of his prolific career as scholar, writer and graphic artist, Charles Johnson has travelled a significant distance in terms of his artistic and writerly premises. He received a major artistic impetus from the ideological maxims and charismatic energy of the Black Aesthetic Movement in the 1960s, particularly by LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka. Yet he has gradually come to understand their rigid ideological stance as a straitjacket which he now sees as detrimental to untrammelled self-expression and imaginative autonomy. He goes so far in his notional mistrust of the cultural nationalism of the Black Aesthetic Movement that he compares its ideological posturing to “fascist art in Germany during the 1930s”²¹⁸ and he now seems to be staunchly espousing universalist aspirations embodied in his statement that “all presuppositions, all theories must be suspended before experience and meaning can be brought forth in black literary art” (BR 29). However, this apparent political disengagement is to some degree tempered by the influence of white novelist John Gardner, his mentor in creative writing. Gardner’s much endorsed “notion of moral fiction” left a lasting imprint on Johnson, yet the apprenticeship with Gardner also allegedly taught him to rid his fiction of didactic “straw man” characters which he tended to set up as cautionary examples and then “slap [them] around”.²¹⁹

Jonathan Little, a leading Johnson scholar, uses Johnson’s early sequential art to describe his stance as an attempt “to remain fundamentally uncommitted to any single racial or political perspective.”²²⁰ This stance is present particularly in Johnson’s critical and philosophical endeavours which ostentatiously dismiss “any identification with writing that focuses on the black experience from a limited, restricted or essentialised perspective.”²²¹ This tendency is also, much less perceptibly, present in his fictional literary pursuits.

As was pointed out in the introductory chapters, the jostling between the partisan and universalist writer has had a history in African American literature. A huge part of African American literary lore traces its origins to 19th century slave narratives which were fairly ostentatiously deployed for ideological purposes (albeit beneficial ones), and a similar tendency of using literature as a vehicle for promoting social uplift and conveying political and ideological content can be found in a significant part of late 19th and early 20th century African American literature, from Booker T. Washington through Langston Hughes and Richard Wright.

It is for this reason that Johnson’s request for ideologically detached and universalist writing seems to be going largely against the grain of early African American literary tradition which tended to be an uneasy marriage between the political and the aesthetic and which was, from the outset, inevitably prone to self-policing on the part of the authors.

Such self-policing, however, was inward as well as outward, as quite a few African American writers in the first half of the 20th century certainly did not aim to fossilise all black

²¹⁸ Charles Johnson, *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) 30. Subsequent page references preceded with BR are given in parentheses in the text.

²¹⁹ Charles Johnson, “An Interview with Charles Johnson,” *I Call Myself an Artist: Writings by and about Charles Johnson*, ed. Rudolph P. Byrd. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) 235.

²²⁰ Jonathan Little, “From the Comic Book to the Comic: Charles Johnson’s Variations on Creative Expression,” *African American Review* 30.4 (1996): 589.

²²¹ Mark C. Conner and William R. Nash, *Charles Johnson: The Novelist as Philosopher* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) xii.

writing into a political manifesto. Even Richard Wright himself takes a fairly compromising and nurturing stance on this issue in his 1937 essay *Blueprint for Negro Writing*:

By placing cultural health above narrow sectional prejudices, liberal white writers can help to break the stony soil of aggrandizement out of which the stunted plants of Negro nationalism grow. And the Negro writer can help to weed out these choking growths of reactionary nationalism and replace them with hardier and sturdier types.²²²

Obviously, the quoted passage above was written chiefly with the aim of counterbalancing the perceived aggrandizement of the white culture bearers, but the second sentence is very unmistakably cautioning against an uncontrolled boost of Black nationalism. We do not need to ponder on what kind of literature Wright means by the nakedly allegorical expression “hardier and sturdier types”. In fact, the statement seems to undermine rather than foreshadow and underscore the radical pursuits of the Black Aesthetic Movement, while at the same time prefiguring Johnson’s position on this subject. While mentioning that, we might also hastily add that, partly because of the shift in time and context, Johnson’s objection to partisan black literature is much more subtle and his definition of this category would actually include a large part of Wright’s work, whose straightforward Naturalistic thrust is more nakedly ideological and black-and-white (no pun intended) than Modernist re-imaginings of African American identity like *The Invisible Man* by Ellison, the author who was, in Johnson’s own words, “dismissed [...] for his insistence that mastery of literary craft must take priority over politics in a writer’s apprenticeship.”²²³

The argument can be taxonomised and understood as several distinct injunctions: (1) authors should do their best to purge their writing of overtly ideological overtones, and/or (2) subordinate these to their imaginative and creative freedom, and, as Johnson has repeatedly implied, (3) authors are meant cultivate the desire to rid their writings of (self-)conscious ethnic particularism per se. The first two injunctions are self-explanatory, while the latter injunction, as defined by Johnson, can be read as a much subtler and more nuanced upgrade of George Schuyler’s stance of the (non)specificity of black writing as expressed in “The Negro-Art Hokum”.

Johnson’s ideologically dismissive stance is slightly mollified in *Being and Race* (1988), an updated version of Johnson’s doctoral dissertation which still ranks among the most coherent and comprehensive works of cultural and literary criticism Johnson has written. This book, in which he fuses his philosophical training with his formidable expertise in African American fiction, pays a very obvious tribute to both the groundbreaking endeavours of early 20th century African American artists and scholars, such as the towering figure of W.E.B. Du Bois, but it also gives a vigorous approving nod to very politically committed

²²² Richard Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007) 274.

²²³ Charles Johnson, “The Singular Vision of Ralph Ellison,” in *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing* (New York: Scribner, 2003) 106. The quoted dismissive remark is attributed to Baraka who could hardly generate any enthusiasm for Ellison’s creative premises at all. The dichotomy between Wright’s straight-up and Ellison’s diluted ideologies is explored at some length in Johnson, *Being & Race*, 14-16.

writers associated with the Black Art Movement generation, typically Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, albeit with major reservations vis-à-vis their prescriptive attitude to art, which will be discussed in connection to Ron Karenga.

One of the book's major concerns seems to be the above-mentioned perennial question of ethnic fiction which Johnson addresses quite often. Making a shrewd and eclectic use of the phenomenological practice of bracketing sensory input as the sacrosanct source of knowledge, Johnson in fact extrapolates this principle to make a fairly nuanced point that can be applied to all ethnic fiction. For starters, he seems to be arguing that, despite the possible short term merit of political manifestos, the best literature invariably results from the writer's bracketing his or her cultural constraints and ethnic makeup. This is clearly not meant as a wilful suppression of one's racial (historical) memory and life experience, on the contrary. However, Johnson cautions against overtly political fiction, particularly African American fiction of the 1960s, which had been very obviously commissioned by the political objectives of its day and which inevitably resulted in what he calls "a new racial melodrama," as it failed to transcend the obsolete, yet "apparently deathless idea that art must be [...] useful to some passing social or political trend." Thus, it inevitably failed "to produce balanced, responsible, well-crafted fiction that revealed both life's failures and its triumphs" (BR 22-23) and from a purely artistic perspective came close to cartooning (Johnson's earliest field of expertise).

This artistic cartooning of the world in sharp racial and political contours in fact echoes the general thrust of the Cultural Nationalism movement which Johnson somewhat disparagingly describes as "a kind of political quick fix for those who are impatient with slow change and ambiguity" (BR 84). Johnson underscores this point by making a metonymical distinction between well-rounded (albeit racially informed) literature and political crusading which is "less that of an enduring art than that of journalism hastily written at the front, hammered out in reaction to fast breaking (bad) news" (BR 23).

The main bogeyman which Johnson is trying to distance himself from is summed up in Ron Karenga's "Black Cultural Nationalism", a 1968 essay which Johnson singles out, ostentatiously not by way of "hold[ing] Karenga to ridicule" but as an attempt to identify the root cause of the "silliness that spoils too many discussions of black fiction trace" and which should be "run into the ground" (BR 23). Seeing black art as "part of the revolutionary machinery of change", Karenga considers the *social* impact of fiction to be the primary goal, thereby relegating "technical innovation and linguistic inventiveness" to the background. The essay makes the argument that black art is supposed to be "(1) functional, (2) collective, and (3) committed", thereby aiming to "expose the enemy, praise the people, and support the revolution." While this extreme wording might have had its justification within the Black Power Movement ideological objectives, Johnson thinks Karenga's artistic requirements are conducive to the production of "agitprop and Kitsch". His summary stance, expressed in opposition to Karenga's, is resonant with Adorno's stance formulated in opposition to Lukács and Brecht almost three decades earlier.

Art is not useful in the sense that a commodity is useful [and] has no business begging for approval or acceptance on these terms. Although Sartre claims in *What is Literature?* that words can be picked up by desperate men and used as

neutral tool or weapon, which is the thought behind [...] all nationalist art, the truth is otherwise: we live in language. It works upon us as we upon it. [...] The work of art raises around itself a special aesthetic attitude, or intention of listening in which we momentarily leave the Natural Attitude of utility (BR 23).

Johnson's "endless stumping for the importance of 'universality'" (BR 114), as he himself describes it, thus leads him to a dismissal of most "1960s social clichés" (BR 112) of the Black Art Movement whose uncompromising ideological stance may have contributed to the present day situation when, as the African American critic Blyden Jackson put it, "few [...] literary universes are as impoverished as the universe of black fiction."²²⁴ The old dilemmatic racially-induced dichotomy is prophetically described by Nathan Hugginson who concludes that "the race consciousness that is so necessary for identity most likely leads to provincialism which forever limits possibility of achieving good art."²²⁵ Johnson endorses the anecdotal opinion of one of his informants from the publishing business, namely that the black literary tradition has grown into "genre fiction" defined by "strict social formulas and calcified ways of seeing" (BR 121) which is otherwise thought endemic to Harlequin romances and pulp westerns, as extreme as the comparison might seem.

The schism between these two facets of an African American writer – that of a partisan spokesperson for his or her race and that of an all-embracing aesthete and unbiased thinker – is either explicitly addressed or implicitly intoned in several of Johnson's books and, as Jonathan Little perceptively points out, is subtly prefigured or foreshadowed even in his early cartooning efforts which "show Johnson torn between the nationalist thrust of his time and his discomfort with ideological rigidity."²²⁶

4.1.1 Reclaiming the mythological roots of philosophy

Johnson the literary theorist may nominally insist on the importance of universalist and ideologically-disengaged black writing, yet Johnson the philosopher leans decidedly in the realm of socially-invested philosophy, a fact which cannot but ooze back into his fiction. Linda Seltzer, one of leading Johnson scholars, draws attention to the fact that already Johnson's college philosophy training at Southern Illinois University, under the tutelage of scholars like Tom Slaughter, sought to forge "a new intellectual grounding in approaches like neo-Marxism and phenomenology" and thereby "infuse academic philosophy with new social and phenomenological immediacy". Seltzer sees this as "a significant factor in the development of Johnson's aesthetic practice"²²⁷, possibly predicated on his realization that a gifted storyteller may convert the dry and insular philosophical discourse into a digestible

²²⁴ Blyden Jackson. *The Negro's Image of the Universe as Reflected in His Fiction* (1960). Quoted in Charles R. Johnson. "Whole Sight: Notes on New Black Fiction," in *I Call Myself an Artist: Writings by and about Charles Johnson*, ed. Rudolph P. Byrd (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) 87.

²²⁵ Nathan Hugginson, *The Harlem Renaissance* (1971). Quoted in BR 120.

²²⁶ Jonathan Little, "From the Comic book to the Comic," 589.

²²⁷ Linda Seltzer, *Charles Johnson in Context*, 3.

narrative. Johnson himself elaborates on this fusion of mythos and logos in the following interview with Nibir Ghosh.

Ideas do not begin in some abstract realm floating high above human experience. Rather, they originate in the historical muck and mud of our daily experience, cloaked in the immediate particulars of this world, and only later do we abstract them for the purpose of study and reflection. What a philosophical novelist does [...] is simply return those ideas to the palpable world of experience from which they first sprang. That way, I hope, readers experience the ideas viscerally, with flesh put back on their abstract bones”.²²⁸

This reversed trend of academic ossification, Johnson argues, is beneficial not only for its intrinsic didactic value but also for its disseminative capacity. By resurrecting its original narratological garb, philosophical inquiry is likely to attract larger readership and thereby be demographically more effective in the fulfillment of its cultivating ethos.

Johnson’s decision to employ the novelistic vehicle towards imparting philosophical wisdom is sanctioned by many other practitioners of this hybrid genre. In his most recent book on creative writing and literary theory, Johnson acknowledges Albert Camus as a kindred spirit who, retrospectively, validates Johnson’s decision to overcome his reserve about the philosophical merit of novelistic writing springing from his “deep suspicion of metaphor as being imprecise, sloppy, careless and misleading”.²²⁹ Johnson concedes that he had been inoculated by Wittgenstein’s linguo-semantic exactitude prior to starting his writing career,²³⁰ but eventually he shed the mistrust for figurative language, opting instead for the following maxim articulated by Camus:

“Feelings and images multiply a philosophy by ten. People can only think in images. If you want to be a philosopher, write novels”.²³¹

²²⁸ Nibir K. Ghosh, and Charles Johnson. “From Narrow Complaint to Broad Celebration: A Conversation with Charles Johnson,” *MELUS* 29.3/4 (2004): 374.

²²⁹ Charles Johnson, *The Way of the Writer: Reflections on the Art and Craft of Storytelling*, (New York: Scribner, 2016) 83.

²³⁰ Johnson started his graduate studies in philosophy in 1971, earning an MA in 1973, while his first literary efforts date back to 1970, which somewhat blurs the causative chronology provided by Johnson’s reminiscence. However, it is important to note that Johnson calls his first (unpublished and unavailable) literary endeavors “apprentice novels”, which seems to validate his claim that the *eureka* moment propelling him towards philosophical fiction may have been catalyzed by something akin to Camus’s endorsement. See *The Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, eds. William L. Andrews, Frances S. Foster and Trudier Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 228. Johnson’s 1996 conversation with Michael Boccia suggests that he might have read Camus’s *Notebooks* in college, long before their official publication in English in 2010, yet he uses a phrase from that new official English translation to second his own position on the merits of philosophical writing. Hence the speculative use of the adverb “retrospectively” in the passage above. Michael Boccia, “An Interview with Charles Johnson,” *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson*, ed. Jim McWilliams (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004) 193.

²³¹ Albert Camus, *Notebooks, 1935-1942 (Volume 1)*, trans. Philip Thody (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2010), 114. Quoted in Charles Johnson, *The Way of the Writer*, 83.

The shedding of mistrust does not amount to a complete embrace of fiction as a viable philosophical vehicle. In the very same book, Johnson tempers his previous statement by conceding that “what we lose when philosophy takes the form of storytelling is exact precision in the presentation of a claim”, though this still does not quite offset the benefit of imaginative literature, namely its “ability to uniquely engage an audience’s intellect, emotions and imagination in their fullness” when harnessed properly.²³² This idea is actually very much akin to Shklovsky’s “defamiliarization” (*ostranenie*), later updated by Bertolt Brecht. Shklovsky posits that radically neologistic and conspicuous language should function as an exclamation point that alerts the reader to the intended message, rather than diluting or bogging it down.²³³

To re-assess this issue from a more racialized perspective, we may see Johnson’s narrative tropes of philosophical delivery as a choice that does not only reflect his personal preferences but also his uneasiness about the status-quo college philosophy. As Lewis Gordon points out, many African Americans who train as philosophers actually do not practice it and instead end up in religion or African studies.²³⁴ Linda Seltzer’s synthesizing explanation is a two-pronged ivory syndrome: (1) philosophical departments are still frozen in racist modes and or (2) the African American scholars themselves tacitly resent the mode in which college philosophy is theorized and taught, seeing it as disjointed from real life and having no beneficial communal overflow.²³⁵ This will be addressed in some detail within the discussion of Alēthia.

Seltzer uses Johnson’s deliberations on this subject as a springboard towards the claim that the above mentioned practical leanings of Johnson’s philosophy inevitably exercise some subliminal effect on his fiction, thereby imbuing it with mimetic and social significance. Johnson’s mission as a writer of philosophical novels and short stories stems from his appreciation of the mimesis of a fictitious narrative as a way to subliminally smuggle in a philosophical point, doing so in a more organic and less laborious fashion than an overt philosophical treatise would.

In addition to its mimetic added value, Johnson’s didactic leanings make him value creative fiction’s malleable format as a medium conducive to very nuanced and subliminal philosophical didacticism. This relates to the simple fact that the established orthodoxy of fiction-writing enables the author to switch between descriptive passages, inner monologue and dialogical direct speech. This plethora of different means of communication enables the writer, for example, to lapse into direct speech in order to impart two seemingly irreconcilable positions, with the hope that the readers will manage to tease out the synthesis by their own reasoning faculties.²³⁶ In fact, Johnson occasionally deliberately inflates the volume of

²³² Charles Johnson, *The Way of the Writer*, 83.

²³³ Jurij Striedter, *Literary Structure, Evolution, and Value: Russian Formalism and Czech Structuralism Reconsidered*, trans. Matthew Gurewitsch (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) 23.

²³⁴ “Conversation with Lewis R. Gordon,” *African-American Philosophers: 17 Conversations*, ed. George Yancy (New York, Routledge, 1998) 111.

²³⁵ *Charles Johnson in Context*, 45-46.

²³⁶ An analogical principle is used in modernist multiple-narration strategy. This device is, unlike an argumentative conversation in the form of a direct speech within a novel, defined by its accentuation of the mimetic mode, and also by its diachronic nature. In other words, the differing perspectives are frequently

dialogical back-and-forth in some of his stories, as will be discussed in the first close-up analysis.

Bringing the notion of “philosophical fiction” closer to our main subject matter, attention needs to be drawn to the fact that Johnson’s narratological reenactments of dry conceptual thinking are held on a relatively short leash when it comes to its didacticism. In other words, the philosophical content of his novels does make explicit appearance, usually in the form of sporadic terms or allusions. Other than that, the conceptual content is usually delivered in allegorical or semi-allegorical package, a method which works under the brazen (or elitist) assumption that the reader is au fait with a fairly wide range of philosophical modes of inquiry. The level of didacticism exerted via this approach (and therefore its overt ideological content) is therefore rather hard to quantify. On the other hand, Johnson is no stranger to stories written with the explicit aim of teaching a particular aspect of philosophy. In 2010, he co-authored a non-traditional textbook called *Philosophy: An Innovative Introduction: Fictive Narrative, Primary Texts and Responsive Reading*, featuring stories whose explicit aim is to expound a particular aspect of philosophy or acquaint the reader with a philosophical within the context of his historical milieu. On reflection, some of the stories employed in the textbook could actually feature in a standard Johnson collection of fictitious short stories and would possibly strike an uninformed reader as just as plausible and enjoyable as Johnson’s “official” fictitious stories. Johnson seems to be drawing a line between didactic and allegorical renderings of philosophical arguments and philosophical fiction, yet in some cases the difference is so subtle (the opening story called “Cynic”, for example) that it confirms the postmodern notion of the corroding binary correlation between historical/documentary on the one hand and the mythological/literary on the other.

Johnson’s concerns about the unflattering notion of modern-day philosophy as an insular or solipsistic (i.e. implicitly undemocratic) enterprise also stem from his personal experience with unfavorable response to arguably esoteric and intellectual pursuits in the black community a point which is touched on in the following section.

4.1.2 Johnson and the dilemma of publicity

Would anyone ask John Updike to speak for white Americans?
The idea is absurd.²³⁷

Charles Johnson, 1998

Charles Johnson is not just a novelist and philosopher, but also boasts a formidable erudition and intimate knowledge of the development of African American writing within the larger context of mainstream American literary forms, which themselves developed in a transatlantic

displayed as opposed to being argued, and the differing narrative perspectives obviously cannot be pitted against each other almost simultaneously the way it happen in a discursive conversation. As a result of that, the diegetic and near-synchronic mode of a discursive dialogue is obviously much less ambiguous and more reader-friendly.
²³⁷ William R. Nash, “A Conversation with Charles Johnson,” *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson*, ed. Jim McWilliams (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002) 220.

communication with the influential European and (to a lesser degree) global literary trajectory. In fact, while still an undergraduate, he “was privileged to participate in the establishing” of the first Black Studies courses that sprang up in the late 1960s with the purpose of filling in the gaps in the US education relating to African American authors who had previously been “invisible to the eye and unknown”.²³⁸ Thanks to this erudition, he is perhaps one of the most qualified people to address the mixed-blessing of limelight artistic position, ensuing from the deeply entrenched idea that a black artist of some renown should be regarded as a spokesperson for the entire black community. He expands on this point in his recent 2008 interview.

During the age of slavery, then the era of Jim Crow segregation, when whites separated themselves from blacks, they needed a black individual to tell them what black people thought, desired, needed, etc. (How else were they going to find out?) Often that person was the black community’s minister; later writers served that purpose, from Richard Wright to Ralph Ellison to James Baldwin. I personally think in the post-Civil Rights period a black person is wasting his (or her) time, the precious few years of their lives, by devoting their energy---as a ‘spokesman’--- to explaining so-called ‘black’ things to white people. Whites [should] do their own homework. Read from the vast library of books on black American history and culture. [...] Then black individuals can be free to pursue the whole, vast universe that awaits their discovery (as it does for any white person), leaving behind emotionally draining racial discussions to investigate astrophysics, DNA sequencing, cosmology, Sanskrit, the Buddhadharma, mathematics, nano-technology, everything in this universe that remains such a mystery to us.²³⁹

In other words, Johnson ascribes this exegetical aspect of African American fiction to a direct response to the white gaze. The racist self-involvement of much of African American fiction owes its existence to the panoptical reflex which bids these writers to “explain” nuances of black societal and psychological turmoil to the white reader, a reflex presumably inherited from the black pulpit. It is intriguing to compare the conclusive part of this statement to an argument which Johnson made on the same topic in 2003.

From Booker T. Washington to Wright and Ellison and Baldwin, from Amiri Baraka to Toni Morrison, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Cornel West, the *role* of black “intellectual” has been, first and foremost, that of (1) interpreting as a spokesperson the “black experience” to white people

²³⁸ Charles Johnson, “Afterword,” *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, eds. John Whalen-Bridge and G. Storhoff (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009) 232.

²³⁹ “The M&C Interview 1: Charles Johnson, 6/07,” *Wayback Machine, Monsters and Critics*, May 28, 2007 <URL> 22 Dec 2008
<https://web.archive.org/web/20081222043612/http://www.monstersandcritics.com/books/interviews/article_1308738.php/The_M%26C_Interview_1_Charles_Johnson_6_07> 13 Aug 2015.

during the Jim Crow and post-Civil Rights periods, and (2) addressing his or her literary and cultural efforts *not* to the mysterious, inexhaustible world at large, *not* to the vast universe of unvoiced subjects that await exploration, but instead to a smaller province of meaning assigned to people of color. To put this bluntly, twentieth-century intellectuals were granted authority by the white world on but one worldly subject: *themselves*.²⁴⁰

This earlier deliberation on the same subject acknowledges the panoptical inducement (“granted authority by the white world”), yet it is not quite so accusatory in that it suggests that the exegetical or interpretive impulse came from within the black community and was not explicitly mandated by the mainstream white gaze. Such an explicit mandate would have been compatible with the notion of panoptical inducement in the first place. However, regardless of the original instigatory guilt of the white gaze, Charles Johnson quite obviously sees this elevation of popular black writers into communal exegetes as counterproductive. Not only does such a tendency narrow down the range of artistic or scholarly pursuit and foster racial provincialism, but the inevitable (plaintive or confrontational) ideological bias of black writing also inevitably levitates toward “racial melodrama”, as Johnson puts it (BR 97).

Seeing this process through to its logical conclusions, Charles Johnson claims that these exegetical expectations on the part of the mainstream white audience have triggered an unfortunate conditional reflex in the black scholarly and literary community. The postcolonial tendency of white intellectuals to shrink away from black subjects on the grounds of their presumably insufficient “authority of experience” has resulted in a “*resegregation of the black mind*”, Johnson argues. He then spins this argument into a deceptively positive pharmakon scenario, arguing that many African American authors and pundits make a “territorial claim” on issues of race simply because the narrow focus has proved “profitable in the short term[...], leading to six-figure book contracts [...], prestigious awards, much publicity in the media” and, all in all, “very comfortable careers.”²⁴¹

In addition to attacking this practice as mercenary and morally dodgy, Johnson further reiterates on the exegetical public spokesperson appointment as being intellectually stultifying, thus directly linking it to the Habermasian conundrum of publicity. His clinching verdict is that the celebrity status of the black “public intellectual”²⁴² who comments on behalf of the entire community, even on issues wildly outside of his or her expertise, “can be as *poisonous* for contemporary intellectual integrity as the century-old ghettoizing of the black intellect and imagination.”²⁴³

²⁴⁰ Charles Johnson, “Afterword,” *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, 232.

²⁴¹ Charles Johnson, “The Role of the Black Intellectual in the Twenty-first Century,” in *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing* (New York: Scribner, 2003) 85. Emphasis in the original.

²⁴² Charles Johnson, “The Role of the Black Intellectual in the Twenty-first Century,” 86. Johnson makes a distinction between a *scholar* and *intellectual* within this argument, with the latter being typically used with mildly derogatory sneer quotes.

²⁴³ Charles Johnson, “The Role of the Black Intellectual in the Twenty-first Century,” 87.

4.1.2.1 One woman's protest fiction is another man's caricature

Beloved is about a woman who kills her kids.

How representative is that of women during the period of slavery?²⁴⁴

Charles Johnson, 1993

Johnson's criticism of ideological literature as an end-in-itself is not confined to "racial melodrama" induced by centuries of racial oppression. His staunch conviction that good writing should "reveal a common situation affecting us all" (BR 97) also propels him to critique some modern literature by African American women, not for the radicalism contained therein, but for its thin characterisation and sketchy plots, in which category he includes even some of the most celebrated works of modern African American fiction, such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Johnson certainly does not shy away from the groundbreaking importance of this seminal African American protest novel, yet he also claims the book is peopled with thinly fleshed out characters and the author can be reasonably suspect of inhabiting the novel with men whose characters are fashioned "to fit [her] polemical design," (BR 106) thereby creating one-dimensional male characters. Johnson voices virtually the same objection in his interview with Jonathan Little, claiming that:

Some of the portraits of black men in those books are so limited and one-profiled, as opposed to thirty or forty images of black men, that they don't seem moral to me. It's not just Walker. You could also talk about Morrison. You do not see black men like Colin Powell or W.E.B. Du Bois or astronaut Ron McNair or Frederick Douglass. It's an extremely narrow range of human beings. You basically see black men who are fuck-ups.²⁴⁵

In doing so, he invokes Mel Watkins's review of *The Color Purple*, namely his conclusion that African American women writers "who have chosen black men as a target" have broken an "almost universally accepted covenant among black writers" that they would not give unflattering writerly reflections "of inner-community life that might reinforce racial stereotypes,"²⁴⁶ thereby harming the public image of the black community as such.²⁴⁷

This is a purposefully far-fetched and unfair analogy, as Johnson's objections to *The Color Purple* are nowhere near these crudely generic assertions, especially since he launches

²⁴⁴ Jonathan Little, "An Interview with Charles Johnson," *I Call Myself an Artist: Writings by and about Charles Johnson*, ed. Rudolph P. Byrd (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) 234.

²⁴⁵ Jonathan Little, "Interview with Charles Johnson," 238.

²⁴⁶ Mel Watkins, "Sexism, Racism and Black Women Writers," *The New York Times Book Review* (15 June 1986): 36.

²⁴⁷ Morrison and Walker were not the only black female writers who dared point an accusing finger towards the black community and reaped strong criticism from the African American community. Similar objections were raised in reference to Ntozake Shange play "*For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*" (1977) and an openly feminist analysis of black-on-black violence by Michelle Wallace's long treatise called *Black Macho & the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979). The decade between early 1970s and early 1980s can therefore be seen as an "en-gendered" equivalent of the ideological tug-of-war between Du Bois's self-policing and New Negro autonomy between mid 1920s and early 1930s.

his criticism from a very cautious perspectival platform (“they don't *seem* moral to me”). And yet, the above-mentioned statement by Johnson partly interferes with his championing of ideologically unrestrained artistic expression, as he gestures towards some major African American female authors and accuses them of gender/racial stereotyping, conflation and willful omission.

If we chart this argument against Johnson's uncompromising ontological suppositions, it is legitimate to ask why he assumes that Walker or Morrison's fiction should provide a representative palette of male characters. Are their poetic license and personal politics to be subordinated to their authorial obligation, which is to portray evenly distributed positive male characters? Is the insistence on veracity or life-likeness of fictitious male characters even tenable as a clear notional concept?

These questions would not even enter into the equation if the slightly cutting comment came from a writer or pundit with little or no philosophical training. However, it seems perfectly justified to question the epistemological foundations of these dismissive remarks when they come from a person so erudite in philosophical inquiry. The heartfelt remarks can possibly be defended as an emotional backlash to a perceived bias, yet by lashing out that way Johnson himself fails to give a balanced view, which would be in keeping with his impassionate principles of fiction-writing where authorial autonomy counts for everything. In short, the criticism seems to rest on intuitive grounds rather than on his standard methodological foundations. Moreover, his objection can be willfully misread as a continuation of ideological policing and strait-jacketing whose stultifying presence in African American fiction he has so frequently criticised.²⁴⁸

On the other hand, the one-sided depiction of male characters in Walker or Morrison can indeed be seen as propaganda rather than unrestrained call-it-like-I-see-it realism (that is, if we assume an ideologically lopsided prism and tag feminist emancipationist efforts as propagandistic). If this were the perception Johnson is advocating, then he might legitimately see himself as in fact countering propaganda and echoing Alain Locke's radical distaste for covertly propagandistic literature which, “apart from its besetting sin of monotony and disproportion, [...] perpetuates the position of group inferiority even in crying out against it.”²⁴⁹

Charles Johnson may legitimately see himself as a victim of this ideological pigeonholing in African American literary canon, namely the prioritization of a straightforward protest fiction typology over its diluted postmodernist variant. His first major literary achievement, 1982 novel *Oxherding Tale*, is a relativist and postmodern take on the slave narrative genre and the novel of passing. The novel defies or mollifies ideological binaries, the raw ideological thrust of the slave narrative or the subversive anti-establishment message of tragic mulatto novels. Incidentally, *Oxherding Tale* came out in the same year as Alice Walker's sensational

²⁴⁸ As has already been indicated, Johnson's resentment might have also been fomented by personal grudge stemming from the fact that his early masterpiece, *Oxherding Tale*, was published in the same year as the *The Color Purple*, with the merit of his novel being judged against the easily digestible matrix of protest fiction. Due to the orthodoxy in the publishing and marketing of African American fiction in the 1980s, Johnson clearly thought it unfair that *Oxherding Tale* and *The Color Purple* had to be competing within the same market niche earmarked for “black fiction”.

²⁴⁹ Alain Locke, “Propaganda-or Poetry?,” in *The New Negro*, 260.

epistolary novel *The Color Purple* which took a long hard look at domestic violence within the black community, among other issues. Walker's novel canonizes a new typology of protest novel, whose novelty resides in the protest vector pointing almost exclusively towards the African American community itself. However, the main heroine's straightforward path towards liberation and wisdom is still a straightforward and familiar rendition of the classic undiluted protest trope, which nudges the book towards African American literary canon in a more vehement way than is the case with *Oxherding Tale*.

On the flip side of the argument, Johnson does acknowledge the fact that the African American women writers of the 1970s through 1990s respond to a different set of social circumstances than their canonical male predecessors. In an interview with Nibir Ghosh, Johnson opines that "if Morrison and Walker are read in light of the protest tradition, a problem arises because they are writing in the post-Civil Rights period, after the Jim Crow world of Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin legally ended in America."²⁵⁰

However, this statement is clearly not intended to misrepresent Walker or Morrison as heroines without a cause. It is more readily understood as a response to the loaded question of the interviewer who implies that the reading of *The Color Purple* or *The Bluest Eye* feels "anticlimactic" if it follows the reader's previous exposure to Wright or Ellison.²⁵¹

Harping on a more non-literary string, Charles Johnson obliquely explains his mildly antagonistic tendency with reference to an opinion repeatedly voiced by his friend, famous playwright August Wilson.

Black women [do] *not* pose the same threat to white male power, and perhaps this is one reason why they have done so much better than black males in terms of integrating into American mainstream society - that is, gaining advanced academic degrees and jobs in greater numbers than black males, many of whom feel (or so August Wilson once told me) that passage through the white man's institutions is basically a form of cultural (and racial) indoctrination, and this is something August said young black males rejected.²⁵²

Johnson's seemingly inconsistent response also needs to be examined in the context of the disproportionate tendency to single black males as the stereotypical perpetrators, often to the detriment of a similarly keen focus on white male domestic violence, be it in real life or in its literary reflections. An anecdotal illustration of this position, which implicitly casts feminism and African American misogyny as two centrifugal elements in the public arena, is provided by Ishmael Reed in his 2008 interview.

²⁵⁰ Nibir K. Ghosh, and Charles Johnson, "From Narrow Complaint to Broad Celebration: A Conversation with Charles Johnson," *MELUS*, 29.3/4 (2004): 363.

²⁵¹ Ghosh and Johnson, "From Narrow Complaint to Broad Celebration", 363.

²⁵² E. Ethelbert Miller, "Nothing but a President: Barack Obama and the Mythology of Black Men," 18 Aug 2011 <URL> 30 Aug 2011 <<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.cz/2011/08/nothing-but-president-barack-obama-and.html>> 13 July 2016.

I was challenged to a fistfight by Margo Jefferson, the Pulitzer Prize winner, New York Times writer, who is part of a feminist clique at the Times, which believes that Black men are the principal threat to the women of the world.²⁵³

This feminist versus racist perspective plays out in one of Johnson's most recent short stories, "Executive Decision", which will be discussed later in the respective close-reading subchapter.

It is also intriguing to observe how Johnson appeals to a demographically fair mimesis in a manner similar to Du Bois's criticism of Vehten's *Nigger Heaven*. Johnson's critique of the "extremely narrow range of human beings" put on display in *The Color Purple* or *The Bluest Eye* is a close paraphrase of Du Bois's complaint that Vehten magnifies and glorifies the relatively few Harlemites who patronize "dives and cabarets", while completely ignoring the demographic fact that the "average colored man in Harlem is an everyday laborer, attending church, lodge and movie and as conservative and conventional as ordinary working folk everywhere".²⁵⁴ In this instance, at least the two great minds tend to think alike, asking the respective writers to go beyond the mantra of racial realism towards a redistributive version of realism that they see as demographically tenable.

The dilemma of publicity is typically attached to a celebrity status, which tends to be understood solely as a matter of individual achievement, and may thus be relegated from the realm of social and political signification to a more personal sphere. However, as was pointed out in the theoretical chapter, this spokesperson position has been historically underpinned by the divide between middle class leadership and the inner city underclass, a divide imaginatively revisited by many modern and postmodern black writers. Pursuing this line of argument, Cornel West's perceptions of Marxism as a useful platform towards fostering "sophistication and refinement" in the African American community²⁵⁵ certainly also apply to the developmental trajectory of Charles Johnson as a writer and thinker.

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'" and in response to this divisive logic became attracted to Buddhism which furnished him with "an intellectual and spiritual pack to King's nonviolence".²⁵⁶ In effect, Johnson's fiction and philosophical writings tend to walk a careful tightrope between civic engagement and disengagement, which can be seen, in hindsight, as progress from the divisive logic of

²⁵³ Ishmael Reed, "Faking the Hood, a conversation with Wajahat Ali," *Counterpunch.org*, Counterpunch, 21 March 2008 <URL> 13 July 2008. <http://www.counterpunch.org/2008/03/15/faking-the-hood/> 13 August 2016.

²⁵⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Crisis*, 32-33 (December, 1926), 81-82.

²⁵⁵ Cornel West, "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," 1079.

²⁵⁶ Linda F. Selzer, *Charles Johnson in Context* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009) 5.

Marxism and cultural nationalism towards the ecumenical (for lack of a better word) appeal of Buddhist and phenomenological permissiveness.

The one-off protest against the anti-male bias in *The Bluest Eye* or *Color Purple* is virtually the only public event inconsistent with Johnson's openly espoused reserve of ideological fiction. Given this position, it is both legitimate and intriguing to verify the degree to which this principle is upheld in Johnson's literary oeuvre.

4.2 Tendentiousness and autonomy in Charles Johnson's fiction

Short story as a paragon of formulaic fiction

Charles Johnson is most critically acclaimed for his novels, yet he has also written three collections of short stories, plus one hybrid collection of essays and short stories.²⁵⁷

The principle reason why the analysis focuses on a segment of his short stories is twofold. Johnson himself suggests that the brevity of the short story format makes it conducive to formulaic and didactic leanings. In his essay "Progress in Literature," he traces the development of Anglo-American short story from Poe's "On the Aim and Technique of the Short Story" and "The Philosophy of Composition", through its formulaic ossification at the turn of the 20th century and the resulting "savage" attack which D. H. Lawrence launched on Poe in *The Symbolic Meaning*. Lawrence takes Poe to task for having "mechanized the form of the story to such an extent that life's mystery, spontaneity and vitality were lost."²⁵⁸ 124 Johnson even invokes the precise point of Lawrence's criticism.

Poe is hardly an artist. He is rather a supreme scientist... He is not sensual, he is sensational... As an artist Poe is unfailingly in bad taste [...] He seeks sensation from every phrase and the effect is vulgar.²⁵⁹

Johnson then highlights Sherwood Anderson's rejection of the "emphasis on fiction-drive storytelling," which he sees as another nod to the fact that the earlier attempts to provide a clear-cut definition of the short story proved to be a mixed blessing. They "placed [the short fiction genre] on its feet as a distinct art form," yet this excessive formalism "led quickly to senility [and] an outcry for reform." This trajectory, as Johnson describes it, is an almost perfect analogy of the development of formulaic and ideologically invested African American fiction from slave narratives until "an outcry for reform" during Harlem Renaissance (McKay and Schuyler). Even the two timeframes are in sync.²⁶⁰ In addition to that, Lawrence's resentment of Poe's sensation-seeking can be seen as analogical to Johnson's resentment of

²⁵⁷ This does not take into account his two books for children (*The Adventures of Emery Jones*) and the stories explicitly designed as teaching material for college-level philosophy (*Philosophy: An Innovative Introduction: Fictive Narrative, Primary Texts and Responsive Reading*).

²⁵⁸ Charles Johnson, "Progress in Literature," in *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing* (New York: Scribner, 2003) 124.

²⁵⁹ Charles Johnson, "Progress in Literature," 125.

²⁶⁰ Poe's essays were published in early and mid 1840s, almost simultaneously with canonical slave narratives of Douglass and W.W. Brown, Lawrence published *The Symbolic Meaning* in 1923, several years before the public debates between Du Bois/McKay and Hughes/Schuyler.

“racial melodrama”. By virtue of their brevity, short stories are considerably more conducive to didactic and antithetical synopses than novels, fact which Johnson explicitly acknowledges by claiming that “*there is always a structure, always a formula*” in a short story.²⁶¹ This is why Johnson’s short stories are the best narrative material to use as a testing ground in order to ascertain the degree to which Johnson the writer abides by his own non-partisan principles. The second reason resides in the simple fact that Johnson’s novels have received considerable more critical attention than his short stories, with only a few exceptions.

In order to put Johnson’s impartial writerly dictum to a test, the analyzed stories needed to be overtly prone to didacticism and racialism, the combined input of which Johnson describes as “racial melodrama”. Panoptical overtones were not established beforehand, though panopticism is generally the first item of the inquiry. The stories for analysis were therefore selected according to several criteria. They needed to feature a very palpable *thesis and antithesis* (thereby overtly indicating didactic leanings) and they should explicitly *pit African American characters against white characters*. Since the analysis takes its point of departure from Charles Johnson’s repeated endorsements of non-partisan writings, the understanding is that these need not be juxtaposed against a *wider section* of Johnson’s writings; a representative segment of the most “suspicious” stories should be the most appropriate primary material for contestational readings. If the analysis establishes that even these overtly antithetical and racist stories contain significations and allusions beyond their overt literalist meaning, then Johnson has made good on his claims even in the most unlikely circumstances. This preemptive criterion has resulted in a representative selection of seven short stories. The 2001 *Soulcatcher* collection contributed five stories, namely “Poetry and Politics”, “The People Speak,” “Mayor’s Tale,” “The Plague” and “Martha’s Dilemma,”²⁶² all of which overtly fit the above described features of racial melodrama. This is also the case of “Executive Decision,” a story which originally appeared in 1997 anthology *Outside the Law: Narratives on Justice in America*, which was conceived as a collection of essayistic and literary reflections on the American legal system. The last analyzed story is “Alēthia” from Johnson’s 1986 collection *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*. This story was not explicitly commissioned for ideological purposes and it openly flaunts its philosophical significations, yet its basic antithesis boils down to a thematic opposition between the black and the white world, in addition to featuring a very overt theme of racial uplift.²⁶³

The practical part of the thesis therefore seeks to identify those tropes and typologies in Johnson’s work which can be subsumed within the Adornian definition of tendentious art,

²⁶¹ Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais, “An Interview with Charles Johnson,” 267.

²⁶² The *Soulcatcher* collection features several stories which would also fit the antithetical and racist template, namely “The Transmission,” “Confession”, or “Lion at Pendleton”. Virtually the entire collection is clearly designed along this antithetical template, yet the quintet under examination yields itself to the structured inquiry in a way that the other stories do not.

²⁶³ The template of white vs. black antithesis can also be loosely applied to three other stories within *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* collection, namely “The Education of Mingo,” “Popper’s Disease” or “Exchange Value.” Of these, “The Education of Mingo” would lend itself quite easily to our inquiry. However, since the story had already been given a fairly thorough examination by Linda Selzer, I decided not to include it in my own selection, by way of avoiding derivative tendencies. Linda Selzer, “Master-Slave Dialectics in Charles Johnson’s ‘The Education of Mingo,’” *African American Review* 37.1 (2003): 105–114.

bearing a distinct fingerprint of racialist fiction (the typologies of *racial realism*, *social uplift* or *protest fiction*). After that tendentious inquiry, the analysis goes on a lookout for allusive potential of the story, relegating Johnson's proactive philosophical interpretive framework into the background (see the next section). The analytical chapter is organized as structural progression from Johnson's more ostentatiously ideological short stories, commissioned as historiographic reenactment of the slavery era (the quintet from *Soulcatcher* collection) or as a legalistic reflection ("Executive Decision"), to a story which does not bear any such overt semblance of ideological para-text.

Johnson's aspiration to imbue his fiction with fill philosophical overtones seems to apply to all of his work, yet some of his stories are clearly more conducive to ideological readings than others. Johnson's 2001 collection *Soulcatcher*, for example, was conceived as complementary material for a historical TV series. The ask of producing literary renditions of the slavery period in the United States thus inevitably "shackles" Johnson's creative autonomy, and in turn also invites ideological readings. However, we must also take into account the fact that Johnson was selecting the thematic stories in the *Soulcatcher* from a vast plethora of antebellum sources,²⁶⁴ and in doing so he could certainly exercise his ideological preferences. The resulting eclectic mix of historicizing stories included in the collection therefore inevitably reflects Johnson's authorial preferences, which is why the stories can be assessed a historiographic. This in fact seems to be Johnson's own opinion.

The same systemic objection can be raised against the choice of *The Adventures of Emery Jones* as a primary reading material from which to tease out conclusions about Johnson's authorial and ideological consistency. Literature for children does narrow down the field and is more conducive to formulaic stories and, while these contours are wide enough to afford some wiggling room for the author's ideological and aesthetic preferences, the presupposed audience (in this case primarily Johnson's grandson) is too conducive to ideological maneuvering and reductions to be used as a representative sample.

There are in fact many stories within the collections that fall outside of its analysis on the grounds that they do not touch on racial issues at all. As an *a priori* evaluative stance, the analysis therefore pre-selects the primary material for scrutiny based on the following twofold objective: It seeks to "redeem" the seven nakedly ideological stories, singling out those aspects which may place them within the fold of Adorno's indirect signification and thereby validating Johnson's impartial writerly policies.

Rogue readings against the grain

The analytical part will use the methodological prism towards analyzing a representative segment of Charles Johnson's short fiction, with an occasional comparative sidestep into his novels. As a general rule, will attempt to read these stories against the grain, meaning it will for the most ignore the proactive framework established by the author who bids us to read the stories through the lens of philosophical fiction. Perhaps "reading against the grain" is self-flattery, considering Charles Johnson's erudition and intellectual span. However, we do need to remind ourselves that Johnson's proactive formula literally goads any inquisitive party to

²⁶⁴ Charles Johnson, *Soulcatcher and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), xii.

read against the grain. A work of art that ostentatiously furnishes its own hermeneutics is inherently suspicious, even though the hermeneutical framework is by no means a straitjacket (philosophy>phenomenology and Buddhism, in this case).

This healthy paranoia may in fact be even exacerbated by the fact that Johnson is such a staunch and public advocate of non-partisan writing. A plain juxtaposition of these two stances, when assessed without reference to any of the writings, smacks of inconsistency. To reduce the point *ad absurdum*: If I insist on (African American) writing to be staunchly non-partisan, why would I pitch the readers a formulaic guideline to walk them through my writing, making sure *they would be understood as intended*. This is of course not what Johnson does, as he only tentatively nudges the readers in a certain direction. That, however, makes little difference in systemic terms. Philosophy is of course not ideology, and Johnson himself refers to phenomenology not as a tool towards garnering knowledge, but as an attempt to see things afresh, outside of particularistic boxes, before they are “plastered over with conceptual paint”,²⁶⁵ which is in fact defined as the very opposite of ideological bias. However, the postcolonial, poststructuralist and Marxist intellectual upheaval has been gnawing even at the notion of philosophy as a discipline of universal inquiry free of cultural bias. If we read Aristotle, Kant or Locke through the prism of class analysis, we may see their philosophical inquiry as limited by what Michael Parenti calls “gentlemen’s history” or “gentleman scholar[ship]”,²⁶⁶ alluding to the fact that Aristotle’s defense of slavery or Locke’s defense of private property may in fact be reflecting the entrenched beliefs of these two gentlemen inevitably ensuing from their middle class status. An intellectual from former colonies may legitimately argue that the canon of philosophy consists exclusively of white male Europeans, which in itself presupposes a cultural bias.²⁶⁷ It is particularly this postmodern mistrust of universal values that warrants a fresh and deliberately obtuse and racist look at Johnson’s fiction.

With the exception of the first book-length analysis of Johnson’s work, Jonathan Little’s *Charles Johnson’s Spiritual Imagination*, the critical focus on his oeuvre has displayed an overwhelming tendency to de-black his novels and short stories, thereby partly doing Charles Johnson’s bidding. This tendency is obvious in the standard interpretations of Johnson of his first novel *Faith and the Good Thing*, which read the main character’s life trajectory as a philosophical progression from Hegel to Marx to Marcuse, like Linda Selzer in her very insightful 2009 book *Charles Johnson in Context*.²⁶⁸

Oxherding Tale is quite appropriately read against Buddhist and Hindu beliefs, namely as a counterpoint of Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha*,²⁶⁹ with a passing nod to the influence of African American literary lore and the modes of the protest fiction. The same (docilely)

²⁶⁵ Charles Johnson, “Afterword,” *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, 231.

²⁶⁶ Michael Parenti, *The Assassination Of Julius Caesar: A People’s History Of Ancient Rome* (New York: The New Press, 2003) 15. This particular quote refers to Gibbon, yet Parenti’s class analysis subsumes even Plato or Aristotle.

²⁶⁷ This is briefly discussed in the section devoted to Johnson’s story “Alēthia”.

²⁶⁸ Linda F. Selzer, *Charles Johnson in Context* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009) 93-104.

²⁶⁹ Jonathan Little, *Charles Johnson’s Spiritual Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997) 80-94. Rudolph P. Byrd, “Oxherding Tale and *Siddhartha*: Philosophy, Fiction, and the Emergence of a Hidden Tradition,” *I Call Myself an Artist: Writings by and about Charles Johnson*, ed. Rudolph P. Byrd. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) 305-317.

philosophically invested criticism tends to be applied to his short stories. “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice” story from the eponymous 1986 collection is virtually the only short story that is typically interpreted with reference to African American literary canon. However, other racially inhabited stories from his first collection, such as “Education of Mingo”, “China” and “Exchange Value”, much like the illuminating journey of the Rutherford character in *Middle Passage*, are typically interpreted with reference to philosophical universalism, not racial realism as defined by Jarrett.²⁷⁰ Out of the seven short stories which are going to be examined within this analysis, only “Alēthia” and “Executive Decision” have been given noticeable critical attention, with Linda Seltzer’s rangy analysis subsuming its biographical as well as philosophical overtones of “Alēthia” and William Gleason contributing a 17-page analysis of “Executive Decision.” While several minor segments in the respective sections are swayed by their analyses, the overall thrust of the argument tends to emphasize different issues and can thus qualify as a fresh analysis.

As has been pointed out, some of Johnson’s stories explicitly lend themselves to ideological readings. Johnson’s 2001 collection *Soulcatcher and other stories*, for example, was conceived as complementary material for the 1998 series *Africans in America: America’s Journey through Slavery* which WGBH Educational Foundation created for PBS. In a preface to the short story collection, Johnson briefly describes the vast scope of the factual background and research that went into this slim volume, though the research and collecting had been done chiefly by the WGBH research staff and not by Johnson himself, as has been customary in his other publishing events. All the twelve stories included in the collection are very closely anchored in slavery-induced historical realities of the antebellum United States. The stories touch on very diverse historical events and social phenomena, among them the horrors of the Middle Passage (“The Transmission”), the American War of Independence (“Soldier for the Crown”), the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 (“The Mayor’s Tale”) or the grassroots of Back-to-Africa Movement (“The People Speak”), but also imaginatively reinvent major figures of that period such as the ex-slave author and activist Frederick Douglas (“A Lion at Pendleton”), the presidential widow Martha Washington (“Martha’s Dilemma”) or Toussaint L’Ouverture, the leader of the self-liberated Haiti (“A Report from St. Domingue”), and the first published African American poet, Phillis Wheatley (“Poetry and Politics”), but also takes a close look at some generic historical personae (“The Transmission”, “Soulcatcher”, “Confession”).

A collection of short fictionalized accounts surveying the American slavery, conceived as a semi-fictitious written complement to a film documentary focusing on the slavery era, can hardly qualify as ideologically unhampered fiction. However, much like with his *philosophical fiction*, Johnson again proactively carves the interpretive playground for the

²⁷⁰ Rudolph Byrd juxtaposes the “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice” story against Charles Chesnutt’s collection *The Conjure Woman*. However, even his analysis tends to downplay racialist themes and foreground larger philosophical themes and meta-meanings. Rudolph P. Byrd, “It Rests by Changing: *Process in The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*,” *I Call Myself an Artist: Writings by and about Charles Johnson*, ed. Rudolph P. Byrd. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) 333-352. By and large, Platonic, Kantian and phenomenological readings of Johnson’s stories and novels have been the dominant mode of inquiry.

readers in a foreword to the collection when he muses over the genesis of the project, remembering that he agreed to write “twelve *original* short stories to *dramatize* the companion book’s history”²⁷¹ The quoted phrase does yield itself to various interpretations, yet particularly the adjective *original* makes it tilt towards creative authorial fiction rather than documentary writing.

This acceptance of the collection as an integral member of Charles Johnson’s fictitious oeuvre is made easier by Johnson’s overtly historiographic pursuits, most notably his 1998 novel *Dreamer*. In fact, Johnson has repeatedly alluded to history as being cobbled together and “emplotted” from scanty historical record, endorsed by Paul Riceour or Hayden White. In his 2002 interview with Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais, he links this notion of “emplotment” directly to his 2001 *Soulcatcher* collection.

History and fiction are based upon narrative (beginning, middle, the end) which, of course, is an artificial structure. You choose a piece of time that you want to work with. In that respect, the historians and the novelists are like brothers and sisters in their efforts.²⁷²

Moreover, Johnson does not seem to see writing on a loosely assigned subject as a constraint on his artistic freedoms. In comparison to a filmmaker, he claims, “[y]ou have a far greater freedom as a writer of fiction, and you are challenged to force your imagination into *all these different roles*.”²⁷³ This claim on artistic autonomy is further underscored by the writerly craftsmanship involved, namely by the numerous narrative points of view employed throughout the twelve stories. The collection ranges across full and limited narrative omniscience, a monologue in Ich form, first and second person narration, a story in dialogue with no indirect speech to provide explanatory texture to the conversation, a series of fictitious diary entries, an epistolary story, a “mock-newspaper article”, or a short piece of prose punctured by snippets of poetry.

Given the ideological bias at their conception, the stories from this collection will therefore be preemptively treated as *a priori* tendentious and summarily dealt with as the first item of our inquiry. The stories in the collection are ordered in a chronological manner, starting with the Middle Passage and ending with the adoption Fugitive Slave Act and the rebellious musings of Henry David Thoreau. For the purposes of this analysis, the stories will be approached and grouped in a thematic, not chronological manner.

4.2.1 *Scriptor poeticus* or *scriptor politicus*: Johnson’s ventriloquist rendering of Phillis Wheatley

The explicit argument that an African American artist should throw at least some of his or her intellectual and artistic weight around in the name of racial uplift occasionally trickles down

²⁷¹ Charles Johnson, *Soulcatcher And Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), ix. Emphases added.

²⁷² Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais, “An Interview with Charles Johnson,” 254.

²⁷³ Nicholas O’Connell, “Charles Johnson,” *Passing the Three Gates*, 18.

to Johnson's fiction work and perhaps even more noticeably in his semi-fictional literary pursuits commissioned to be written for a particular purpose. Arguably the most eloquent and poignant fictional embodiment of this artistic schism can be found in his "Poetry and Politics", a dialogic story included in his short story collection *Soulcatcher* (2001).

Johnson does not give a list of researched material, so one has to sift through the resources that he might have used, though in the case of "Poetry and Politics" only a brief search through primary sources is needed due to the largely self-explanatory nature of the story. The entire story consists of a 7-page dialogue between the 18th century African American poet Phillis Wheatley and her mistress, and it centers round a single topic – the dichotomy between a universalist and partisan writer. Johnson seems to be conducting the dialogue as a self-dispute over the public responsibilities of a gifted poet, in which the universalist and apolitical side seems to get the upper hand.

"Poetry and Politics" is a story which, as Johnson poignantly mentions in the foreword, does not feature a single declarative sentence, only lines of dialogue. Given Johnson's philosophical training, one is briefly reminded of the Socratic discursive mode of philosophical inquiry, but the ventriloquist mode in which Johnson re-enacts a conversation between Phillis Wheatley and her mistress is perhaps even more reminiscent of the Stoppardian notion of dialogue being "the most respectable way of contradicting [one]self."²⁷⁴ The latter might seem as a slightly defeatist attitude,²⁷⁵ at least by the uncompromising ontological standards of philosophical fiction generally attributed to Johnson. However, it is rather hard to see this contradictive heteroglossia as an evasive strategy and shorthand for notional fuzziness. A nuanced position is a far cry from being fuzzy. On a more Africanist note, such heteroglossia may also be seen as a partial analogy of Bakhtinian double-voiced discourse, theorized by Henry Louis Gates with reference to Hurston's excessive use of dialogical direct speech.²⁷⁶

The Johnsonian Wheatley, who has just returned from a medical trip to Britain, is actually the one who triggers the racially flavoured discussion in the story by musing over the astonishment of the British (and Americans) "that an Ethiop could write verse." (25)²⁷⁷

The mistress, presumably Susanna Wheatley (if we deliberately chose to historicize), tries to deracialize the issue by suggesting that Phillis has earned her celebrity status not on racial grounds, as a sensational "Ethiop" who can compose poetry, but on purely meritocratic

²⁷⁴ Jon Bradshaw, "Tom Stoppard, Nonstop: Word Games With a Hit Playwright," *New York Magazine* (10 January 1977): 51.

²⁷⁵ Defeatism is an intentional overstatement, yet Tom Stoppard has repeatedly pointed out that a writer with a strong philosophical bent (like himself and Johnson, we might add) may see dialogical fiction as a very convenient vehicle for driving a nuanced point home without committing to a single perspective. He broadens the scope of his argument by the previous sentence in the referenced interview in which he says that "writing fiction is a way of making statements [he] can disown" (Bradshaw, "Tom Stoppard, Nonstop," 51). In fact, the artistic and philosophical premise contained in that statement can be seen as echoing Emerson's contempt for consistency as a fetishist end-in-itself in argumentation (the "hobgoblin of little minds" in his *Self-Reliance*) which may stunt the development of an individual by making him or her too intellectually timid for fear of contradicting himself or herself, yet it also somewhat frivolously sums up the concept of tentativeness endorsed by postmodern writers and thinkers. Ralph W. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," *Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Modern Anthology*, ed. Alfred Kayin and Daniel Aaron (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1958) 97.

²⁷⁶ See Henry L. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 143-144.

²⁷⁷ All quotations from *Soulcatcher* follow the Harcourt edition of 2001. Page references are given in parentheses in the text.

grounds, by being an extremely gifted human being. From a child prodigy translating Ovid, she matured into an accomplished poet. Susanna presses on, further complimenting Phillis on being possibly the most talented poet in 18th century New England, which the poet counters by reminding her mistress (and the readers) that her work has been derided by Thomas Jefferson whose “opinion of [her] work is less than laudatory” (26). This historically grounded dismissive stance refers to the well-established fact that Jefferson refused to see Wheatley as an exception to his conviction that African Americans were not capable of producing poetry of any value.²⁷⁸

It is only at this point that Susanna discovers the subject of the new poem Phillis is working on, namely on the necessity of manumitting African American slaves. Susanna seems to be taken aback, almost hurt, by the notion that Phillis would feel the urge to even address this subject, despite (or maybe because of) the fact that she herself was manumitted prior to her departure for England, on account of her delicate health.

Phillis (in Johnson’s ventriloquist poetic licence) was admittedly prompted to write on the subject because of the fresh experience from Britain where all slaves had been manumitted shortly before her arrival by Chief Justice Lord Mansfield²⁷⁹. Susanna’s riposte that there are free African Americans in (late 18th century) Boston, too, provokes Phillis into a veritable rant which eventually nudges the debate towards the key issue at hand, as it makes Phillis clarify the reason why she has decided to address the subject of slavery:

“But there are free black men and women in Boston.”

“Yes, and they live miserably, ma’am! My contact with them is slight, but I’ve seen them languishing in poverty and ostracized by white Christians. I wonder sometimes what they think of *me*. I imagine some mock the models I’ve chosen—Alexander Pope—and my piety and the patriotism of my verse, such as the poem to General Washington, which you know I laboured hard upon, though he is a slaveholder (and who replied not at all to my gift), so that the *hardest* work sometimes, at least for me, has been to honor in my verse the principles of the faith that brought me freedom, yet—and yet—I have not spoken of its failures, here in New England or in the slaveholding states that justify my people’s oppression by twisting scripture.” (26-27)

This is clearly a twofold argument. The introspective part addresses a topic which will be revisited later in the story, namely Phillis’s anxiety that her fellow African Americans,

²⁷⁸ Jefferson assumes this dismissive stance quite explicitly in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* where he claims that “[r]eligion, indeed, has produced Phillis Whately [*sic*]; but it could not produce a poet,” putting an implicit question mark over her authorship and a derisive exclamation mark over the merit of her work by stating that “[t]he compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism”. See Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Boston: Bedford St. Martin’s Press, 2002) 174.

²⁷⁹ The widely publicised 1772 court ruling delivered by judge William Murray, the 1st Earl of Mansfield, in the Somerset Case, effectively led to the manumission of the entire slave population in Britain (approximately 14,000 slaves). A very detailed account of the court proceedings can be found in a 1973 Ph.D. thesis by C. P. Bauer at New York University. See Carol Phillips Bauer, *Slavery, and Somerset’s Case in Eighteenth-century England* (New York: New York University Press, 1973).

both bondsmen and free(d)men²⁸⁰, may see her either as indifferent to their plight or even as a quisling who sides with the oppressor, emblematically speaking.

This secular part of her self-flagellating argument is perhaps more readily comprehensible. It resides in the conviction that African American patriotism in the 1770s could have been quite legitimately viewed as a contradiction in terms. When an entire people is held in subjugation, either through official policies (slavery) or customary prejudice (the ostracisation of free blacks), then the notion of loyalty to the state inevitably becomes a very precarious concept. The quoted passage only implies this dilemma in an undertone, and Phillis certainly does not carry this minor nuance of the argument through to its logical conclusion, yet it very subtly signifies on yet another short story within the collection, *A Soldier for the Crown*. Just like all the other stories in the collection, *A Soldier for the Crown* provides a cursory glance at a painful and contradictory event in the early history of the United States vis-à-vis slavery, drawing attention to the fact that during the War of Independence, “slaves [...] fought in greater numbers for the [British] Crown than for the Continental Army, in a desperate gamble for their freedom” (xii).

Judging against such an ideological yardstick, the indicated poem “To His Excellency, General Washington,” in which the historical Phillis bids Washington (with unintentional irony) to confront “whoever dares disgrace / The land of freedom’s heaven-defended race,”²⁸¹ can be seen either in purely universalist terms, as a legitimate poetic homage to a great man, or through an ideologically slanted prism, as a servile ode penned by a disingenuous African American by way of tickling the vanity of a lifelong slaveholder. Based on such a prism, it could indeed be surmised that the imaginary black Bostonian critics whose existence Johnson’s ventriloquist Phillis presumes might not have been completely imaginary.

As a footnote to this secular argument, Phillis also anticipates possible objections to her choice of Alexander Pope as a cultural anchor and model to emulate (possibly mannerist and irrelevant), and objections to her Christian piety which turns a blind eye to the biblical sanctioning of slavery.²⁸²

The semi-fictitious Phillis in Johnson’s story seems keenly aware of the contradiction inherent in her decision to embrace Christianity as a way to “be refin’d and join th’ angelic train”²⁸³, as can be demonstrated by her admission “that the *hardest* work [...] has been to honor in [her] verse the principles of the faith that brought [her] freedom” (27).

The mistress responds to this somewhat schizophrenic outburst by asking Phillis the first of her thread-derailing questions, namely “Must you speak of these things?” (27). When Phillis gives a rather tentative verbal nod and confides that she could not sleep because of the burning issue, the miffed mistress comes up with an almost textbook non-sequitur:

²⁸⁰ The primary material under debate is often tainted with historical linguistic bias, both generically sexist (bondsmen) and obsolete/racist (Negro) which has been purposefully retained in this analysis.

²⁸¹ Phillis Wheatley, “To His Excellency, General Washington,” in *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Julian Dewey Manson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989) 167.

²⁸² The justification of American slavery “by twisting scripture” is an unambiguous reference to the standard practice in the 18th-19th century American South, when the Bible was routinely used to lend scriptural credence to the legitimacy of the peculiar institution in general (Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy) or, more specifically, pigmentocratic racial enslavement (the Manichean reading of the Hamitic Myth stemming from Genesis 9:25-27) and flogging (Luke 12:47).

²⁸³ Phillis Wheatley, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” in *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, 53.

“Phillis...are you...unhappy here?”

“No, no! That’s not what I am saying. I’m thankful for the blessing that brought me from Senegal to America. Thankful that you took on the sickly child that I was [...], taught me to write and read, and introduced me to Horace and Virgil, associates with whom I can spend hours, and ne’er once have they rebuked me for my complexion–” (27)

Susanna interrupts and latches on to the last notion of the monologue, agreeing wholeheartedly that “[t]he finest thoughts have no complexion” (27). Phillis, however, is unyielding. She fully endorses the notion (which goes largely against postmodern sensibilities) that the greatest thoughts and works of literature are colour-blind and universalist in its essence, not essentialist. However, she also immediately takes from this statement by inferring that even the finest thoughts have not stopped “the worst prejudice and passions” from running rampant in the colonies (27-28).

These anxieties of Phillis Wheatley (in Charles Johnson’s poetic licence) then peak in this possibly most eloquent summary of her preoccupations that reverberate throughout the story:

“Will it not be odd, a hundred years hence, when readers open *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* by Phillis Wheatley, and discover that not in a single poem do I address the anguish of bondage, the daily horror that is happening around us, the evil of men bleeding their sable brethren for profit? Will I not be *suspect*? Or censured? For it is our hope–isn’t it–that freedom will come to all? If it does, ma’am, what will free Negroes think of me? That I wrote nothing to further their cause?”

(28)

This is arguably the high point of Phillis’s deliberation on this issue. She envisions (somewhat prophetically, in mid 1790s) a post-slavery America in which her moral credentials might be significantly compromised by the fact that she completely neglected to address what her successors would probably see as the most pressing issue of her day.

A major Harlem Renaissance author, Wallace Thurman, explains Wheatley’s reluctance to address the subject of slavery as a result of insufficient first-hand knowledge of the subject rather than conscious ideological detachment. His apologia is predicated on the notion that Wheatley “wrote little about slavery, which is not surprising considering that save for her epic trip across the Atlantic in a slave-ship, she had never known slavery in any form.”²⁸⁴ The scope of the argument can be broadened to accommodate Wheatley’s seeming disingenuousness and detachment from the gritty side of 18th century black American life. James Weldon Johnson very plausibly attributes these features of her poetry to a sort of ivory

²⁸⁴ Wallace Thurman, *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman*, ed. Amritjit Singh and Daniel M. Scott III (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003) 206.

tower syndrome, pointing out the fact that she “never had the opportunity to learn life”²⁸⁵, having been “reared and sheltered in a wealthy and cultured Boston family”²⁸⁶, and she did not really have the time to cut through the protective sheath on account of her early death.

Be that as it may, the cultured and sheltering Susanna Wheatley (in Charles Johnson’s ventriloquist exchange of opinions) again slightly derails Phillis’s train of thought by asking whether, as a result of her awakened racial conscience, she is planning to become a pamphleteer, (perhaps ironically) implying that such a political issue can only be effectively addressed by a political pamphlet, not a poem. She tries to validate this tacit claim by associative reasoning, as she insinuates that what Phillis appreciates about the poetry of Virgil or Pope is not some explicit ideological overtone but the “beauty, which age does not wear” (Phillis’s suggestion) and also, perhaps more importantly, the “truth [...] which is timeless.” (28)²⁸⁷

Phillis clearly shares her mistress’s presumably low opinion of political pamphleteering, seeing it as an ephemeral phenomenon that does not sustain itself in terms of literary merit:

“At the end of the day one wraps garbage in newspapers. And while a pamphlet can be valuable and stir people to action, a hundred years hence it may be forgotten – as the injustice it assails is forgotten – or it will be preserved only as a historical document, interesting for what it reveals about a moment long past, but *never* appreciated as art.” (28)

She, however, remains adamant in her intention to “write *poems* about oppression” (28), driven at least partly by her gnawing suspicion that “[her] people see [her] work as useless” because it “doesn’t serve their liberation” (29). Susanna delivers what seems to be the clinching point of the debate, opining that Phillis does enough for the uplift of enslaved African Americans even without broaching on the painful subject openly in her poems. She invokes the (fully historical) names of the black inventor Benjamin Banneker, the medical expert Santomee, and Onesimus who discovered an antidote for smallpox. These people of Phillis’s race, Susanna argues, “enriched others through their deeds, thereby providing in the example of their persons, and the *universal* value of their products, the most devastating broadside against the evils of Negro bondage imaginable.” (30; emphasis added)

By alluding to Banneker, Johnson possibly signifies on the canon of noteworthy black people provided by William Wells Brown in *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*, thereby pledging loyalty to his late 19th century rendition of the “credit to the race” motif. Brown lists Banneker as the first item on his list of noteworthy people of African descent, though he does not mention either Santomee or Onesimus. The intriguing semantic aspect of this possible intertextual gesture is the generic male bias in Brown’s deliberations (“*Man*” and “*His Achievements*”), even though he does mention three accomplished women who fall within his “credit to race” rubric, namely the famous mutineer

²⁸⁵ James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, 1922) xxiv.

²⁸⁶ J.W. Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, xxiv-xxv

²⁸⁷ The chronology of the discussion in this analysis has been slightly conflated due to spatial constraints and with regard to the coherence of the argument.

Madison Washington, immortalized in Frederick Douglass's 1953 novella *The Heroic Slave*, abolitionists and poets Charlotte Louise Forten (later Grimké) and Frances Ellen Watkins, and also Phillis Wheatley, astonishingly enough.²⁸⁸ All in all, a vastly predominant portion of William Brown's handpicked personae whom he saw as the embodiment of black accomplishment were people directly invested in the social uplift of the black race.

These pro-ideological leanings apparent in William Brown's "credit to black race" examples provide a provocative juxtaposition to the universalist meritocracy advocated by Johnson's Susanna Wheatley, subliminally engaging in an intertextual dialogue with William Brown's *The Black Man* by starting her enumeration of apolitical black high achievers with the name of Benjamin Banneker, the first person on Brown's list. On the other hand, Brown's listing of the 19th century poet Elymas Payson Rogers provides an intriguing counterpoint to Johnson's Phillis Wheatley and her concerns about the ideological amnesia of her poetry. Rogers can be seen as a black counterpart of the abolitionist poet Whittier, with his famous lines "Shall we arrest escaping slaves / At the beck of Southern knaves?" directly responding to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.²⁸⁹

Susanna Wheatley's clinching "credit to the race" argument rests on her conviction that Phillis's poetry, just like the universally valued products of the three outstanding personalities she mentioned, does not need to be socially engaged in order to assist the uplift of Phillis's enslaved brethren. It only needs to be there for everybody to see, and thereby mock the white supremacist conceptualisations of her time (which provided the key leverage point in the public debate over racial slavery). As Kristin Wilcox perceptively points out, "[i]n the late eighteenth century, the fact that this enslaved black woman wrote at all took precedence in the public mind over anything that she said."²⁹⁰

Johnson's story uses several chronological approximations and confluences (the date of Wheatley's manumission, her trip to London and the writing of her ode to Washington), but even within this approximate timeframe it is fair to assume that the dialogue would have taken place after the famous Boston trial on October 8, 1772, during which a committee of eighteen renowned Bostonian minds (respectable white citizens, several of whom held slaves) set out to ascertain the authorship of Wheatley's poems by plumbing the intellect and poetic probity of the presumed yet suspicious authoress, face to face. The brevity and almost generic nature of Johnson's story makes it impossible to be certain whether the last rallying point of Susanna Wheatley in "Poetry and Politics" is meant to signify on this historical event. However, the uplifting quality inherent in Wheatley's poetry (no matter how colour-blind and politically timid it may seem) is quite aptly summed up by Henry Louis Gates in his in-depth description of the Boston trial. The large-scale ideological implication of the trial can be boiled down to Gates's statement that the jury's "interrogation of this witness, and her answers, would determine not only this woman's fate but the subsequent direction of the antislavery

²⁸⁸ William Wells Brown, "The Black Man, His Antecedents, His genius, and His Achievements," *William Wells Brown: A Reader*, ed. Ezra Greenspan (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008) 288–289, vii.

²⁸⁹ Elymas P. Rogers, "A Poem on the Fugitive Slave Law", *African-American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century – An Anthology*, ed. Joan R. Sherman (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992) 167–172.

²⁹⁰ Kirstin Wilcox. "The Body into Print: Marketing Phillis Wheatley," *American Literature*, 71.1 (1999): 1.

movement [...].”²⁹¹ So unless the jurors chose to see Wheatley as a *sui generis* marvel or a grudgingly accepted exception that proves the rule, the presumed social impact of her poetry (as advertised by her mistress in the “Poetry and Politics”) is and was inescapable.

Rhymesters Make Lousy Muckrakers

As a tentative practical outcome of the ideological skirmish in “Poetry and Politics,” Susanna Wheatley asks Phillis whether she is going to “continue [...] with this bristling new poem” (30) whose literary merit Susanna clearly does not hold in very high esteem. Phillis gives an ambiguous reply:

“Perhaps, if I can find my way into it. The problem is not that I don’t feel outrage whenever I read or see or hear of injustice, it’s rather that I fear I have no real talent for that sort of writing and rhetoric. For things I hate. I think I can compose passably well a hymn to morning, but as soon as I turn my pen to painting a portrait of a slave suffering beneath the lash, I cut myself off from what flows most easily from me – the things I love – and the words fall woodenly, unconvincingly, onto the page.” (30)

Wheatley’s complaint that her “words fall woodenly, unconvincingly, onto the page” (30) echoes yet another fledgling political writer who inhabits Johnson’s fiction, namely Evelyn Pomeroy, the white retired teacher from *Oxherding Tale* who is briskly replaced by the not-so-tragic mulatto character of Andrew Hawkins in the process of his discreet passing into the white world. Andrew’s wife describes a painful phase in Evelyn’s career when she first tries to emulate Harriet Beecher Stowe, and, after realising that she cannot possibly muster the forte of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, she at least attempts to write a sneering parody of this anti-slavery classic, which eventually turns out to be a doomed effort, as well. Just like Johnson’s rendition of Wheatley, the reason why Pomeroy does not write political lampoons is not because she does not burn for the cause. On the contrary, she would very much want to, but she simply cannot do it, being “constitutionally, a romantic writer”, as opposed to “a journalist muck-raker.”²⁹² The literalistic image of muck-raking as a formal antipode to a romantic/poetic disposition is quite akin to the dichotomy between timeless poetry and journalistic pamphleteering which Johnson’s Wheatley sums up by the overtly metonymic statement that “at the end of the day, one wraps garbage in newspaper”.

The combined input of the imagery alone makes political writing sound like a rather unsavoury option. Raking muck or wrapping garbage, could there possibly be some other choice?

Johnson (and a modern-day reader) enjoys the privilege of historical hindsight, which adds an interesting ironic undercurrent to Susanna’s universalist appeal and Phillis’s fear that a pamphlet is forgotten along with the social injustice it attacks. It is rather hard to argue against the fact that Phillis Wheatley generally gets anthologized on historical rather than

²⁹¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003) 7.

²⁹² Charles Johnson, *Oxherding Tale* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1999) 143.

purely literary grounds. “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” Wheatley’s by far the most frequently anthologised and referenced poem, is often very ostentatiously picked with the (rather simplistic) aim of providing a window into the mindset of an 18th century African American of considerable eloquence who (1) feels grateful to have been wrenched away from her pagan homeland, (2) strongly appreciates the Protestant spiritual uplift (3) subscribes to the contemporary racist Manichean worldview and (4) is asking white Christians to acknowledge the *potential* of African people for refinement and redemption. Indeed, a 21st century reader perhaps needs to be reminded that the fossilized racist concepts which underlie the poem’s focus were once accepted as a matter of course.

If nothing else, this alone would legitimize the choice of the poem as a standard anthologised item, not because of its intrinsic literary merit (in terms of poetic ingenuity or formal execution), but because of its indirect pamphleteering value, to paraphrase Johnson.

Sociological and historicist readings of Wheatley’s most famous poem generally do not deal in such one-dimensional simplifications. However, the range of critical reception has indeed mediated between ideological positions, sometimes induced by deliberately literalist reading (not completely unlike the one given above), and more nuanced interpretive positions which seek to incorporate all possible cultural, historical and semantic underpinnings.²⁹³ A representative example of the former would be the eloquently formulated yet uncompromising position of the historian Edgar J. McManus who views the Christian proselytizing of African American slaves as an obvious docility inducement.

Frequently the leading collaborators under slavery were black Christians who had so assimilated white values that they rationalized black bondage. “’Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,” wrote Phillis Wheatley of her devotion to Christianity and the teachings of her masters. New York slave poet Jupiter Hammon went even further and urged his fellow slaves to accept their bondage “as the servants of Christ doing the will of God.”²⁹⁴

The rather sober and, until recently, fairly consensual view of the literary merit of Wheatley’s poetry is perhaps most succinctly expressed by Newman Ivey White in his introduction to *Anthology of Verse by American Negroes* (1924) where he uncompromisingly states that Wheatley’s poems display “typical faults of second-class Eighteenth Century poetry, [namely] pseudo-loftiness, roundabout expressions, and personifications that are somewhat too frequent and unnatural for modern [early 20th century] taste,” and sums up her

²⁹³ The interpretive polysemy of Wheatley’s poetry is very carefully surveyed by Russell Reising who tries to consider all the semantic potentialities of Wheatley’s work, with a special focus on “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” His provocative spin resides in pointing out the possibilities of Wheatley’s playful discursive signification on the standard Protestant practice of seamless switching between figurative and literal registers, and close-up cultural readings of the poem’s possible reference framework (perhaps most imaginatively the double significations of refin’d/sugar refinery and Cain/sugar cane). Russell Reising, *Closure and Crisis in the American Social Text* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, London 1996) 85-91.

²⁹⁴ Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001) 104. Hammon’s quoted phrase is found in Jupiter Hammon, *An Address to the Negroes of the State of New York* (New York: Carroll & Patterson, 1787) 7.

poetic style by the unflattering epithet “debased Popianism”.²⁹⁵ This appraisal of her literary merit was largely shared also by African American scholars from the Harlem Renaissance onwards and has only been altered fairly recently with growing emphasis on pan-Africanist elements and subtle subversive practices in Wheatley’s poetry.²⁹⁶

Despite these rather unkind assessments, early 20th century African American critics were more likely to condone Wheatley’s conventional style, which they largely saw as the inevitable spin-off of European Neoclassicism, than her seeming lack of racial consciousness and social commitment. Johnson’s semi-fictitious Phillis Wheatley quite correctly anticipates (yet does not preclude) the objections of several African American authors who criticize her for her lack of ideological commitment. For example Alain Locke explicitly singles her out by claiming that while “one would naturally expect the work of Negro poets to reflect a strongly emphasized social consciousness, African American artistic expression from the days of Phyllis [sic] Wheatley was pivoted on a painfully negative and melodramatic sense of race”, marked by “self-pity and its corrective of rhetorical bombast”, instead of having assumed “race loyalty and pride in racial tradition.”²⁹⁷

The theme of pitting tangible propagandistic aims against timeless values of poetry is, yet again, an old and fairly perennial issue in African American literature. Wheatley’s preoccupations and concerns (in Johnson’s poetic license) are variations on an old African American theme, very poignantly summed up for example by Eric Walrond in his 1921 essay *Art and Propaganda*, in which he predicts 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.”²⁹⁸

Candid contradictions and conflations

It has been insinuated that a story in dialogue (unlike an analytical treatise) is a very malleable medium which can bear two antithetical arguments without the need to bring them into some synthetic statement. Considering Johnson’s resolute preference for universalism, we might be tempted to see Susanna Wheatley as his notional alter ego (or the main embodiment of his side of the argument) and Phillis only as a ventriloquist dummy which provides the counterpoint to Johnson’s leading argument (in favour of universalism). However, given the nature of Susanna’s derailing questions and attempts to deflect Phillis’s social critique, tacit or

²⁹⁵ *Anthology of Verse by American Negroes*, eds. Newman Ivey White and Walter Clinton Jackson (1924) (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2003) 5.

²⁹⁶ The notion of subversiveness in Wheatley’s poetry is explored at great length in a groundbreaking treatise by A.J. Nielson called “Patterns of Subversion in the Poetry of Jupiter Hammon and Phillis Wheatley,” *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 6 (1982): 212-219, and the most recent and definitive elaboration on this topic is *Phillis Wheatley’s Poetics of Liberation: Backgrounds and Contexts* by John C. Shields (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008). However, while Nielson and Shields have contributed significantly towards our understanding and critical appreciation of Phillis Wheatley, their central thesis does not align with the sharp focus of Charles Johnson’s literary rendition, which is why it cannot be given a more thorough scrutiny within the scope of this chapter.

²⁹⁷ Alain Locke, “Propaganda—or Poetry?,” 261.

²⁹⁸ Eric Walrond, “Art and Propaganda,” in *The New Negro*, 255.

otherwise, it is also legitimate to see Susanna as a Mephistophelian tempting voice which seeks to mislead Phillis from her (desirable) conversion into a poetic voice of dissent.

So far we have been looking (largely disapprovingly) at the concept of the African American tradition of political writing. Johnson's "stumping for the importance of universality" has all but monopolised the debate, just like Susanna Wheatley eventually has the final word in "Poetry and Politics."²⁹⁹ So now, by way of conclusion, we may at least very crudely counterbalance this bias by turning the vector to face the other way and taking a cursory glance at the perceived shortcomings of Johnson's creative premises as they could be voiced by the other side (though this in all likelihood has not happened).

As has been implied, Johnson at times knowingly fuses phenomenological precepts with a Buddhist outlook. If we assume Johnson's theoretical prism, we might observe two Buddhist attitudes which are quite akin to a rigorously phenomenological approach to the world. The two analogical arguments in Johnson's rendition of Buddhist principles are the wilful reluctance to see fundamental distinctions between individual entities and, more importantly, the Buddhist notions of effort (*samyag-vyayama*) and concentration (*samyak-samadhi*) which in Johnson's rendering should amount to "freedom from attachment."³⁰⁰ These two can actually be seen as two syllogistic steps within one principle. But the key line of Johnson's Buddhist renderings, at least vis-à-vis the torment of Black history in America and the resulting fictitious re-visits thereof, is the supposition that it is most desirable to pursue oneness with the world, to forget the self and to "extinguish[...] the experiential realm of suffering."³⁰¹ While this is certainly a very coherent strategy for creative endeavours and a well-balanced life in general, the principle may be assailed precisely on its best "selling-point" – the hard-sought detachment. From a rigidly ideological or even *soi-dissant* revolutionary standpoint, a purposeful retirement from a partisan perspective might be seen as counterproductive for almost precisely the same reasons for which McManus sees the religious conversion of Phillis Wheatley's as an adjustment without improvement – because they can both be seen as a docility inducement and/or a self-imposed placebo medication.

To sharpen the point of this argument, we might evoke the bitter complaint of Richard Wright that the African American "revolutionary struggle" was thwarted by "religion [which] began to serve as an antidote for suffering and denial" and that in the Jim Crow America, there are still millions of African Americans "whose only guide to personal dignity comes through the archaic morphology of Christian salvation"³⁰² which echoes the age-old thesis of Marx that states "[t]he abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness."³⁰³ Of course, phenomenologically-driven reserve or Buddhist nonattachment as valid life or creative attitudes can hardly be seen as analogical with

²⁹⁹ Susanna's clinching argument is not technically the end of the story. The final punchline, plot-wise, arrives with a letter from George Washington in which he thanks Phillis for the poem and quite conventionally finishes his letter by the closing address "Your obedient, humble servant", thereby giving the entire story a capricious verbal spin which, however, has very little bearing on the antithetical reasoning contained therein.

³⁰⁰ Charles Johnson, "Reading the Eightfold Path," in *Turning the Wheel*, 7.

³⁰¹ Charles Johnson, "Reading the Eightfold Path," 11. Johnson likens this concept to the Fallacy of Misplaced Concretedness, espoused by the American phenomenologist Alfred North Whitehead in his book *Process and Reality* (1929).

³⁰² Richard Wright, "The Blueprint for Negro Writing," in *The New Negro*, 270.

³⁰³ Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, ed. Joseph O'Malley, trans. Joseph O'Malley and Anette Jolin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 131.

Christianity viewed through a secular ideological prism as a tranquilizer and “house of refuge.” The juxtaposition is so crude as to render it virtually meaningless. Johnson’s transcendent universalist stance, however, goes also very much against the grain of the post-modern conviction that every universalist principle or opinion is in fact skewed by some invisible cultural bias, even though it may be very far from the original intent.

This story hardly needs to be juxtaposed against the Adorno taxonomy and the threefold taxonomy of ideological black tropes. By virtue of making the issue of socially engaged literature its central theme, “Poetry and Politics” all but exempts itself from theoretical deliberations on the subject. Suffice to say that the very conversation between Phillis and Susanna Wheatley (and therefore the entire story, if we cut its author loose) was induced by Phillis’s defensive panoptical anxieties which prodded her to attempt the poem in the first place. Outside of the primary taxonomy, the narrative propulsion of the story is also unmistakably built around “art as therapy” trope, whose symptoms Phillis demonstrates abundantly throughout the dialogue. This trope is not necessarily within the fold of tendentious writing, yet Wheatley’s accentuation of the exegetical (as opposed to exhortative) mode makes it akin to classic pre-modernist tropes in African American literature, partaking largely of plaintive and assimilationist overtones. The fact that Susanna misreads this plaintive position as confrontational, or “bristling”, as she puts it, is all the more telling. Phillis is clearly not the only character in the story whose lens has been smeared by the relative privilege of being “reared and sheltered in a wealthy and cultured family”. It is in fact Susanna who files the first complaint and needs to be placated by Phillis throughout the dialogue, which also makes her – metafictionally – the beneficiary of Phillis’s artistic therapy.

On the flip side, there are several aspects of the dialogical story which, if assessed on their own, go against the principles of tendentious engaged literature simply by virtue of implying rather than directly referencing. The most obvious elephant in the room is the very subject of the conversation – the exact nature or even identity of the poem that triggered the debate. Susanna Wheatley clearly managed to skim-read through the unfinished poem, but the readers of Johnson’s story did not. Not a single snippet of the poem is dispensed throughout the dialogue, which saddles an inquisitive reader with the task of establishing which poem actually triggered all the polemical gymnastics. A philistine reader may even stop to ask whether there in fact was any such poem to begin with. If not, the undisclosed linchpin of the conversation would in fact be the main fictitious conceit of Johnson’s story, a simulacrum at its most pristine.

As Vincent Carretta confirms in his comprehensive and incisive 2014 study *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, the only two poems by Wheatley which are universally recognized as anti-slavery, “To the Right of Honorable William Earl of Dartmouth” and “Farewell to America”, were both written and even circulated well *before* Wheatley’s visit to Britain.³⁰⁴ The tone of “Farewell to America”, written as a parting note before setting off for Britain, would have hardly given Susanna any reason to characterize it

304 Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014) 122.

as “bristling”, especially after a perfunctory glance when the poem was apparently still in its fledgling stage. Clogged up in abstractions and hyperboles, “Farewell to America” does mostly two fairly predictable things. The poet compliments Britain, looking forward to explore its “wide-extended main” with “astonish’d eyes”, and solicits empathy for the presumably mourning Susanna Wheatley, hoping that “no sighs, no groans for me / steal from her pensive breast”.³⁰⁵

The possible anti-slavery comment is not delivered until the penultimate stanza, which should be quoted in its entirety.

But thou! Temptation hence away
With all thy fatal train
Nor once seduce my soul away
By thine enchanting strain³⁰⁶

The preceding stanza makes it clear that “thou” refers to Britain, or “Britannia”, as Wheatley puts it. It can therefore be surmised that the “temptation” that may “seduce away” the poet’s soul is the “enchanting strain” and allure of post-slavery Britain in the aftermath of the Somersett case (a speculation which the loose timeframe of Johnson’s story can easily accommodate). Nevertheless, the objection still stands - such tepid and nebulous criticism can hardly qualify as “bristling”. We can therefore only assume that the entire commotion is caused by a poem titled “To the Right of Honorable William Earl of Dartmouth” which Wheatley did write shortly after her visit to England. The poem provides an inverted image of the opening lines from Wheatley’s classic “On Being Brought from Africa to America”, countering her former gratitude for the “mercy that brought [her] from [her] pagan land” with the complaint that “I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate / Was snatch’d from Afric’s fancy’d happy seat / What pangs excruciating must molest / What sorrows labour in my parent’s breast?”.³⁰⁷ The trenchant of these four lines alone seems sufficient to bring out the wounded complaint from Susanna Wheatley.

The omission of the poem’s name may appear sly or even devious from the perspective of an overly inquisitive reader, yet it is otherwise quite inconspicuous and plausible, given that the poem is as yet unfinished. Of course, Susanna might have deliberated on the exact verses which she considered objectionable, yet the non-disclosure is a mildly suspenseful and therefore beneficial narratological device. In addition to the secrecy about the poem’s content, the story also features one uncanny historical contradiction. Phillis Wheatley in fact wrote her ode to General Washington as late as in 1776, which gives Johnson’s conflated rendition of the historical and historicizing events a funny twist, presumably intentional. The obvious irony resulting from Johnson’s intentional conflation resides in Wheatley’s simultaneous veneration of Britain and George Washington (who would have

³⁰⁵ Phillis Wheatley, “Farewell to America,” in *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. John Shields (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 120.

³⁰⁶ Phillis Wheatley, “Farewell to America,” 122.

³⁰⁷ Phillis Wheatley, “To the Right of Honorable William Earl of Dartmouth, His,” in *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. John Shields (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 73-75.

been an open enemy of Britain by the time the poem was sent to him). This historiographic subversion, however, has no bearing on the overall ideological content of Johnson's story.

Charles Johnson's story "Poetry and Politics" is a dialogical rendition of an argument centered on the tension between overtly ideological literature and its unadulterated universalist counterpart. Since this is overtly announced by the characters as the very thesis of the story, its *tendentious* nature instantly reveals itself. The main character repeatedly invokes very explicit panoptical anxieties vis-à-vis black community, both of her contemporary community ("I wonder sometimes what they think of *me*") and the imagined future black polity ("Will I not be censured?"/"What *will* free Negroes think of me"). In addition to this major panoptical mode, Phillis's deliberations also display concerns about the white gaze ("An Ethiop who can write verse"). When assessing the story in view of its *modality*, the linguistic *affective* tenor of the dialogue is mostly carried along the *exegetical* trope on Phillis's part, countered with predominantly *exhortative* trope from Susanna.³⁰⁸ When assessed through the *sociological* prism, the overall appeal of the story is *assimilationist*, as Phillis clearly presupposes (or rather hopes for) black social uplift within the contours of the American society and, perhaps even more importantly, wholeheartedly subscribes to the notion of American patriotism, as underscored by her correspondence with George Washington.

When judged against the *hereditary* or *biologist* prism, the story lends itself to (suspiciously) straightforward interpretations. Phillis expresses concerns for her "sable" brethren who are "languishing in poverty", which is a classic middle class trope of pledging loyalty with the black underclass, referenced in chapter 2.3.1. Phillis does self-inflate when confronted by the white gaze, yet her self-deprecation has explicitly to do with her artistic merit, not her pigmentation. Perhaps even more importantly, the browbeating white gaze is embodied by a single individual, Thomas Jefferson, which cannot possibly qualify as panoptical inducement, regardless of his stature.

All in all, "Poetry and Politics" overtly states its ideological mission, and to a large degree aligns with all of the classic black tropes. As such, this story seems to go against Johnson's non-partisan prerogatives. This conclusion takes into account the fact that Susanna Wheatley argues consistently in favour of non-partisan writing and seems to have the final word in the debate. This fact may provide some interesting food for thought as far as readerly experience is concerned, yet it has no bearing on the *ideological nature of the story* as such.

4.2.2 Exhortative *black-mail* in "The People Speak," "Mayor's Tale," "The Plague" and "Martha's Dilemma"

The variety of stories included in the *Soulcatcher* collection offers the possibility of various pairings according to different criteria, several of which align with the focus of this thesis. In general, they are dominated by the nationalist/assimilationist dichotomy, yet they

³⁰⁸ Susanna's exhortative mode of discourse is irrelevant for our analysis. Coming from the mouth of a member of the dominant class, her exhortations are not panoptical in the sense used within the thesis.

generally provide enough leeway for other interpretive stances within our prism. One such mutually complementary and self-supporting combination can be pieced together from three distinctly antithetical and racist stories within the collection, namely “The People Speak”, “The Mayor’s Tale” and “The Plague”, marginally overlapping also with “Martha’s Dilemma”. “The People Speak” will be treated as the central piece of this quartet, due to its allusions to the other stories and the antithetical clarity with which it articulates the issues at hand.

All of these stories are anchored in real historical circumstances, yet they ostentatiously present themselves as historiographic, even though the “once upon a time” template of “The Mayor’s Tale” is conducive to more mythical and generic interpretations. That is why the analysis will repeatedly acknowledge and reference historical circumstances surrounding some of the stories, yet doing so in a manner that does not interfere with their generic, fictitious or semi-fictitious hermeneutical framework. This multiple analysis deliberately does not start with the first chronological item on the trajectory of American slavery, which would be Martha’s Dilemma, but with a story which establishes the dominant theme in the most outright and antithetical manner.

4.3.1 Anti-colonialism and democracy in “The People Speak”

“When the people lead, the leaders will follow.”³⁰⁹

Mahatma Gandhi

“The People Speak” is a short story which recreates the earliest separationist tendencies within the African American community. The story takes us to an all-black gathering of three thousand people in a Bethel church in Philadelphia in 1807, where an emblematic vote is being cast as to whether the black people should leave America and settle in Africa, or whether they should stay and try to get along in their bumpy and uneven relationship with the white majority, within the historical context of the fledgling American republic.

The proposal has been made by the “newly created American Colonization Society,” and is debated during a “tempestuous meeting” which takes up almost the entire day,” finally ending with “a historic vote that will no doubt be decisive- if not fateful-for the future of all people of African descent”³¹⁰ in the USA, hence the description of the vote as *emblematic*.

We immediately learn that the American Colonization Society, which had been only founded fifteen days prior to this meeting, had the endorsement from the then US president, James Madison, and also his predecessor, Thomas Jefferson. More specifically, the foundation of what was effectively an expatriation movement was “endorsed with

³⁰⁹ Rajmohan Gandhi, *Gandhi: The Man, His People, and the Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) 241.

³¹⁰ Charles Johnson, *Soulcatcher* (New York: Harcourt, 2001) 67. All quotations from *The Soulcatcher* follow the Harcourt edition of 2001. Page references are given in parentheses in the text.

enthusiasm”³¹¹ by the two leading white statesmen of the era. The official mission statement of the society is to “redress the evils of exploitation visited upon Negroes in Africa, and to establish on that continent a homeland for American people of color” where they would be “free from white persecution” and could “pursue their interests without interference”. Thus, the new-found society immediately establishes itself not only as a refuge for underprivileged black people in the American North (presumably just Pennsylvania, in this case), but also as a potential bulwark against the white colonial “scramble for Africa,” which seemed to have been already underway within the self-sustaining hermeneutics of Johnson’s story (as it in fact was, in the early 19th century).

The decision-making of those gathered in the church is underlain by a basic question as to whether the African American people, “once released from bondage,” are likely to ever be “accepted in or assimilated by American society.” (68)

The dilemma is not just presented to the congregation in a summary statement. The main purpose of the meeting is to stage a debate on this proposition, wherein “the most prominent leaders and luminaries” from Philadelphia will express their opinions, thus publicly endorsing either the “stay” or “leave” position. These luminaries include “maritime entrepreneur Paul Cuffe,” who presumably recorded the story, several influential reverends and self-made entrepreneur James Forte, who has been asked over by the Colonization Society by way of “swaying Philadelphia’s Negroes to the idea of leaving America.” It is at this point that we are unwittingly given a glimpse of the balance power in this “pro” and “con” antithesis. Since the people congregated in the church (plus the non-attendees they may potentially represent) need to be “swayed,” it is logical to assume that the majority is either reluctant or outright hostile to the emigration and resettlement plans. This rift between the position of the leaders and the widely shared position of the ordinary people does not explicitly reveal itself until the very end, yet the word “sway” can be seen as deliberate foreshadowing. (68)

The first speaker, Mr. Forten, reminds the congregation about his own rags-to-riches life story and his American patriotism, also invoking the contributions of the black people to America, singling out the case of Crispus Atticus, a black soldier who was the first American victim to die in the War of Independence. And yet, “despite our contributions to this country,” he contributes, “we have not been – and perhaps will never be – accepted as white citizens.” Upon this conclusion, he bids the congregation to take their chances “in the land of their forebears.” (69) He is awarded by a long round of applause, as is the speech of the next person, a Quaker and a shipping tycoon Paul Cuffe, who also happens to be a philanthropist, having founded a school for African American children. Incidentally, he has already used his fleet to help some black people migrate to Sierra Leone, having paid for their journey himself. A much older man than Forten, he ponders matters from the perspective of a person who may not live another year, as he reminds his audience, before making a case for separation.

³¹¹ Johnson deals with this issue with an elegant and economical understatement, using a deceitfully positive wording for something that is, in effect, an agreement to purge black people from the United States, unless we choose to think of this as an endorsement of African colonization as an integral part of the Manifest Destiny, a speculation which is not born out by historical facts (and would not be overly flattering in any case).

We struggled together thirty-seven years ago to protest taxation of our people when we have no representation.[...] Jefferson [...] and others like him have always envisioned the United States as a white man's nation, irrespective of our deep and enduring contributions to its economy, its culture, and its precious Revolution. [...] Can [the white man] ever relinquish his desire to be dominant? Can *you* ever forget the horrors of our history in this country at the hands of white men? [...] Leave America to the white man. A far greater and nobler civilization beckons, if we but have the courage to answer its call. (70-71)

Apart from the bitter remembrance of African American grievances, Cuffe is envisioning free African Americans returning to their native continent, “benighted by centuries of slavery and oppression”, and elevating it to its rightful place within humankind. He too, is awarded by “thunderous applause”. These two luminaries are followed by more speakers, some of whose talks are interrupted by shouts from “raucous” people in the audience. Eventually, the presiding Reverend Allen calls for order and concludes with the following exhortation:

Gentlemen, remember what we are deciding here. We are, I daresay, at a crossroads. Future generations will judge us by our sobriety. Our wisdom – or the lack of it. We are voting on [...] which direction all our people will take in the future. [...] Take a prayerful moment to review the discussion you've heard, then vote knowing your decision carries as much weight for the direction of this nation as that of the white men who assembled at the Constitutional Convention (72)

After this final exhortation, the voting begins. In ten minutes, the ballots are collected and counted, after which Rev. Allen announces the verdict.

“You, the people, have voted unanimously *against the position of your leaders*[.] You have rejected returning to Africa. Whatever *our* future will be, you have decided it will be here, on these shores. God help us all...” (73; emphases added)³¹²

In a simple literalist and historicist reading, this story is written in the most tendentious way imaginable. It invokes *panoptical* anxieties, both within black community (“future generations will judge us”) and in response to the white establishment which apparently envisions America “as a white man's nation”. Johnson's (or Cuffe's) verbally terse rendition of the events does not make it perfectly clear whether this conviction is just presumed by the speaker (in which case it would constitute panopticism) or whether the observation has been gleaned from circumstances or even outright revealed by members of the white elites which Cuffe might have had a close contact with (which would not constitute panopticism).³¹³

³¹² Italics have been removed from the word “here” in the phrase “it will be *here*” as italicized in the original, in order to shift the emphasis.

³¹³ This information is not verifiable either with reference to the story or the real-life historical counterparts (as a last resort). However, several late 18th century US politicians were very explicit about the US as a “white man's

In addition to this, the story openly pits *assimilationism* against *nationalism*, with geographical separatism being the most nakedly antithetic variant of this dichotomy that we can imagine (“Shall we stay or shall we go?”). It also invokes race pride and race loyalty in face of prejudicial *essentialist* antagonism from the white establishment.

With such a barefaced argument as the central plotline of the story, reading against the grain would actually entail a search for connotative meanings that do not instantly reveal themselves. The *modal* tenor of the story is largely appellative or exhortative, yet this only pertains to black speakers addressing black audience. Let us therefore stop drawing interpretive conclusions from the event as it would have seemed to its participants. Instead, let us step back and treat it as a document that has been recorded *for somebody to read it*, as it in fact was done by Paul Cuffe, according to the narrative.³¹⁴ In this case, we may choose to appreciate the intertextual nuances of the exhortative appeal *of* the story not *within* the story.

Given the fact that Johnson himself calls this story’s vehicle “a mock-newspaper article,” thereby inviting us to think of “The People Speak” as a hybrid piece of documentarism and his own literary aplomb, we may attribute some extra-textual significance to the factual circumstances of the story. This does not imply that Johnson doctored the facts themselves, but rather that he might have picked this particular historical event with regards to its larger context of early 19th century United States.

In the quoted fragment of his speech, Paul Cuffe mentions the fact that his fellow African Americans bled in the “precious”³¹⁵ War of Independence, fought ostensibly because of unwarranted taxation, yet they themselves had to protest taxation when they had no representation. This paradoxical point, arriving less than halfway through the story, can be seen as the dominant theme gesturing towards the presumed white reader (in an exhortative panoptical stance). The fledgling American republic of 1807 was a nominal democracy, or rather self-governance, to use the standard coinage of the day used in contrast to monarchism.

However, we need to realize that only a miniscule percentage of the population could exercise their right to vote, due to institutional chauvinism and stringent property qualifications. In fact, even as late as the early 1820s, only one quarter of white Americans

country”. As late as 1835, James Bryan from North Carolina made the outright argument that the “offices, honors, dignities, and privileges” of the United States “are only open to, and to be enjoyed by, the white people,” thereby underlying the disenfranchisement of free African Americans during Jacksonian democracy, which happened even in the North. Lacy K. Ford Jr., “Making the “White Man’s Country” White: Race, Slavery, and the State-Building in the Jacksonian South,” *Race and the Early Republic: Racial Consciousness and Nation-Building in the Early Republic*, eds. Michael A. Morrison, James Brewer Stewart (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002) 147.

³¹⁴ Charles Johnson ostentatiously takes the backbone of his story from a real source, identifying it as “A NEWS ITEM from the Philadelphia Liberator”. In so doing, he appears to be relegating his literary licence to the background, which makes the account less compatible with postmodern historiography than with traditional psychohistorical fiction in the vein of Stefan Zweig. Even the “psychohistorical” label barely applies here, as Johnson’s story is written in a scrupulously descriptive journalistic style, with very minor rhetorical inflations on the part of Paul Cuffe, the person who is presumably relaying his eye-witness account of this event. On the other hand, Johnson himself undermines the account in an explanatory footnote, admitting that Cuffe in reality learned of the meeting by letter. This smacks of historiographic pastiche based on the notion that history as we know it is part fiction, emplotted from scarce and ambiguous factual record.

³¹⁵ The economy of language makes it impossible to determine with certainty whether the adjective is meant sarcastically, as could be implied by the larger context of the speech.

could exercise their right to vote.³¹⁶ If we factor in the fact that no women could vote, it leaves us with staggering 87 or 88 per cent American people who had no impact whatsoever on their political representation in the early 19th century. This closet elitism of the Founding Fathers, and the lingering undemocratic momentum which lasted until the racially preferential Jacksonian democracy of the 1830s, has been explored and confirmed by many left-leaning American historians,³¹⁷ as has been the racial exclusionism that lasted for another century. Ironically, the subsequent arrival of Jacksonian democracy did mean the expansion of poor electorate by loosening property qualifications, yet this was in fact an empowerment of poor white population at the expense of otherwise eligible free black men.³¹⁸

Juxtaposing the story against these historical circumstances, it can be read as a covert challenge of these undemocratic practices prevalent in early 19th century United States, not only in relation to African American population (which is overly mentioned in the story), but also in relation to the disenfranchised class of white people. As the title of the story deliberately drives home, the *people have spoken*. Despite the warmly received advice from *propertied* luminaries of the African American community, the ordinary black Philadelphians “voted unanimously against the position of their leaders”. (73) This act of defiance does not only provide a rather chastening denouement of the story, but also, in a panoptical sense, parades a cautionary message of “grassroots” democracy in the face of Jefferson’s and Madison’s elitism cloaked in democratic rhetoric.

This seems to be an intentional signification, as attested to by the fact that Johnson deliberately overplays the all-embracing democratic emphasis, insinuating that the decision-making of the assembly might have been to some degree a joint venture of men *and women*. The most explicit indication of this is the fact that Paul Cuffe is accompanied by his “Indian wife”, who is even identified by her name, “Alice”. (60) The final pre-voting exhortation of Reverend Allen specifically addresses the assembly as *gentlemen*, making it rather clear that the ballots are only going to be submitted by the male attendees. However, the votes are counted to the accompaniment of two hymns sung a by Bethel’s choir, and the ushers who count the “yeas” and “nays” are implicitly identified as both men and women. (72)³¹⁹ While these are tentative suggestions, Johnson himself explicitly pleads guilty of overplaying the democratic mandate of the congregation in a footnote on the very first page of the story.

Fiction often changes the facts for dramatic effect. [...] There were no women present, and the actual vote was by choice, not paper ballot. The author hopes readers of this tale can forgive the liberties taken with facts in order to conjure up a moment in time with feeling. (67)

³¹⁶ Andrew Robertson, *Encyclopedia of U.S. Political History, Volume Two: The Early Republic, 1784-1840* (Washington: Sage, 2010) 81.

³¹⁷ This topic was put in the public eye by Charles Beard’s 1913 seminal book *The Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United State*. Charles A. Beard, *The Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New Jersey: Simon and Schuster: 1913/1986).

³¹⁸ Lacy K. Ford Jr., “Making the “White Man’s Country” White,” 137-145.

³¹⁹ This can be inferred from the statement that the decisive slip with the result of the voting was brought to the reverend by “one of the ushers, a young man”. While this is no confirmation, the gender emphasis would, by inductive reasoning, suggest that there were also women among the ushers.

While the phrasing of Johnson's caveat emphasizes writerly autonomy and steers clear of ideology, his deliberate "en-gendering" of the story may seem rather conspicuous. By deliberately and a-historically adding women to the picture, Johnson significantly increases the all-embracing commonality and democratic legitimacy of the final decision, even though there is no textual evidence that the women present in any way influenced the voting procedure. Yet even without that authorial intervention, the decision of the leaders in "The People Speak" to abide by the verdict of the congregation commoners (i.e. not even their legal constituency) shows a respect for democratic principles that stands as a real challenge to the official US pro-democratic rhetoric of that period.

The appeal of the story as a template of bottom-up democracy has larger meanings when juxtaposed to the scholarship of Robin Kelley, Manisha Sinha, Michael Parenti and other historians and political scientists who emphasize the nature American democracy as a developmental process happening *in opposition* to the establishment rather than a creed inherited from the Founders who were presumably endowed with visionary foresight. To these left-leaning scholars, the iconic struggles of the abolitionist or suffragist movement are just minor blips on a trajectory from aristocratic privilege towards hard-earned *substantive* democracy, as opposed to shallow *procedural* democracy of a state dominated by oligarchy and corporatism that "makes no provision for popular representation, no public forum for debate and decision, no elections, no institutionalized democratic checks to hold decision makers accountable".³²⁰ If we see the historical development of the African American community through this prism, it could be argued that the black Americans, due to their legislatively and customarily sealed bottom position on the income and civil rights scale, have frequently functioned as a catalyst of grassroots push for democracy from below, which eventually also benefited many other underprivileged groups. This is in fact an argument implicitly made by Robin G. Kelley and Earl Lewis, using the postbellum South as a case in point.

Newly freed men and women sought to create a civil society in which the role of the government was to provide land for landless ex-slaves, protect all its citizens from violence and exploitation, make education and basic public services available to all irrespective of race or economic status[...] As a result of this vision of democracy, Congress passed [not only] the 13th Amendment to the constitution, abolishing slavery, [but also] the 15th Amendment enabling black men and poor *white men* the right to vote without property qualifications. [...] Throughout the late 1860s and early 1870s, former slaves not only voted, they ran for office and held positions in the state legislature, Congress, and even the Senate. They insisted that free universal public education was a pillar of democracy.³²¹

³²⁰ Michael Parenti, *Democracy for the Few* (Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 2011) 161.

³²¹ Robin G. Kelley and Earl Lewis, "Preface to Volume Two," *To Make Our World Anew: Volume II: A History of African Americans Since 1880*, eds. Robin G. Kelley and Earl Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) vii-viii. The most recent rendering of this historical period is offered by Manisha Sinhu in the last chapter of her

Drawing on this of active participation of black people in the process of shaping of American democracy, a quintessential example of the “black agency” typology, we may even think of Martin Luther King’s hope that the American nation will “live out the true meaning of its creed” in his “I Have a Dream” speech as an overly diplomatic remark towards the American establishment of the 1950s. After all, democracy is not a creed but a process, and African Americans have often acted as its contributors rather than beneficiaries. In fact, King’s reasoning on the subject largely aligns with Kelley and Lewis, namely his conviction that African Americans “have illuminated imperfections in the democratic structure that were formerly only dimly perceived, and have forced a concerned re-examination of the true meaning of American democracy.”³²²

In addition to this “black agency” trope of grassroots democracy, the story touches on one other issue also that can be read as panoptical gesturing towards the white gaze of the 19th century, namely *colonization*. Paul Cuffe, the keynote speaker of the Bethel assembly, describes the envisioned process of colonizing Africa in very benign terms.

Our great energies, talents and love would be better applied, I think, to the nurturing of a democracy on the continent of our origin. Visit Sierra Leone, if you dare. I have. And it gladdened my heart to see Negroes who possessed every freedom this [American] republic withholds from us. (71)

Even the fact that the ordinary black Philadelphians were not lured in by this pastoral image of the Promised Land, a respite from their domestic oppression, can be read as an indirect panoptical signification towards the white American gaze. The emigration plans of Johnson’s black Philadelphians have a precursor in the American foundational myth, even though the analogy would probably have been lost on some of the presumed white readers in the 1800s. However, a discerning reader can see a distinct analogy with the story of the Pilgrim Fathers, the 17th century Puritan settlers in New England whose legacies lingered on the American northeast coast for centuries to come. Like the Pilgrims, the black leaders in Johnson’s story envisage a journey across the ocean and settling in a new land, in an attempt to escape persecution in the old country which “withholds freedom” from them. The analogical overtones of this plan are further reinforced by the paradigmatic nature of the original Puritan transatlantic pilgrimage, which many of its protagonists saw as a reenactment of the Hebrew exodus from Egyptian *slavery*. Incidentally, this redemptive project turned out to be a stepping stone towards the self-entitled arrogance of the Manifest Destiny. As succinctly resumed by Anders Stephanson, the “Puritan reenactment of the Exodus narrative revolved around a powerful theology of chosenness” whose Messianic thrust turned out “to be decisive for the course of colonialisation as well as for the later American self-concept.”³²³ The white

2016 book *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition*. Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (Yale University Press, 2016) 586-592.

³²² Martin Luther King, Jr., “Where do We Go from Here,” *Old Memories, New Moods: Americans from Africa*, ed. Peter I. Rose (London: Aldine Transactions, 2009) 310.

³²³ Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of the Right* (New York: Hills and Wang, 1995) 5.

American alignment of the Exodus story with Manifest Destiny obviously goes very much against the liberationist associations that the same story historically evoked in the African American community. As Eddie Glaude points out, even the early phase of the Great Migration, or the founding of all-black towns in Kansas and Oklahoma, were perceived as re-enactments of the Old Testament story.³²⁴

Perhaps even more strikingly, the pastoral beneficence of the black Philadelphian luminaries towards the native Africans in Johnson's story was also prefigured by the Pilgrim Fathers. In the following anecdotal characterization, Native American biblical scholar Richard Twiss recreates the context in which one of the early settler groups set sail to America.

Biblical narratives were formally used to justify the civilization of the new world beginning in 1629 with the striking of the Great Seal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony as Puritans prepared to depart England to America. The seal's central figure was an Indian man holding a bow in one hand an arrow in the other, naked except for some appropriately placed leaves. From his mouth flowed a ribbon with the words "come over here and *help us*," a reference to the apostle Paul's "Macedonian call."³²⁵

When read against this telling parallel, the decision of the Bethel congregation may be seen not only as an anti-elitist gospel of substantive bottom-up democracy, but also as a cautionary message against well-meaning colonialist condescensions. We must not forget that the notion of ex-slave settlement in Africa was not just a figment of literary imagination. The failed attempt of the Province of Freedom colony in Sierra Leone 1787 was a historical fact,³²⁶ as was the relatively more successful attempt in Liberia in 1821³²⁷ which can, in retrospect, be classified as an act of colonization with many of its ugly connotations. In fact, the idea of an ex-slave colony in Africa was understood as a stepping stone towards a colonial venture by many mid 19th century white abolitionists. Bronwen Everill describes this mix of messianism and mercantilism in his comprehensive 2013 study *Abolition and Empire in Sierra Leone and Liberia*.

³²⁴ Eddie S. Glaude, *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 4.

³²⁵ Richard Twiss, "Reading the Bible Unjustly: How Has the American Church Read the Bible Unjustly," *The Justice Project*, eds. Brian McLaren, Elisa Padilla, Ashley Bunting Seeber (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009) 69; emphasis added.

³²⁶ A group of four hundred ex-slaves who settled Sierra Leone on a plot of land that had been officially purchased from a local tribe by the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor, under the patronage of Granville Sharp, a leading British abolitionist. However, the purchase was probably misapprehended as a lease by the tribal chieftains, which might have been the reason why the tribesmen destroyed the settlement in 1789. This tragedy provides a chastening historical counterpoint to Paul Cuffe's eye-moistening account of the African west coast. Bronwen Everill, *Abolition and Empire in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013) 19-31.

³²⁷ To torture the analogy with the Pilgrim Fathers even further, let us mention the fact that the first ship with American and ex-slave settlers headed from New York to Liberia in 1920 was called *Mayflower of Liberia*. Nancy C. Curtis, *Black Heritage Sites: An African American Odyssey and Finder's Guide* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1996) 235.

Benjamin Coates, an American anti-slavery activist and international businessman, declared in 1851 that he hoped to spread American influence throughout Africa through the formation of the ‘United States of Africa’. This was not a new idea. It echoed the words of a Liberian governor Jehudi Ashmun in the 1820s, who called for the creation of a new American in Africa. This theme was taken up again by American Colonization Society (ACS) advocate Elliot Cresson in the 1830s, who described his plans for the continent to become the ‘Empire of Liberia’. Anti-slavery, to these men, was a universal and expansionist idea.³²⁸

As was pointed out in chapter 3, the theme of African expatriation as an antidote to US racist oppression makes a sporadic appearance in late 19th century and early 20th century literature. The white literary muckraker of the abolitionist movement, Harriet Beecher Stowe, made one of her central characters in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the technological prodigy George Harris, argue fervently in favour of uplifting African colonialism.

On the shores of Africa I see a republic [...] formed of picked men, who, by energy and self-educating force, have [...] raised themselves above the condition of slavery. [...] Let us [...] see what we can do with this new enterprise, and the whole splendid continent of African opens before us and our children. Our nation shall roll the tide of civilization and Christianity along its shores, and plant there might republics, that, growing with the rapidity of tropical vegetation, shall be for all coming ages.³²⁹

George Harris’s musings are similarly entrepreneurial as those of Paul Cuffe, as he is envisioning “picked men” pursuing the “enterprise” that will “roll the tide of civilization” in Africa, which will quickly grow into fruition thanks to the equatorial climate (Stowe’s involuntary nod to the essentialist conviction that tropics provide juicy pickings, thereby compromising the work ethic of its inhabitants). By envisioning an African republic, George Harris seconds his expatriate tendencies by arguing that an exhortation voiced by an entire nation is more likely to be heard than the pleading of an underprivileged individual.

[L]et me go and form a part of a nation, which will have a voice in the councils of nations, and then we can speak. A nation has a right to argue, remonstrate, implore, and present the cause of its race, which an individual has not.³³⁰

³²⁸ Bronwen Everill, *Abolition and Empire in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013) 1.

³²⁹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (London: John Cassell, 1852) 377-378.

³³⁰ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 378. Having written the bulk of her novel in 1851, Stowe could not have been completely unaware of the European revolutionary years of 1848-49. It is impossible to trace the degree to which George’s argument in favour of nationalistic autonomy and representation was meant to reflect on the uprisings in Austria, France, Italy or Prussia, yet, as Joshua Bellin points out, “the news of oppressed [European] people attempting to shake off their masters must have struck a responsive chord, both fearful or hopeful, within antebellum Americans.” Joshua D. Bellin, “Up to Heaven’s Hate, down in Earth’s Dust: The

It is important to note that George's pan-African musings arrive towards the end of Stowe's bestseller, thereby significantly tempering or even swaying its dominant tone. George Harris's endorsement of Liberia as opposed to "a worn-out, effeminate"³³¹ republic of Haiti even constitutes an inverted typology, because Haiti's Toussaint D'Ouverture, the leader of the Haitian revolution, presumably constituted black "culture-hero" that boosted race-pride even in postbellum black middle class communities.³³²

However, the separationist position in African American public thought and literature was generally formulated *in opposition to*, not *in collusion with* the US capitalist and imperialist policies. Johnson's story takes place in early 19th century, it is therefore clearly not informed by the most visible rift between the nationalist and assimilationist view in the African American (or possibly black transatlantic), embodied by the animosity between W.E.B. Du Bois's assimilationist uplift and the nationalist self-reliance of Marcus Garvey's Back-to-Africa movement. Garvey's understanding of African American assimilationism as a lost case even led him to rub shoulders with KKK leaders, famously opining that "the Klan, the Anglo-Saxon clubs and White American societies, as far as the Negro is concerned, [were] better friends of the race than all other groups of hypocritical whites put together." He based the argument on the conviction that racism and xenophobia were firmly rooted in economic anxieties, and were therefore difficult to deracinate within the capitalist context.

I like honesty and fair play. You may call me a Klansman if you will, but, potentially, every white man is a Klansman as far as the Negro in competition with whites socially, economically and politically is concerned, and there is no use lying.³³³

The most explicit rendition of the pan-African expatriate tendencies in older black literature is Sutton Griggs 1899 novel *Imperium in Imperio*, one of the most stunning examples of baldly stated separatism in early African American literary self-representation. Unlike Stowe's George Harris, Griggs's hero Bernard Belgrave endorses immigration to Congo, explicitly partaking in the colonialist logic by planning either to wrestle the land, "great in area and rich *in resources*," from the "hands of the weak kingdom of Belgium", or possibly purchase it, astutely pointing out that it is "a personal property of King Leopold", anyway.³³⁴ The novel

Politics of Judgment in Uncle Tom's Cabin," *Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin: A Casebook*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 211.

³³¹ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 377.

³³² Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 5.

³³³ Marcus Garvey, "The Negro, Communism, Trade Unionism and His (?) Friend: "Beware of Greeks Bearing Gifts"," *African American Political Thought: Capitalism vs. Collectivism, the Colonial Period to 1945*, ed. Marcus D. Pohlmann (London: Routledge, 2003) 101. This unholy separatist alliance between radical African American leaders and white supremacists is echoed in more recent US history with Malcolm X's temporary overtures toward the KKK and George Rockwell's Nazi Party in the early 1960s, which was driven by similarly pragmatic attitudes. Manning Marable, *Black Leadership* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 173-175.

³³⁴ Sutton E. Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio: A Study of the Negro Race Problem A Novel* (Echo Library, 1899/2006). Kindle.

makes overt references to black agency also in other respects, as will be explained in more detail within the next subchapter.

There were relatively few literary renditions of the Back-to-Africa movement during its most prominent activity and in its direct aftermath, namely in early 20th century. One of the few authors who chose to render the topic was Eric Walrond, himself an expatriate Harlemiter originally from the Caribbean (Guyana) who contributed to the tempestuous “art versus propaganda” discussion in the mid 1920s before eventually moving to England. In 1921, he chose to tackle the topic of African resettlement in his short story “A Senator’s Memoirs” which can only be seen as a piece of undiluted ideological fiction. In the vein of the previous literary renditions, Walrond’s story envisions a sovereign black state that can compete with Europe and America, established through the efforts of UNIA, with Marcus Garvey as the state’s president. The story is narrated by a senator from Congo who sees the state as the combined result of human effort and divine providence. This can be read both a redemption narrative which the American audiences would unwittingly associate with the American foundational story. What is more, it can also be understood as a flaunting the confident pan-African self-sufficiency, albeit projected into the future.

Many of these examples, especially when juxtaposed to the American foundational story, point to the fact that the separationist back-to-Africa tendencies can be seen as implicitly colonialist and exploitative. This is why the resounding “no” of the Bethel community also carries anti-colonialist intertextual significance.

Signifying on the Founders’ creed

Another indirect cautionary signification within Johnson’s “The People Speak” can be attributed to Paul Cuffe’s reference to his “taxation without representation” struggle mentioned earlier in the story. Leftist historians like Howard Zinn tend to see the “no taxation without representation” banner of the American War of Independence, ostentatiously fought against the Stamp Act of 1765, as a pretext rather than a substantive issue, as the added taxation was a negligible financial burden for the average colonial American. When cast in this light, the American Revolution would seem like an elitist takeover, not a spontaneous grassroots revolt originating within the ordinary population. The ostentatious remark on “taxation without representation,” paired up with the refusal of the congregation to do their leaders’ bidding, therefore offers one more nuanced panoptical hint to be appreciated by the white gaze.

The final exhortation of Rev. Allen can be subsumed within the same line of argument. When he is reminding the congregation that their “decision carries as much weight [...] as that of the white men who assembled at the Constitutional Convention,” this explicit juxtaposition also speaks very much in favour of the black gathering in Bethel, when seen through the leftist prism of substantive versus procedural democracy. As Parenti and Zinn remind us, the notable white citizens who gathered in 1787 in Philadelphia to draft the constitution of the new republic, were discussing issues that concerned the entire nation, and yet, only very privileged people could take 40 days off to discuss political matters. The obvious result was that some substantive issues pertaining to the larger American population

were, in the absence of the less fortunate, adjudicated through the lens of wealthy classes, despite the objections of some delegates that the “sentiments of the people ought to be consulted,” lest they see the new republican establishment as “the semblance of monarchy”.³³⁵ Regardless of these dissenting voices, the ensuing legislation reflects this aristocratic bias.³³⁶ Compared to this elitist ivory tower assembly drafting of the American Constitution, the Bethel gathering again makes the leaders and the rank and file share the same floor and make joint decisions, as opposed to the elitist decisions of the Constitutional Convention gathering made in absentia, at least from the perspective of the ordinary postcolonial Americans.

Tendentious aspects of the story

“The People Speak” addresses two major *panoptical* topics which are directly invoked within the story, namely the fully panoptical notion that the eyes of the entire black nation are upon the congregation, and the shared understanding that the white establishment “enthusiastically endorses” their “repatriation” to Africa.

Biological *hereditary* prism keeps a fairly low profile in the story and as such does not warrant a serious investigation. The “race loyalty” issue is unmistakably present in the story, yet its merit is made rather nebulous by the fact that the Sierra Leone, and the pan-African “mother country” is treated like an abstraction, while its inhabitants are described as “benighted” people in need of uplift. If we assess this position in strictly formalistic terms, juxtaposing it against the “race pride vs. race hatred” template, the resulting picture is rather ambiguous or negative. However, this is to some degree compensated by the compassionate language and the envisioning of “greater and nobler civilization” which “beckons” on the other side of the Atlantic. On the flip side, this essentialist “reaching out” towards dark brethren is explicitly repudiated by the assembly.

The *sociological* prism provides the main dynamics of the story and would in itself suffice to classify “The People Speak” as a tendentious story, judging by Adorno’s criteria of direct and indirect signification. The first speaker at the assembly, James Forten, deliberately points to his former assimilationist outlook, calling himself “an American patriot through and through,” after which he proceeds to explain the reasons why he has moved towards a nationalist or separatist position. Paul Cuffe, on the other hand, immediately identifies himself

³³⁵ This particular objection was voiced by Edmund Randolph, who eventually chose to leave the convention prematurely. Robert Yates, “Notes of the Secret Debates of the Federal Convention of 1787, taken by the late Hon Robert Yates, Chief Justice of the State of New York, and one of Delegates from That State to the Said Convention,” *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu>, Lillian Goldman Law Library, 19 June 2014<URL> 13 July 2014<http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/yates.asp> 23 Aug 2016.

³³⁶ Zinn highlights the issuing of paper money as a particularly telling case. Many small American farmers paid off high mortgage on their land in the early days of the republic, and would have therefore welcomed the introduction of paper money, and the resulting inflation. This, however, went against the interest of the creditor class. The wealthy creditors, unlike the indebted farmers, exercised considerable influence in the new Congress, which is why the new legislation prohibits the issuing of “paper money, [...] an abolition of debts, [or] any other improper or wicked object,” as James Madison stipulates in Federalist paper No. 10. Quoted in Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present* (London: Routledge, 1980/2003) 91. While this may be dismissed as a myopically leftist view of societal development, it still provides an interesting juxtaposition to the selfless charities of Johnson’s tycoon Paul Cuffe who funds a black school and has apparently paid the \$4000 of passenger ship fare for many of the black expatriates, out of his own pocket.

with nationalist sentiment by adverting to himself as a fighter who “shed blood for freedom [and] justice” (70) and “never avoided a good fight” (71).

The *modal* prism is the only part of our assessment scale which remains virtually unchanged no matter whether we read the story as a story without any intertextual significations, or a document to be read by a third (white) party. The predominant *modal* tenor is exhortative. Not only do the appointed speakers exhort and plead with the audience, but the story itself pleads with its readers, in a manner that Marcus Garvey’s back-to-Africa movement was marginally understood also as a reproachful gesture towards the white majority by way of shocking them into introspection. The act of posing as a generic self-appointed spokesperson is a panoptical and exhortative position. This is also panoptical in the sense that the speaker is aware of the pressure of expectations emanating from invisible audience. The story does very little to explain the positions of the participants, whose motives are fairly self-explanatory and therefore need no exegetical interventions. The recording of the entire story for the outward (and possibly white) readership can be understood as partaking of the exhortative mode.

Autonomous aspects of the story

As has been pointed out, the general plot and theme of the story is rather conducive to the summary label as tendentious literature. However, this is only true if we insist on the literalist reading. If we flip this around and try to read the story in juxtaposition to the larger context of American history, we may see it as a subversive analogy rather than pedestrian rendering of a historical event. The subversiveness of the event described in the story resides in the fact that the entire voting process abides by much more stringent democratic procedures than the ones upheld by the white establishment of that era, thereby providing an indirect egalitarian challenge to the elitist white gaze. The story does suggest that there may be a considerable material chasm between the leaders and the commoners, yet the possible vested interest of the leaders does not prevail, in a perfect paragon of democracy which is both ostentatiously procedural (the ushers collect the ballots in plain sight, under the scrutiny of the entire congregation) and substantive (the majority opinion prevails).

A similar challenge resides in the final decision of the assembly not to join in the colonizing mission of its community leaders. Given the fact the American establishment was about to go full steam with its Manifest Destiny mission in the early decades of the 19th century, the decision of the assembly to reject colonization can be also seen as an indirect subversive signification on the predatory US expansion westwards.

Since none of these challenging parallels are overtly stated in the story, they all summarily qualify as Adorno’s indirect signification or the understatement of Roland Barthes’s myth. The only direct reference to the white establishment as a yardstick for comparison takes place towards the end of the story, when the assembled voters are reminded that their verdict will be at least as important for American future as the decisions of the Constitutional Convention were two decades earlier. This, however, is not nearly enough to *overtly* call in any of the contestational binaries implied above, namely elitist vs. egalitarian, democratic vs. aristocratic and colonialist vs. anti-colonialist. In view of the ostentatiously democratic proceedings of the assembly, it would not be surprising if Johnson chose to further

reinforce the democratic appeal by having women vote alongside the men, even though this would be in flagrant denial of reality. As it is, Johnson allows us to draw our own conclusions from the story, while admitting in a footnote that the meeting was in reality only attended by men.

In summary, “The People Speak” is a story whose perfunctory literalist reading lends itself to very tendentious and narrowly racist interpretations. However, if we think of the story not as a story to get engrossed in, but as a document for discursive reading within its historical context, this prism yields interesting indirect significations, which may legitimately be seen as redemptive as far as the tendentiousness of the story is concerned.

4.3.2 Invisible men: black agency in “The Mayor’s Tale”

So they became hewers of wood and drawers of water
for the whole congregation, just as the leaders had spoken to them.
(Joshua 9.21)

James Forten, the first speaker in “The People Speak”, reminds his audience of “how central Negroes have been to every dimension of life in the colonies” (69), a point later underscored by the verbal nod to “deep contributions” of black people to the US economy. (71) Especially the first quoted fragment can be seen as a direct allusion to another story within the collection, namely “The Mayor’s Tale”.

The generic title does not lie, as the story is indeed told by the Mayor of an unnamed, “large, northeastern city,” (93)³³⁷ who one day realizes the indispensability of black people within the texture of the society, a realization that dawns on the main protagonist and he readers via a gradual disclosure throughout the story. To his astonishment, the Mayor wakes up late one day because nobody has woken him up, as he is accustomed to. The house is chilling cold because nobody has heated the fireplace. With bewilderment, he realizes that he has already missed five appointments at the City Hall. Having no idea where his wardrobe is (as even this has always been his butler’s responsibility) he puts on a crumpled shirt he wore the day before. With an empty stomach and chattering teeth, he leaves his scolding wife in the cold house and starts walking to the city from his suburban residence³³⁸, still baffled by the fact that neither his butler nor his maid has showed up for work. As he is trudging to work, which takes him two hours without the customary coach, it dawns on him that something is missing from the picture.

[W]hat he saw-or rather didn’t see-along the way to work startled him. There were no black people. It wasn’t as if he looked for them every day. No, most of

³³⁷ In this case, the analysis will not delve beyond the scanty factual framework established by the story which preserves the city’s sly anonymity. The Mayor’s surname is revealed, but still keeps a rather low profile, a narrative slant which the analysis will respect.

³³⁸ This is obviously a rather a-historical usage of the word, as suburbia only became a thing of sociological interest with the fast growing middle class segment of the early 20th century US.

the time they blended into the background of his city, as unnoticeable as trees or weather vanes or lampposts-or maybe like the inner workings of a finely tuned watch. Obviously, no one paid attention to a timepiece's hidden mechanism until it ceased to work. But now, along the five-mile stretch between his home and the City Hall, he saw chaos.

(97)

After this brief reflection, which does not attempt to explain the absence, the Mayor finally reaches his office, where his young (white male) assistant tells him that, due to the delay, his city has lost important business contracts, which will almost certainly bury any possible chances for his re-election. After this unhappy revelation, the assistant tells the baffled Mayor that the disappearance of black people was also his own fault, having been one of the political dignitaries to approve the Compromise document, one of whose (very minor) items was also an amendment of the Fugitive Slave Act. The newly amended law entitled federal commissioners not only "to issue warrants for runaway slaves" but also to "form posses [and] fine citizens if they refused to help in returning Negroes to their former masters." To his utter astonishment, the Mayor realizes that all the black people in *his* city must have been runaways who, in the face of these new draconic laws, chose to make tracks to Canada or some other safer place. Upon a self-flagellating moment of reflection, the Mayor sees that it had also been him who "had endorsed that disaster." (99) Let us stop halfway through the story for a brief inventory of tendentious and autonomous readings which ensue already from this fragmentary reading, and which will be used as a frame of reference while concluding the narrative arc of the story.

Tendentious reading

The racially invested tendentious aspects, very palpable in the story, are largely positive in racist terms. The main point which is being bulldozed by the story is the indispensability of black people in the American society. The presumed invisibility of African Americans, like the inner machinery of a watch, is a functionality taken for granted until it goes missing. This is a classic essentialist concept, namely a riff on racial pride trope that is frequently described as "black agency".

Emphasis on black agency generally partakes of assimilationist overtones in African American literature, namely the indispensability or agency is alluded to within the mainstream society, not without. This is also the way in which it is presented in two classic essayistic renditions of the theme by W.E.B. Du Bois and Ralph Ellison.³³⁹ In several cases, though, the economic indispensability of black Americans is mentioned as an exhortative position with the blackmailing undertone of separatism. In chapter 3 we described Hurston's and Morrison's literary renditions of all-black towns and the even more extreme Back-to-African movement. Let us then again invoke 1899 novel *Imperium in Imperia* by Baptist minister

³³⁹ Du Bois touches on this issue in several books, including his seminal 1899 study *The Philadelphia Negro*. His most complex treatment of the subject came out two decades later. W. E. B. Du Bois, "*The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America*" (Garden City Park, NY: Square One Publishers, 1924/2009). Ralph Ellison, "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," *Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003) 581-588.

Sutton Griggs, namely the vindictive exhortation of one of its main characters, Bernard Belgrave, as he is imagining the economic and legislative bleeding of the post-Reconstruction American South caused by the sudden en masse emigration of its black population.

[O]ne of his chief reasons for suggesting emigration was that it would be a terrible blow to the South. The proud Southerner would then have his own forests and fields to tend. He pictured the haughty Southern lady at least last the queen of her own kitchen. He then called attention to the loss of prestige which the South would sustain in the nation. By losing nearly one half of its population the South's representation on Congress would be reduced to such a point that the South would have no appreciable influence on legislation for half a century to come. He called attention to the business depression that would ensue when the southern supply merchant lost such an extensive consumer in the negro.³⁴⁰

This dependency motif is precisely the trope that Johnson refurbishes in “The Mayor’s Tale”. The desperation and impotence cause by the absence of black people, which Griggs envisions, becomes a historically sanctioned literary reality in Johnson’s tale.³⁴¹ This scene from Griggs’s classic black political novel can be also seen as an elegant bridge that spans the central issues in “The Mayor’s Tale” and “The People Speak”. Such palpable thematic allusion, however, can hardly redeem the overall tendentious nature of Johnson’s story. Let us therefore examine some more nuanced aspects which may be tentatively classified as indirect signification.

Autonomous reading

In addition to the above palpably obvious literalist connotations, which fall safely within the fold of tendentious writing, the story can also be read as a subtle signification on *Native Son*, the ultimate black classic of American naturalist fiction written in 1939 by Richard Wright, whose influence as a general source of inspiration Johnson acknowledges in his *Being and Race*.³⁴² Like Wright, Johnson does not make the classic “mistake” of a tendentious writer by letting the catastrophe descend on a clearly defined antagonist, i.e. a blatant racist or an enemy of the black people. The Mayor is described as a “progressive man,” fully supportive of “Negro manumission”, and he even boasts a wife who engages in “abolitionist activities.” The mediated inner monologue of the Mayor takes the pains to let us know that he “cheered on and publicly supported the recent Compromise that abolished the slave trade in the District of Columbia” (the same document that is eventually revealed to be the root of all the evil). On a personal day-to-day basis, the Mayor believes that he treats his black servants “royally” and pays them “handsomely”. In short, the narrator of this story spends almost an entire page on enumerating the civic and personal virtues of the main character, typically in relation to his personal investment and interest in the social uplift of the darker race.³⁴³

³⁴⁰ Sutton E. Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio*.

³⁴¹ Despite the insistence of this analysis to retain the generic nature of “The Mayor’s Tale,” the story is indeed based on a conflation of several historical events in the aftermath of the Fugitive Slave Act.

³⁴² Charles Johnson, *Being and Race*, 14-15, 48.

³⁴³ The allusion to Wright’s classic is rather arbitrary, Johnson’s artistic resentment “melodramatic” racial

This long adulatory list may be somewhat compromised by the disclosure that the Mayor has a “lovely, young mistress” who happens to be “half his age,” (90) yet this lack of moral fibre seems irrelevant to the racialist backbone of the story.

In similar manner, though on a much more complex scale, Wright’s Bigger Thomas commits his accidental yet grievous crime against the daughter of his employers, the Dalton family, all of whose members seem to be extraordinarily friendly towards black people, judging by the standard of the day and the context of the novel. By doing that, Wright partly manages to wiggle out of the formulaic cautionary didacticism typical of exhortative African American fiction. Johnson’s story, however, does not wrench itself completely from the shackles of poetic justice. After the congratulatory description of the Mayor, we are given a long glimpse into his mindset as far as the innate capacities of black people are concerned. Since this part is clearly pitched as an argumentative thesis to be countered with its antithesis later on, the Mayor’s musings on this topic should be presented in their entirety.

[The Mayor] overlooked what everyone in his social circle agreed were inherent and unfortunate deficiencies in colored people. These shortcomings, after all, were not *their* fault, but rather the unjust distribution of talent, beauty, intelligence by Nature, so that those more generously endowed by Providence were duty bound to help them. Without the white men, the Negro would be lost. They were like children in their *dependency*. (94; emphasis added)

What this passage is suggesting is that the Mayor had it coming, at least to some degree. Well-meant condensation is not an openly antagonistic feature, yet the presumable dependency of blacks on whites is clearly a purposeful pitch to be countered with a very blatant antithesis demonstrating the visceral dependency of whites on blacks. In addition to this rather loose and debatable analogy to Wright’s diluted cautionary strategy, the story also uses analogical black-and-white symbolism. In his *Native Son*, Wright very deftly places the action of the first two parts of the novel in winter, thus accompanying the actions of Bigger Thomas by heavy snowfall and chilling weather. This is readily understood as a symbolic way of underscoring the fact that Thomas is *chilled* to the bone, i.e. mortified and intimidated, by white people, while the ubiquitous layer of snow symbolically renders the stifling presence of the white oppression which underlies Thomas’s thinking and actions.³⁴⁴

In a similar manner, the narrative trajectory of Johnson’s Mayor is underlain by the contrast between snow and coal, in an inverse Manichean scenario: white snow connotes cold,

oppositions does not really need any such backing. For example, his two slave protagonists in *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage*, Andrew Hawkins and Rutherford Calhoun, have fairly benevolent masters who “didn’t approve of the institution of slavery [and] wanted to free their slaves at the first opportunity.” This is Johnson’s deliberate attempt to wiggle out of the “obligatory” binaries of the slave narrative genre which amount to “censorship and tying the writer to a lie.” Marian Blue, “An Interview with Charles Johnson,” *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson*, 134.

³⁴⁴ This Manichean symbolism is regarded as an interpretive standard in relation to Wright’s novel. Johnson himself posits that, within the Manichean contours of the story, “to be is to be white,” while the “black coloration” of Bigger Thomas subliminally suggests “defilement”. Charles Johnson, *Being and Race*, 14. Recognizably similar color symbolism is used to a different end in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, when the black narrator hates milk, or the classic trope of a black woman doing laundry for a white family, found in *The Bluest Eye* and some short stories by Zora Neale Hurston, most notably “Sweat”.

discomfort and illness (potentially death), while black coal is metonymically associated with warmth, comfort and life. The Mayor himself seems dimly aware of this inverted Manichean dichotomy.

Coal had not been delivered to homes, and this was the *dead* of winter! Roadwork lay unfinished, as if the fingers of God had plucked its *dusky* crews of the face of earth. No *snow* was shoveled. It was as if his city had run out of its primary source of power, *coal*. (A terrible pun, he knew, but on this awful day it seemed appropriate.) (97; emphases added)

The Mayor's direct acknowledgment of the "black-and-white" nature of the predicament, as expressed in his pun, legitimizes the symbolic counter-Manichean reading of the story. Such indirect symbolic signification may go against the blinkered reading of the story as a one-track cautionary tale, yet it does not change its fundamentals. Johnson's deconstruction of Manichean symbolism does nothing to subvert the story's meaning; it just creatively amplifies the realistic point.

Since the overall ideological tenor of the *Soulcatcher* collection seems to be boosting the image of African Americans rather than detracting from it, any interpretation which would suggest otherwise may be seen as a dissenting, i.e. decidedly non-tendentious reading.

In one such inverse reading, the story may actually be seen as a reinforcement of the negative essentialist label of dark "Hamitic" people as the "hewers of wood and drawers of water". After all, being indispensable as the basic maintenance element within the texture of society is not necessarily a compliment. As has been pointed out, the painful absence of the African Americans is clearly meant as antithetical to the Mayor's disparaging comments at the beginning of the story, yet the only pitch for the clinching counterpoint is provided by the notion that black people "were like children in their *dependency*" and possibly also the claim that "[w]ithout white men, the Negro would be lost", (94) of which only the first claim (dependency) provides a logical thesis towards the subsequent antithetical dichotomy (i.e. it turns out that the whites are the ones who are dependent). After all, the Mayor is not necessarily lost, only delayed, inconvenienced (possibly fired from his job) and starving.

In another reading against the grain, we may willfully choose to see the disappearance of the black people as an act that is not defined by astuteness but by cowardice. After all, they choose to run away in the face of presumed danger that has not even materialized itself. Other than these covert significations, the potential for autonomous reading of the story is rather limited. It can be seen as a covert cautionary tale regarding the logistical dangers of suburbia, or the intrinsic limits of a mind like the narrator's, who likes to be "like the most regular of regular verbs," (97) a phrase which the narrator attributes to Immanuel Kant. These, however, would be speculative and impressionistic interpretations which are completely disjointed from the story (even as far as indirect signification is concerned).

The story also does to a limited degree function as a subversion of negative essentialist typologies. As seen by the potential investors who were kept waiting and eventually left, the white Mayor is inevitably seen as lazy and irresponsible fellow, a role which he himself

initially attributes to his butler and, by extension, to all black people who had innate “deficiencies” which he generously chooses to overlook.

Panoptical and modal readings of “The Mayor’s Tale”

An examination of panoptical overtones in “The Mayor’s Tale” yields ambiguous results. The main dramatic conceit of the story, namely the reason why all the ex-fugitive black people have gone missing, is driven by their anxiety that there are people out there wanting to get them, people whom the fugitives do not even know. While this preemptive anxiety has distinct paranoiac overtones, it still falls short of the panoptical defensive reflex. Panoptical anxiety is predicated on the absence of a threat or punishment that has explicitly declared itself. To the contrary, the amendment of the Fugitive Slave Act as described in the story makes the danger of being apprehended very explicit and imminent, which only constitutes a very marginal alignment with panopticism.

The only stance in the story that has distinctly panoptical overtones is expressed by the Mayor’s assistant, a young man called Daniel. He has only just recovered from the fury of the two “entrepreneurs of tremendous wealth and importance” who had “traveled a great distance”³⁴⁵ only to be kept waiting for the Mayor, and consequently decided to “cancel further discussions of their proposed contracts and in the future only do business with other cities” (97). As a result of this threat, the assistant is *a priori* convinced that the mishap has killed the Mayor’s chances for reelection, assuming that the political opposition “will make great capital out of this,” given that the Mayor had promised “to improve commerce, shipping, and transportation.” As a result of this (clearly paranoid) conviction, he neglects his secretarial duties and instead starts sending out his CVs to “potential, future employers.” (98) The notion of being under a constant scrutiny by one’s rivals and constituents is distinctly panoptical, yet the story only attributes this feeling to a white person of a fairly privileged background, which is why it has no bearing on the racist overtones of the story.

An even more obvious *argumentum ex silentio* is applicable to the modal tenor of the story. “The Mayor’s Tale” does not feature any verbal or physical performance of African American people, unless we see their abrupt withdrawal as a pleading stance vis-à-vis the reader of the story. In any case, the exhortative and exegetical positions of the three white characters (the Mayor, his wife and his assistant) may seem irrelevant to the discussion at hand. However, even in the absence of any direct exegesis or exhortation by black people, we should take note of the overall tonal trajectory of the story, where the main character begins his daily journey as a self-styled *owner* of the city, plus many other things,³⁴⁶ and is gradually reduced to a desperate man trying to find some food for his family. In the final narrative

³⁴⁵ This phrase slightly undermines the coherence and plausibility of Johnson’s narrative. While it is conceivable that the two wealthy businesspeople did not rely on African American workforce, it is difficult to imagine that they would have been completely oblivious of the logistical calamities that seemed to have paralyzed the entire area.

³⁴⁶ The language of ownership permeates the entire story. In his mediated inner monologue, the Mayor refers with satisfaction to “his home” and “his family”, “his investments”, “his [anticipated] reelection”, “his role as a major”, “his black help” and “his personal servant”, “his freshly pressed linen”, “his secretary” and “his club”. However, perhaps most poignantly within the story’s trajectory, the mediated monologue repeatedly mentions “his town”. This phrase can be seen as yet another deliberate pitch which is subverted and discredited through the story’s development. As it turns out, the city was not “his” all along, it in reality belonged to the “invisible” black working class population.

crescendo, the sneezing and exhausted mayor walks two miles in the darkness, with fresh snow “flaking on his shoulders,” only to realize that even *his* club, which he thought of as the last resort for food provision, has closed down, with a NO COOKS, NO WAITERS TODAY sign attached to the ground-floor window. Upon this final let-down, the Mayor “broke down and cried in the snow.” (101) This mimetic pleading does not fully qualify as an allusion to the African American exhortation trope, yet the story does present a powerful cautionary analogy partaking of the biblical admonition that “the mighty man shall be humbled,”³⁴⁷ a notion which reverberates through African American lore and literature.

4.3.3 Exhortations and panopticism in “The Plague” and “Martha’s Dilemma”

The topic of black communal self-sufficiency and agency surfaces through several other stories within the collection, extending the primary subject into several different directions. Since we are dealing with variations on a theme that has been firmly established within this subchapter, “The Plague” and “Martha’s Dilemma” will only be addressed in a more cursory fashion. The analysis will first examine each story in turn, suggesting possible allusive or other autonomous elements, and eventually sum up their *tendentious* features within one segment. To this end, selective reading will be applied with the aim of subsuming these stories within the lore of the entire quartet. As a basic point of departure, we should mention that both “The Plague” and “Martha’s Dilemma” pledge intertextual loyalty to “The Mayor’s Tale” in their own specific ways.

The mortifying dilemma of Martha Washington

“Martha’s Dilemma” can be read as a deliberate expansion on the ubiquity the black population, “invisible” to the eye but indispensable for the smooth functioning of the society, as rendered in “The Mayor’s Tale”. The entire story revolves around the dilemma that George Washington’s wife Martha had to deal with after his death. A progressive man by the standards of his era, the general legally confirms his “repugnance of slavery” by stipulating in his will that after the death of his wife all their slaves will be set free, thereby trying to “right” the privilege he was born into, having been “a slave master since his eleventh year.” (47) This charitable and progressive gesture, however, creates a terrible predicament for his aging wife. The frail old lady, surrounded by a cohort of slaves who know that her death is the door to their deliverance, gets progressively more paranoid, eventually deciding to manumit all of them rather than “accidentally” dying of food poisoning.

The story partakes of the indispensable *black agency* mode outlined on “The Mayor’s Tale”. Having “delegated so many household responsibilities to them,” Martha complains, she has become child-like in her dependence. She reflects on the irony of the inverted power relationship.

³⁴⁷ Isaiah 5:15.

Ironically, we were enslaved to *them*, shackled to their industry, the knowledge that they'd acquired because we were too busy running the country to develop it ourselves!

(46)

Upon George's death, this benign dependency acquires more ominous overtones, as Martha begins to fear all her husband's black servants who inhabit "every nook and cranny" of her life. In paranoid anxiety, she eavesdrops behind kitchen door, imagining that they are plotting to kill her. She complains about food going missing from the pantry and plants in the greenhouse dying from neglect. She fancies that she has heard somebody play the drums in the slave quarters, even though she and her husband "had expressly forbidden" such an activity. She imagines that the head servant, who is now technically in charge of the house, is getting increasingly insolent in his manners, and she even "sniffed [their] best brandy on his breath". Hearing some of her servant's footsteps behind her is enough to give her "chills". (47) The paranoid pressure is too much to bear, which is why she eventually decides to set all George's slaves free.³⁴⁸ Reflecting on this decision, Martha concludes her narrative by the clinching summary statement that only by freeing the slaves she herself will finally break "free from the errors of George Washington." (48)

The main source of dramatic tension in the story is Martha's panoptical paranoia, informed by her deep-seated conviction that she has been treated unfairly, as she is saddled with a problem that springs from her husband's short-sighted generosity. However, it is also important to realize that Martha seems to be astute enough to understand that the black slaves have a legitimate reason to complain about the tantalizing scenario. The story is as much Martha's exhortation as the slaves' exhortation. The reader is only allowed to glimpse the events in the story through Martha musings. Given the fact that she is old and recognizably paranoid, the setup of the story is conducive to an unreliable narrator device. The narrator is compromised by an unfair monopoly over the story, just like George Washington felt he was morally compromised by assuming the monopolising duties of a slaveholder at the age of eleven.

While "The Mayor's Tale" only accentuates the indispensable role of black people within the texture of African American society, "Martha's Dilemma" retains that aspect while also drawing attention to the fact that this benign power tip may over into a menace, if induced by circumstances. Let us explore the semantics of the following conglomerate of Martha's complaints and juxtapose it to a classic rendition of the "social uplift" theme.

At night, [...] I began to hear drums. [...] Food began to disappear from our pantries. [...] Sometimes when I started to enter the kitchen, I'd stop outside the door, listening to the blacks laughing whilst they prepared my meals, and once our cook told the chambermaid how pleased she was that now she'd never again have to slave all day[.] At that point, I strode inside. Seeing me, both women went

³⁴⁸ The manumission does not seem to extend to Martha's own slaves, leaving the story rather open-ended in narratological terms.

fussily back to work, ducking their heads, but I saw one of them, I swear, wink at the other.

(46-47)

The wording and imagery of this composite passage is reminiscent of the laugh-eat-grow strong empowerment scheme classically rendered in the allegorical poem “I, too” by Langston Hughes.

[...]They send me to eat in kitchen.
When company comes,
But I laugh
And eat well
And grow strong
Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes
Nobody'll dare
Say to me
“Eat in the kitchen,
Then [...]”³⁴⁹

Even the drum-playing, when assessed on its own, yields interesting racialist connotations. The two most famous successful black slave rebellions on the Western hemisphere, the Haitian and Jamaican uprisings, were reputedly orchestrated by tom-toms. Based on this intertextual allusion to another event within the realm of pan-American slavery, the fact that George's near-liberated slaves choose to play drums, a practice frowned upon by their late master and mistress, acquires rather ominous connotations.

The chiasmic trope of being enslaved to the industry of one's slave, and morally corrupted by ownership, is not the only element that pledges allegiance with the classic slave narratives.³⁵⁰ Among the many sins of the uppity head-servant Billy Lee, Martha Washington also mentions that she “heard him *swearing* at a stable hand.” (46) The italicization of the verb “to swear” can be completely innocuous, yet it can also be read as an intertextual reference to classic slave narratives, many of which refer to profanity as one more vilified feature of the masters. Douglass's classic narrative deliberately muses on “profane swearing” and “horrid oaths”.³⁵¹

However, the significance of these potential indirect significations should not be overestimated, as they simply “drum home” the same point which is explicitly expressed in the story, namely the simmering rebellious spirit of the underprivileged black people.

³⁴⁹ Langston Hughes, “I, too,” *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, vol. 11*, ed. Dianne Johnson (Columbia, University of Missouri Press) 82-83.

³⁵⁰ This refers to Frederick Douglass's famous chiasm “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how slave was made a man.” Frederick Douglass, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave,” 294.

³⁵¹ Frederick Douglass, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave,” 258-259.

“Martha’s Dilemma” as a gothic and feminist tale

Martha Washington concludes her final assessment of the situation with the following tirade.

You [...] *consigned* me to a *hellish house*, where in the face of each of our *formerly loving* attendants I now see my possible *executioner*. (48; emphases added)

If we go on a deliberate hunt for intertextual significations by way of “redeeming” the story from its overtly tendentious nature, we may draw attention to the use of the italicised words in the quoted passage, comparing it to the closing paragraph of a classic American short story “The Black Cat” by Edgar Allan Poe. With the help of an insensitive racist conflation, we may point out the shared motif of a formerly loyal black creature which eventually *consigned* the main protagonist to an *executioner* (*hangman*, in Poe’s case). This may seem like a flimsy similarity, but it should be given the benefit of doubt, as Johnson has repeatedly acknowledged Poe’s influence, so the conspicuous use of the verb *consign*, which features in the closing paragraphs of both stories, should not be ignored. Let us therefore briefly revisit some of the parallels of “Martha’s Dilemma” with the classic American romanticist story. The opening sentence in both stories mentions death. Both stories are partly built on the paranoia of the main hero(ine). In both stories, the spouse of the narrator dies, after which the surviving partner eventually makes a sudden and compulsive decision. Prior to dying, General Washington is subjected to bloodletting (with a knife), which is reminiscent of Poe’s narrator cutting out the cat’s eye. As has been mentioned, the formerly loving black attendants, like the formerly loving black cat, in the end turn on the hero or heroine, respectively. While this inventory of similarities between Poe’s and Johnson’s narrator is only mildly suggestive, “Martha’s Dilemma” does use several themes and ominous foreshadowings which nudge the story towards gothic fiction, regardless of the similarities with “The Black Cat”. These aspects also help ease the overt didacticism of the story.

In addition to the obvious and tendentious racialist reading, “Martha’s Dilemma” can be also read via feminist prism. If a story is dominated by some blatantly tendentious and historicizing theme, it allows some more nuanced points within the story to keep low profile. In the case of “Martha’s Dilemma”, the dominant motif is the main heroine’s paranoid fear of getting in some way assaulted by the slaves of her deceased husband, General Washington, because they know that they are bound to be manumitted after her death. Martha’s anxiety dominates the story so much that it partly neutralizes a feminist line of critique that informs the central dilemma.

The basic underlying argument is that Martha has been treated unfairly, as she is saddled with a problem that springs from her husband’s short-sighted generosity. Despite this unflattering summary, the first two thirds of the story are very adulatory towards George Washington. We learn how indefatigable he was, and how the supportive wife thought of

Washington's fledgling republic as "the child they never had". (41) We are also given to understand how she tried to nurse him through diseases and finally failed at that project.

It is only after the full recognition and assessment of her situation after his death that we learn some less savoury facts about their relationship. First, Martha punctures some of the myths surrounding her husband, informing us that he was, "after all, a politician" and was therefore bound to tell a lie now and then. After this, she subtly demotes his intelligence by characterizing him as "a man of deeds, not ideas" who could barely spell due to the "paucity of his education" and needed to be helped along, thus making him appear even more *indebted* to Martha's sophistication.³⁵² In addition to these non-material contributions, Martha further intimates that she added a dowry of "five thousand acres to his estate," plus twelve thousand which is now inherited by their son. (45)

These mildly disparaging comments eventually sharpen up into outright denunciations, when Martha complains that George should have "thoroughly consulted" her on the matter of manumitting the slaves, given that they had not decided about the fate of her own servants. (47) And indeed, this sounds like a logical proposition, especially from a feminist standpoint. If Martha Washington had invested so much into her husband's career, in terms of intellectual and real estate property, she should have had some say in the matter. Let us reiterate on her clear exhortative and reproachful note, as she is chastising her dead husband for the improvident *legalistic* arrangement.

Oh, George, you were not a thinker. Had you been, you would not out of Christian kindness to the blacks unwittingly consigned [sic] me to a hellish house, where in the face of each of our formerly loving attendants I now see my possible executioner. (48; emphasis added)

On the level of personal efficacy, it is conceivable that George Washington might have failed to foresee the consequences of his progressive act on the livelihood of his widow. However, when seen as a narrative device rather than a personal obtuseness, the way Johnson spins the story seems to contrast two principles which are not necessarily contrastive in their own right, namely *African American social uplift* and *female emancipation*. While this is a ideologically flavoured topic in its own right, yet the feminist critique is upstaged by the central paranoid dilemma to such a degree that it cannot possibly qualify as tendentious commitment.

Black-mailing exhortations in "The Plague"

An even more exhortative rendering of the black indispensability trope is delivered in "The Plague", yet another story from the *Soulcatcher* collection.

The story is ostentatiously grounded in the factual record of "a plague that descended on Richard Allen's Philadelphia of 1793," as Johnson himself explains in the preface. (xiii) The story unfolds through a diary kept by Reverend Richard Allen, the exhorter from "The People Speak" story. In "The Plague," his exhortations cater primarily to the white gaze whose browbeat presents itself several times throughout the story. As a pastor of the recently

³⁵² In a different strand of her rambly inner monologue, we learn that Martha studied the classics as a young girl.

founded Bethel church and man of charitable Christian disposition, Allen does his best to ameliorate the disastrous impact of the “plague of medieval proportions” which God (in Allen’s rendition of things) “visited upon the city’s whites.” This is not meant as a gleeful comment on Allen’s part, yet he certainly has reasons to be vindictive. The Bethel church was founded as a last resort, because local church-going African Americans had been repeatedly subjected to humiliation in St. George, the largest Methodist church in Philadelphia. Reverend’s diary briefly sums up the most vivid embarrassments which the Cainites (i.e. blacks) suffered at the hands of their Abelite coreligionists. The Christians “refused to take the sacrament if it meant sipping from the same chalice that had touched the lips of their darker brethren” and at one embarrassing moment one of the church trustees hauled Allen’s praying colleague to his feet and forcibly removed both of them to a more appropriate (blacks-only) part of the church. As a result of this, the black Methodist churchgoers in Philadelphia “turned [their] backs on all Philadelphia’s white churches” and provided for themselves. (50)

As has been indicated, Reverend Allen seems to interpret the plague as a divine retribution for this racist malevolence of the Abelites. Nevertheless, he heeds the pleading of his white friend, a medical doctor who is doing his best to mitigate the impact of the catastrophe. There is widespread belief in the city that black people are immune to the disease. Reverend Allen therefore agrees to use his influence among the black parishioners and “assist the city’s remaining civic leaders in combating the curse that is laying them low.” He does so not only because he is mindful of the injunction “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ,” (51) but also with the hope that such a public gesture of self-denial and altruism may ease the racial prejudice of the white Philadelphians.

This crisis, the Lord let me see, is possibly our invitation as a people back from our exile east of Eden. If we help the Abelites in their hour of need, mightn’t they be thankful to the Negroes of Philadelphia? Wouldn’t their hatred be replaced by gratitude? Such has been my hope since I enlisted my people in the dangerous work of saving others who have long despised them. (51)

The sad daily routine of the sanitary crew resides largely in gathering the bodies of people who died overnight. On one such occasion, Allen sees a corpse of the trustee who once expelled him and his colleague from the church. Contemplating the decomposing corpse, he is trying his best to purge himself from a sense of vindication, for the second time in the story. He does not quite succeed.

I could no longer see the trustee’s face - which, God forgive me, I hated - I said a brief prayer that all their souls might wing heavenward, though should that doubtful even happen, I’m sure the trustee would be standing at the gate when I arrived, telling Jesus that my black brethren and I should not be admitted. But I prayed for him, yes. And [...] for the removal of my anger. For does not the light of the World tell us that we must forgive seven times seventy, if need be?

(53-54)

His prayer is not completely granted. After being prejudicially barred from providing assistance to a rich yet diseased woman, who was known for throwing lavish parties, he muses that God might have “sent this plague for the same reason His wrath destroyed Sodom. To cleanse our city of human corruption.” (55)

Only halfway through Allen’s diary do we learn that the black citizens are far from immune to the disease, with a proportionally equal number of them having perished, and even the writer of the diary briefly appearing to be in danger. Finally, the plague seems to be loosening its grip, so the narrator, when talking to the white doctor, ventures to suggest that the contribution of the black people towards abating the plague might be acknowledged. Upon this, he receives the chastening news that their initiative has actually been willfully misapprehended and has had the opposite effect than what he’d hoped for.

Rather than singing your people’s praises, white men and women are saying the blacks used the plague for their own profit. They tell me reports that Negroes stole when, in the guise of nurses, they entered white homes-and like vultures pilfered the bodies of the dead. Some have even been accused of murdering, not saving, others. And even you, my friend, are being accused.”

(56)

After this anticlimactic revelation, the doctor explains to the Reverend that the accusation towards his own person resides in the fact that he has had to charge some families for his services, having run out of volunteers. He assures the Reverend that he would try to change people’s minds about the issue, but he is skeptical that such interventions “will change many of their hearts.” The story ends on a very disillusioned note, with the doctor suggesting that he has “many potions and elixirs for curing the ailments of the flesh,” (56) but he can only pray that a similar medicine could be invented “for curing the sickness in the white soul”. After ascertaining that the Philadelphians really suspect them of malevolence, having seen “lily-white faces glaring at [him] through the windows, twisted lips drawn together at [his] very presence,” the Reverend finally draws the “exoteric lesson,” presumably taught by God, that “despite the best efforts by men of goodwill, some plagues never end.” (57)

Allusive resonance in “Plague”

Allen’s diary format and his biblical exhortations loosely follow the American Jeremiad and the conversion narrative – classic genres of the religiously invested Puritan New England. Apart from this intertextual signification, the story also allusively communicates with “The People Speak” in mapping Reverend Allen’s character development. Throughout the fifteen years that presumably elapsed between the two stories, the hopeful assimilationist became a

disillusioned separatist, with the suggestive option that the abysmal ingratitude of the white city Philadelphians might have been the triggering point.

The story also intertextually communicates with the inverted Manichaeism of “The Mayor’s Tale”. Johnson’s Allen clearly thinks that there is no need to explain the words *Abelite* and *Cainite* as used in the story. Abel and Cain, as used in standard biblical exegesis, stand for the good/bad or docile/disobedient dichotomy, without any racist overtones. However, in the pigmentocratic lingo of the 18th century, the word Cain was often used synonymously with Ham as a way of denoting the Manichean subordination and scripturally preordained subservience of the black people.³⁵³ When seen in the larger context of Johnson’s writings, the Abel/Cain mythology features prominently in his 1998 novel *Dreamer*, which he completed weeks before starting the *Soulcatcher* stories. His character Chaym Smith, a Martin Luther King look-alike who is trained to double for him, was to some degree influenced by Ricardo Quinones’s book *Changes of Cain* which surveys the two millennia of Cain’s development in the western artistic imagination, from “a reprehensible, devil figure, to his birth as the new anti-hero.”³⁵⁴ While this is not necessarily an interpretive allusion, Chaym Smith’s self-redemptive journey in the novel may be seen as associative. The notion of African Americans being “black as Cain” also features in the most canonical poem by Phillis Wheatley, obliquely referenced in “Poetry and Politics,” a previously examined story within the *Soulcatcher* collection. The “Negroes, black as Cain”³⁵⁵ line does not make an explicit appearance in the story, yet that only makes the connotation more elusive, without obliterating its allusive resonance.

By accusing the black helpers of pilfering and murdering, the white Philadelphian public sentiment follows the standard of inverted typologies described in the section on early postbellum era in chapter 2. White men in privileged positions often acted as sexual predators, imposing themselves on black slave women, thereby creating the tragic octoroon - the liminal character that threatened to destabilize the Southern color line. Yet the same ruling white class (emblematically speaking) inverted the causation vector by 1) creating the Jezebel myth, thus shifting the blame toward the abused women, and, even more blatantly, 2) inventing the black rapist bogeyman myth (possibly from whole cloth) and insinuating it into conventional wisdom. In an analogical manner, it is the white people of Philadelphia who have ostracized the blacks (which is apparent even within the terse narrative of “The Plague”) and benefited from their altruism, yet they invert the vector and accuse *them* of committing crimes.

This inversion can be more specifically related to the accusation of sanctimony or hypocrisy. The black members of the sanitation crew presumably pretended to be nurses, using this irreproachable façade in order to sneak in the houses of the afflicted and steal or even murder. However, the only people who display recognizably hypocritical behaviour within the story are the white trustees from St. George, whose sanctimonious façade of good

³⁵³ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966), 171, 236. Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 102-105. Charles Johnson himself refers to the historical tendency to conflate Ham/Cain very briefly one of his essays. Charles Johnson, “Sangha by Another Name,” 47.

³⁵⁴ Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais, “An Interview with Charles Johnson,” *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson*, ed. Jim McWilliams (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002) 246-270.

³⁵⁵ Phillis Wheatley, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” 12.

Christians does not stop them from discriminating against their darker brethren.³⁵⁶ Since this is a subversive implication, not an overtly stated fact, it can also be considered autonomous rather than tendentious.

Tendentious readings of “Martha’s Dilemma” and “The Plague”

When assessed through the *hereditary* prism, both stories display some features of affirmative essentialism or racial pride mobilized in the face of social and racial ostracism. The Cainite/Abelite adjectival pairing, as used in “The Plague”, has distinctive racist or Manichean overtones, and as such provides the basic antithesis of the story. The white race as a summary essentialist entity is repeatedly censured throughout the story, not just by the black narrator but also by one white character. Since most of the events in the story are either valorized or disparaged with reference to the Bible, the repeated flagellism of white characters and the white race in general effectively inverts the Cain vs. Abel framing of the story. The story also briefly suggests that the African American citizens of Philadelphia may be immune to plague, which makes them more deserving people in terms of the biblical justice invoked by the narrator.

The affirmative essentialism in “Martha’s Dilemma” presents itself, first and foremost, in its *black agency* variant, namely the acknowledgment that the African Americans in the story have proved so indispensable that the main character feels “enslaved to them,” not the other way around. (46) This affirmative essentialism gestures towards the reader and is not explicitly expressed by the black characters themselves. In addition to this, the black agency asserts itself through the pressure which the black characters exert on the narrator and which eventually leads to their manumission. The one-sided and possibly unreliable narration of the story by aging Martha Washington makes it unclear whether the pressure has been exerted intentionally or whether it is just a figment of Martha’s paranoid imagination. In any case, since the ends justify the means, the coerced manumission can only be read as an affirmation of the black agency within the story.

The sociologist criterion of assessment makes a more demonstrable appearance in “The Plague”. The decision of the pastors to establish their own church, after the humiliating incidents in the white churches, can be seen as topographic manifestation of the dividing line between assimilationism and nationalism. Nevertheless, the main character and author of the diary spends most of the story in the assimilationist mode, acting on behalf of the entire black community with the hope of eroding the white prejudice by their exemplary deeds. Such an effort to make themselves more acceptable is inevitably guided by an assimilationist impulse. This exemplary assimilationism approach fails, or in fact backfires, because the self-sacrifice has been misattributed to ulterior (criminal) motives. Even after this debacle, it is not clear whether the main character adopts a more nationalistic/separatist stance, as the final exhortation does not provide any clear lead. If we read the story in an intertextual pairing with “The People Speak,” we may assume that this painful incident might have been the reason why Reverend Allen later argues in favour of expatriation to Africa.

³⁵⁶ This particular pharisaic element of American Christianity is a recurrent topic in the work of Frederick Douglass.

“Martha’s Dilemma” gives us very limited grounds for assessment according to the assimilationist/nationalist duality. The (real or imagined) striving for manumission falls short of explaining the black characters’ attitudes vis-à-vis the mainstream white society. It is therefore impossible to glean their intentions on that account.

The *modal* narrative inquiry aligns with classic African American typologies or tropes. “The Plague” is narrated largely in the exhortative mode of a Jeremiad, except when the character is explaining his ulterior motives to join in the effort of combating the epidemics. “Martha’s Dilemma” is told from the exhortative narrative stance of Martha Washington, which is irrelevant for our purposes because she is white. However, if we chose to discard our suspicions of Martha’s unreliability as a narrator, we may believe her observation that the slaves were joyfully anticipating their freedom, which would constitute an exhortative mode towards the reader of the story.

Both stories display certain panoptical overtones, more palpably in the case of “The Plague”, where the main character joins the charitable mission literally because of the white gaze. The panoptical paranoia in “Martha’s Dilemma” pertains predominantly to the main character, which has little bearing on our topic. However, even the expectant position of the slaves towards Martha as a dispenser of freedom can be seen as panoptical.

Both stories can be read as general (i.e. raceless) cautionary tales about short sighted human folly (“Martha’s Dilemma”) or human ingratitude and the ephemeral nature of human existence (“The Plague”), yet these universalist readings are very much submerged within the dominant racialist message. Other than their intertextual potential within the *Soulcatcher* collection, the two stories directly expound racialist themes instead of indirectly signifying.

4.2.3 Meditations on Melville in “Executive Decision”

On surface reading, Johnson’s story “Executive Decision”, best known from his 2005 collection *Dr. King’s Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories*, appears to be teeming with overt didacticism and suggestive racialist typologies possibly more than any other of his stories. Given the focus of this thesis, such an explicit tendentious characteristic warrants a closer look.

“Executive Decision” is told by a head of a large legal firm who is about to hire a new chief executive as a replacement for a retiring CEO. The company is dynastic, having been founded by the narrator’s grandfather, and the narrator inherited it from his³⁵⁷ father thirty years ago, along with his secretary, Gladys. The CEO position on offer implies a “six-figure

³⁵⁷ The story is told in second person, a device which Johnson also uses in “A Soldier for the Crown” story from the *Soulcatcher* collection, with the explicitly acknowledged purpose of keeping the narrator’s gender secret until the final denouement. It can therefore be assumed that this may also be the reason why he uses this (fairly unnatural) narrative stance in “Executive Decision”. No information about the narrator’s gender is explicitly volunteered throughout the text, apart from the fact that *his/her* friends from college allegedly complain how “dull, portly and bald” *s/he* has become. Balding is not an exclusively male problem, yet this hint seems to be Johnson’s unobtrusive way of nudging us towards the assumption that the narrator is a man, based on this (prejudicial) snippet of information, plus the (even more prejudicial) notion that a son would be more likely to inherit a company. The narrator later mentions that Claire, the female applicant, could be the first woman to break the glass ceiling in the company, which further confirms that he himself is a man.

job, with [...] benefits and stock options”, which is why a total of eight hundred managers applied. After an exhausting ordeal, these have been narrowed down to two “most appealing candidates”, a white woman and a black man.³⁵⁸

At this point, the narrator chooses to tell us that when he assumed his position as the head of the company, he changed the company hiring policy, insisting that the PR department should “aggressively seek out blacks and women,” which was presumably an “outrageous” thing to do in 1966. (57) As a result of this progressive initiative, the company “acquiesced” to the narrator’s wishes by “placing more blacks in custodial stuff and women in the secretarial pool in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s,” later underscoring this trend by “a sprinkling of both in middle management”. (57-58) He does not reveal whether this preference for hiring underprivileged segments of population has influenced the act of narrowing down the list to the two candidates, but since they are both “being wooed by other business and by government,” (56) we can presume that the pre-selection procedure has been largely meritocratic, not preferential. As will be addressed later, it is precisely the illusive definition of fairness and meritocracy that seems to be the main issue the story is trying to address.

Each candidate has his or her relative strengths and weaknesses, ones that are difficult to admeasure in direct juxtaposition against each other. The white woman, Claire Bennett, comes from a relatively privileged background, having enjoyed the benefit of private tutors as a teenager, in addition to attending “one of the best independent academies in the region,” and linguistically and culturally benefiting from her parents’ professional sojourns abroad. It is therefore not altogether surprising that she graduated from college “near the top of her class.” Being 28 years old, she has already proved her managerial aptitude by rising up to the position of a CEO’s assistant in her previous company, which unfortunately went under as a result of a legal suit. (59-60) In addition to coming from the same northeast part of the US and similarly privileged middle class background like the interviewers, she also impresses them as very communicative and sociable, a point which is further driven home with the appearance of her husband, a sculptor who would have no trouble relocating if she got the job. That overall impression is underscored by the fact that they have adopted a Filipino girl, their own son having died from SIDS.³⁵⁹ All in all, the narrator sums up her chances in the following statement.

If you hired Claire, you knew she would not only protect the interests of your interest as if it were her own, but her family and yours might become the best of friends. Added to which, and perhaps most important of all, she would be the first woman to break through he company’s “glass ceiling,” which was definitely a plus in the present gender charged political climate. (61-62)

³⁵⁸ Charles Johnson, “Executive Decision,” *Dr. King’s Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories* (New York: Scribner, 2005) 56. All quotations from *Dr. King’s Refrigerator* follow the Penguin edition of 2005. Page references are given in parentheses in the text.

³⁵⁹ In the antithetical framing of the story, even these items were clearly meant to strengthen Claire’s chances in the interview. The adopted Filipino is deliberately pitched to boost her liberal, multicultural, and charitable credentials, while the tragic death of their son inevitably evokes compassion and empathy. Both of these are further reinforced by the revelation that the Bennetts are planning to adopt two or three more children (charity), thereby indicating that they may have problems conceiving another child (compassion).

The competing applicant, Eddie Childs, is the first college graduate from a large African American family from the deep South (Georgia), who almost immediately volunteers the information that his high-flying career ambitions were sparked off by a white teacher telling him that “he’d never be college material,” in a fairly overt intertextual allusion to Malcolm X’s *Autobiography*.³⁶⁰ Childs recalls this moment quite vividly (and rather too forcefully) at an early stage within the timeframe of the interview.

“That woke me up,” Childs said. “He made me so mad I guess I’ve been fighting to prove him wrong since I was fifteen years old.” (62)

This sets the tone of the interview. We learn that Childs “had to work half as hard as other to get half as far – and four times that to break even,” which is why he “made his own opportunities” in life. Having worked as a night watchman to pay for college, he sacrificed all his social life. He then managed to build his own business and, before selling it off, he redeemed the mortgage on his parents’ house and “put one of his siblings through school.” This impressive record is accentuated by his membership in NAACP and active participation in community work preventing juvenile entanglement with crime, with Childs’s official credentials boosted by references from “half a dozen names in Atlanta’s city government and two black congressmen.”

At this point in the interview (mediated by the narrator), the fairly conventional narrative structure and delivery of Johnson’s story makes a sudden turn into a lecture in sociology. The new tone is introduced with reference to Childs’ wife Leslie, a primary school teacher, who “knew firsthand and through research about this country’s marginalized history,” namely “the contributions from people of color,” and so did he, further emphasizing the lingering yet underserved low status of the African American community. The interviewers listen to his sociological detour in “respectful yet nervous silence.” (63)

You learned that blacks suffered twice the unemployment rate of white and earned only half as much (56 percent); that a decade ago they comprised 7 per cent of professionals, 5 percent of managers, 8 percent of technicians, 11 percent of service workers, and 41 per cent of domestic workers. [...] Worse, the typical black household had a net worth less than one-tenth that of white households. AIDS among black Americans was six times the rate it was for whites, and every four hours a young black male died from gunfire. (63-64)

In a virtually uninterrupted stream of monologue, or so it seems, Eddie Childs lets the interviewers know that “[s]eventy percent of black children were born to single mothers” and fifty-five percent grew up in “fatherless homes”. The volley of social deprivations certainly

³⁶⁰ Upon expressing his desire to be a lawyer, Malcolm X’s primary school teacher opined that it “was not a realistic goal” for a black child, advising him to opt for carpentry instead. Eugene Victor Wolfenstein, *The Victims of Democracy: Malcolm X and the Black Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) 149. A similar situation is described in less canonical black writings and comes close to a generic narrative typology.

strengthens the interviewee's credentials, as the narrator wonders how Eddie Childs could have survived "a world in which black men [...] accounted for half those murdered in America" and one out of three men was either in prison or on parole. With these incredible hurdles to surmounts, the narrator concludes, "you are amazed this man is even alive." (64) This mediated monologue stretches, incredibly, over one page and a half,³⁶¹ marking a clear watershed in Johnson's story. At this point, it seems that Childs or the narrator "had to swallow chalk" in order to pin the committee and the reader to the wall, even though this sociological intervention inevitably "started to grate" against the narrative plausibility of the story, to borrow Adorno's phrase.³⁶²

There is clearly a reason why the entire tirade³⁶³ is mediated by the narrator, even though the story generally uses direct speech, not reported dialogues. The abrupt sociological interjection begs one obvious question, namely "How did Childs broach on the subject in the first place?" It is imaginable that he might have volunteered the anecdote about the condescending attitude of his teacher as an initial boost that propelled him towards high achievement. The same mimetic credibility, however, hardly applies to a one-page summary of the lingering social underprivilege of the African Americans, delivered in a pedantically itemized overview. How does one deliver this kind of summary within a job interview? Does it not immediately alert the interviewing committee, as well as the readers, to the fact that they are being emotionally blackmailed? But then, did not the same thing happen with Claire's visibly flaunted adoption and implied reproductive problems? Why would Johnson push his didacticism to a point which seriously undermines the narratological credibility of the story? Halfway through "Executive Decision", the suspicion that we have been reading a philosophical or legalistic treatise cloaked in a narrative grab becomes a certainty.

Let us therefore pursue the narrative trajectory to its denouement prior to drawing interpretive conclusions. The narrator and his two CEOs use Childs's complaint as an explanation for his rather guarded behaviour throughout the interview, which culminates in his polite refusal to take a part in a poker game to which he is (also rather implausibly) invited by one of the interviewers.

"I don't play cards." He confessed, "My wife is always saying I am not much of a fun person. All I do is work." (65)

³⁶¹ Eddie Childs's overview of setbacks faced by the black community appears to have been partly lifted from an introduction to 1997 book *Black Men Speak* which Johnson coauthored with John McCluskey, Jr. The overview in the book's introduction is longer and more comprehensive, spanning the early and mid 1990s, yet many of their respective themes and statistics overlap. Charles Johnson, "The Second Front: A Reflection on Milk Bottles, Male Elders, the Enemy Within, Bar Mitzvahs, and Martin Luther King Jr.," *Black Men Speak*, eds. Charles Johnson and John McCluskey, Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) ix– xv. Johnson own contribution within the book also mentions several autobiographical details that are reflected in "Executive Order", such as the night watchman job (possibly modeled on Johnson's father) or the elementary school teacher (Johnson's wife). The book's introduction also mentions a possible model for the charitable part of Eddie Child's character, namely Geoffrey Canada, a community worker and author of *Fist Stick Knife Gun*. Charles Johnson, "The Second Front," xvi.

³⁶² Adorno uses this as a jab at Bertolt Brecht, taking him to task for his undiluted ideology in *Mother Courage* and *The Measures Taken*, arguing that in order to "become a panegyrist" of social harmony in these two plays, "his lyric voice had to swallow chalk, and it started to grate." Theodor Adorno, "Commitment to Art," 187.

³⁶³ This word is not meant to indicate disrespect to the actual social deprivations of the African American population. It only adverts to the very conspicuous placement and length of this sociological interjection.

The narrator uses this incident to contemplate Childs's chances towards blending in with the work team.

[H]e was formal, guarded, and, even after two interviewing sessions, opaque. He was – what word do you want? – “different.” Sometimes you did not understand his humor. You certainly did not know his heart – *that* would come slowly, perhaps even painfully if you presumed too much about him, and it might be hard at first, a challenge, with you tripping lightly, walking on eggs around him until everybody in the office eased into familiarity. Was one candidate worth all that work? (65)

By now, we are already aware of some interesting indirect parallels between the two candidates. Unlike Claire Bennett, who is a “people’s person,” (61) Eddie Childs never seems to completely relax, or to “let his hair down,”³⁶⁴ (64) which the interviewers see as an understandable but mildly off-putting character trait. On the other hand, Claire mentions her “early struggle with epilepsy, which she controlled with Klonopin.” Eddie’s guarded attitude and Claire’s attempt to keep her medical condition under control can be traced to a common denominator: the self-vigilant urge to be in control of things. In Claire’s case, the symbolic control of epilepsy is semantically underscored by the fact that she “controlled the damage” ensuing from the “class-action suit” filed against her company. She was also very much in control of the interview, having “done her homework [concerning] the company’s history.” (60) Her guidance of the interview is described as almost obnoxious, as “it seemed that *they*, not she, were being looked over and scrutinized.” (61) This is also true of Childs, who seems to have monopolized the interview by swaying the debate towards the lamentable position of the African American community as a yardstick against which to assess his own personal and professional merit. On the other hand, Child’s guardedness, and his defensive alignment with the “credit to the race” typology, can also be seen as panoptical, even though it was ostentatiously triggered by a dismissive remark of one white person, his school teacher.

Child’s main suggestion towards improving company strategies ensues from the statistical fact that minorities in the US will no longer be minorities “after the coming millennium”.³⁶⁵ This argument cuts ice with Nips, one of the CEOs in charge of the interview, who is never satisfied with the way things are and seems to be looking forward to an upset of the status quo brought about by the “changing demographics.” That is why he “cast his vote *categorically* for Childs.” (65; emphasis added) The other deputy, whose fraternity nickname is Turk, endorses Claire Bennett as the more eligible candidate, portraying her as a safe choice that “can weather any crisis that may come along.” In addition to this, he adamantly opposes what he sees as preferential treatment of ethnic minorities, claiming that the job should go to “the most qualified employee” and insisting that discrimination is a natural part of human experience.

³⁶⁴ This figure of speech is used as a blatant pun, as Eddie Childs is described as having “close-cropped hair.” (62)

³⁶⁵ As has been indirectly pointed out, the story presumably takes place in mid 1990s.

Every moment of every day we choose one thing rather than another on the basis of our tastes, prejudices, and preferences. How else can we achieve life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? I remember that *you*, back in your school days, never deigned to direct your affections towards women taller than yourself [...] (67-68)

Claire Bennett is “six-feet-two in her heels,” (60) which is why Nips’s preference for Eddie Childs seems to have been swayed by his personal discomfort in Claire’s presence. This is soon accompanied and counterbalanced by the revelation that Turk may be equally uncomfortable with Childs, as he in fact does not know any black people. In short, since neither of the two is willing to change his mind, it is up to the narrator to “break the tie.”

The narrator feels the weight of his decision. “Could there be a color-blind decision in a country wracked by race?,” he muses. Too late to “catch the ferry home,” he decides to sleep on the decision in his office. (70) Even as he is falling asleep, the conundrum keeps creeping into his mind.

A black man. A white woman. No, that was wrong. These empty signifiers had names, faces, specific histories that exploded sterile sociological categories and rendered both candidates ineffable and inexhaustible. Their portfolios provided no clues whatsoever [...] to *unkeying* the paradox of justice. (71)

He is woken up by the sound of Gladys, his secretary who also used to be his father’s “secretary, factotum and possibly his lover” (57), unlocking (or providentially unkeying) the office door. Mildly embarrassed, the narrator sneaks into the adjacent bathroom and closet in order to get dressed, and involuntarily watches Gladys doing her morning routine.

In his interview with Jonathan Little, Johnson points out that even in his short stories he frequently uses an epiphany, describing it as a moment “where the character is smashed into a larger vision of life under the pressure of events.”³⁶⁶ That crucial moment arrives when the narrator watches his secretary in mufti singing a Harry Belafonte song, in a rare unguarded moment, and realizes that she is in fact an African American woman who has been passing for white for all these years. It is only now that we (along with the narrator) finally understand her social reclusiveness and reluctance to discuss the company’s racial policies. Still slightly awed by the discovery, the narrator asks her to give him a piece of her mind about the choice he is about to make. She says that Eddie Childs reminds her of Turk when he was applying for the job a long time ago, and implicitly reminds the narrator that even Turk was a beneficiary of preferential treatment back then.

Neither was very much at ease. And I know your father never approved of Mr. Turk. His references weren’t that good [...] but he got the job because he was your friend and you insisted. You acted on his behalf, and that was all right. (74)

³⁶⁶ Jonathan Little, “An Interview with Charles Johnson,” 226.

The final denouement scene therefore alerts the narrator to the fact that Gladys has found it necessary to pass all these years, thereby implicitly suggesting that being black is still deemed a stigmatizing disadvantage at a corporate workplace. In addition to this, Gladys's reminder also alerts the narrator to the fact that he already committed the "injustice" of preferential treatment once, thereby creating a precedent, which has turned out to be "all right" in retrospect. Through these two revelations, one unwitting and the other deliberate, the narrator's inherited factotum manages to break the tie for him.

Snappy tendentious readings

As the narrator is making his final choice late at night, he intimates to us that the only other person who remained in the "top-floor office" at ten p.m. is a black janitor. This should be coupled with the fact that Gladys (who is also revealed to be African American at the end of the story) is generally described as the first person to arrive and the last person to leave, and the narrator explicitly labels her as the "factotum" of his father, the previous owner of the firm. This information can be seen as a calculated authorial nod to the low-profile indispensability of African Americans in the texture of American life, a topic artistically rendered in "The Mayor's Tale" and repeatedly broached upon by Johnson.

Johnson quite ostentatiously pitches "Executive Order" as a didactic and legalistic argument in a narrative package, so when considered in its entirety, the story's racist and tendentious nature does assert itself. The realization that Gladys has considered it necessary to hide her black ancestry for all those years, seems to have contributed to the narrator's decision almost as much as the remembrance that Turk himself had been hired not on meritocratic but preferential grounds. There is not enough textual evidence to glean the narrator's decision-making with a reasonable degree of certainty, yet he might have concluded that being black in America still constituted a much more serious obstacle to social mobility than being a woman. This tendentious and racist interpretation is made perfectly plausible by a complete absence of self-explanatory inner monologue preceding the narrator's final decision.

This tendentious endorsement of the *black agency* typology can only be maintained if we think of the story as a monolith whose meaning is completely swayed by its ending. On the other hand, if we see it as a process rather than the end result, it is sprinkled with many dissenting voices.³⁶⁷ One of these is expressed by Nips.

"Racial categories do cause a lot of confusion." For a few moments he said nothing, hoping, no doubt, that you and Turk would ponder the stories reported about whites with only a fraction of Mexican or Indian blood who invoked a distant minority in their family tree to qualify for the government's set-aside programs. (68)

³⁶⁷ This aligns with Johnson's artistic intentions which he has repeatedly commented on. The final denouement of a story, and the moral readers may draw from it, is important. However, it should not completely occlude the partial truths dispensed during the antithetical process through which the synthesising denouement has been reached. This is Johnson's basis for distinguishing between "moral" and "moralistic" fiction, a distinction which he credits to John Gardner. Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais, "An Interview with Charles Johnson," 259.

We need to remind ourselves that this jab against affirmative action comes from a person who is overtly characterized as sympathetic to racial minorities and who acquiesces the statistical certainty of the US becoming a white minority country in the near future (within the timeframe of Johnson's story). This underhand delivery of a dissenting voice makes the snappy tendentious reading of "Executive Decision" as an overt endorsement of black uplift slightly more problematic.

The overall *modal* tenor of the story is dictated by the second person narration which is a very obvious exhortative stance, coupled with the narrator's exegetical attempt to explain his quandary. More importantly for our racially-invested reading, the entire statistical monologue by Eddie Childs is pitched as exhortation and clearly understood as such by the interviewers who are "stunned [...] into respectful yet nervous silence". He also assumes a brief exegetical stance by explaining the motifs for his career ambitions. Eddie's explicit exegetical and exhortative trope is coupled with Gladys's decision to pass for white, which can only be understood as a latent reproach toward the racially intolerant workplace. All in all, if read through our biologist, sociologist and modal classification, "Executive Decision" comes across as a tendentious story.

Intertextual significations

As the nicknames of the narrator's associates may indicate, "Executive Decision" quite ostentatiously flaunts its intertextual engagement with Herman Melville's classic short story "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853). The deputies' nicknames (Nippers/Nips and Turk) and their matching character traits (Turk being more irritable in the morning and Nips in the evening, plus some other idiosyncrasies³⁶⁸) are accompanied by many other allusive elements. The story borrows the motif of hiring and firing in a large legal firm, the boss-as-narrator and some of his legalistic mannerisms,³⁶⁹ the unpleasant and unnerving decision that the narrator has to make, the theme of sleeping at one's workplace and many other minor and *seemingly* ornamental items, such as the bust of Cicero in the narrator's office. The story does not take place in a Wall Street office, "entirely unhallowed by humanizing domestic associations,"³⁷⁰ (BS 2251) like in Melville's original, but in a somewhat more pleasant office building in Seattle which is, however, seemingly devoid of human presence between 10 p.m. and 8 a.m., which accounts for a large portion of the "real time" of the story.

Bartleby's pivotal role seems to have been split between two African American characters in "Executive Decision", namely the successful applicant Eddie Childs and Gladys, the long-serving secretary. Johnson commuted Bartleby's complaint and social reserve to Eddie Childs, even making him utter the epitomic "I would prefer not to" phrase when

³⁶⁸ Johnson's description of Turk in the afternoon is very resonant with Melville's original. The narrator muses that "Turk was notorious for being a morning person, and you seldom trusted anything he said or did after lunch when his vitality was low, his face flushed pink, his manners rude, and his judgments often dubious." Nips, on the other hand, was morose in the morning (which the narrator attributes to being hungover), "but as the day progressed, and he slowly sobered, his disposition generally improved." In addition to that, Johnson's Nips also retained Nippers's tendency to keep "rearranging and replacing" his work desk (65-66).

³⁶⁹ Melville's and Johnson's narrators both preview the main course of their narrative with the legal word "Imprimis", which in both cases functions as a fairly conspicuous mannerist highlight.

³⁷⁰ Herman Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener," *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Vol. 1*, ed. Nina Baym et al. (New York: Norton and Company, 1994) 2251. Subsequent page references preceded with BS are given in parentheses in the text.

politely refusing Turk's invitation to his home for a game of poker."³⁷¹ (65) This also has a direct parallel in Melville's story. Shortly before the eviction, the lawyer rather desperately assumes his "kindest tone" and invites Bartleby to "go home with [him] now". To this, Bartleby gives a slightly less resolute answer than usual, namely "at present I would prefer not to make any change at all." (BS 2255) Gladys is referred to as a factotum, a term which is not found in Melville's story but occasionally (and quite appropriately) used in scholarly analyses of Melville's story with specific reference to Bartleby.³⁷² In addition to this, Gladys, being an African American passing for white, shares one more trait with Bartleby, namely his unwillingness to go out with his colleagues, typically for lunch.

Let us briefly review some major philosophical and intertextual aspects of the Melville/Johnson pairing, beginning with sporadic reference to the only scholarly treatment of the story to this day, namely William Gleason's 2009 article "It Falls to You: Rawls Bartleby and the Ethics of Affirmative Action in Charles Johnson's "Executive Decision".

The philosophical aspect does not skulk at the edges of "Executive Decision" but is directly outlined by two quotes, one of which is paratextual.

The story is previewed by an epigraphic summary of Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative.

"As it the principle of thy action were to become by thy will a universal law of nature" (55)

Added to this, when musing about his college years at Harvard in the sixties, the narrator remembers the oratorical injunction by Martin Luther King, Jr. that "[p]ower at best is love implementing the elements of justice" while "justice at best is love correcting everything that stands against love," a piece of advice that kept "echoing in [the] ears" of the narrator even after assuming the responsibility as a head of a company. (57) These two quotes provide the basic philosophical and ethical framing of the story.

William Gleason perceives Johnson's intertextual engagement with "Bartleby" as a contrast between the affirmative action enacted in the "Executive Decision" and the "affirmative *inaction*" of Melville's scrivener.³⁷³ Moreover, he reads the main value of Johnson's update of "Bartleby" in the narrator's "refusal to *copy*" the "traditional hiring patterns of the company",³⁷⁴ a decision which does not lead to "immobility and death," as it does in "Bartleby the Scrivener," but rather fosters "integration and renewal."³⁷⁵

³⁷¹ As has already been indicated, this invitation looks like a stilted narrative device to get Childs to say the phrase. Such an intimate overture towards a person who is being formally scrutinized for a job is barely plausible, especially given the fact that Turk actually does not know any African Americans and seems either rather hostile to Childs.

³⁷² David Morse, *American Romanticism: From Melville to James – The Enduring Excessive* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1987) 75.

³⁷³ William Gleason, "It Falls to You: Rawls Bartleby and the Ethics of Affirmative Action in Charles Johnson's "Executive Decision"," *African American Culture and Legal Discourse*, eds. Loyalerie King and Richard Schur (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009) 76.

³⁷⁴ This may seem like rhetorical bombast rather than careful observation backed up by textual evidence. After all, even Turk was not hired on meritocratic basis, which in fact provides the final twist of the story.

³⁷⁵ William Gleason, "It Falls to You: Rawls Bartleby and the Ethics of Affirmative Action in Charles Johnson's "Executive Decision"," 86; emphasis added.

In addition to this general antithesis, Gleason quite rightly focuses on the philosophical nature of the conundrum that the main character needs to tackle. He reminds us that Turk's argument that they "may hire or fire the most qualified employee [...] for bad reason, good reason, or no reason at all," (67) explicitly refers to legal scholar Richard Epstein, namely his book *Forbidden Grounds: The Case Against Employment Discrimination Laws* (1992). Epstein's central argument, which sparked up some controversy in the real historical milieu of its publication, resides in his critique of the "unjustified limitation" of the affirmative action as curtailing the freedom of private enterprises to "do business with whomever they please." This is Turk's way of qualifying his preference towards Claire Bennett. Nips counters this by reminding him of a college course taught by John Rawls which they once attended and whose basic message could be boiled down to the communal statement that people share their fates and should act accordingly. Gleason summarizes the difference between the two positions in the statement that, unlike Epstein, John Rawls does not see the pursuit of liberties, freedoms and happiness as an "exclusively private goal" but a social obligation based on mutuality.³⁷⁶

To elaborate on Gleason's sketchy description we need to furnish the argument in more detail. Nips singles out one of John Rawls's points as a rebuke for Turk's unyielding attitude, reminding him that "when justice is seen as fairness, men of equal circumstances agree to share one another's fate." Further regurgitating the lecturer's point, Nips argues that "wealth, talent, beauty, or imagination" are arbitrarily distributed, which in itself constitutes unfairness. To see justice done, he continues, the more fortunate have every responsibility "to eradicate these inequities," otherwise the less fortunate "have every right to break the social contract that has so miserably failed to serve their ends." Nips does not present this as an altruistic argument, as concludes that unless the least favored are induced towards cooperation, "the social order collapses for everyone." After this abstract rumination, Nips applies this explicitly to African American population, suggesting that he and Turk, as the "favored" part of population, are obliged to "redress the wrongs caused by slavery and a century of segregation." This overt invitation to compensational charity triggers an incredulous reaction from Turk.

"Wronged by whom? Nips, I assure you I had nothing to do with it. All that happened before our time!"

"Then we have no greater social obligations?"

"My dear friend," Turk said, patting Nips on his knee, "making the monthly payroll on time so employees and their families are not unduly inconvenienced is [...] social obligation enough. I am for that candidate who puts *that* first. (69-70)

In view of these insights and contradictions, Gleason concedes that Johnson may have indeed used this piece of short fiction as explicit leverage towards "the appropriateness of affirmative action as a workplace remedy against employment discrimination," yet this simple polemicist drive is counterbalanced and complemented by the emphasis on the all-embracing

³⁷⁶ William Gleason, "It Falls to You," 79.

responsibility that people in a “just society” should be mindful of, particularly with regard to “the Bartlebys”, that is, “the least fortunate[...] among them.”³⁷⁷

The browbeating of con-text

In the context of *Dr. King’s Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories* (2005), the artistic merit and intent of “Executive Decision” is admeasured against other items within the collection like Kafkaesque dystopia “Sweet Dreams” or the all-embracing gastronomic humanism of Martin Luther King in the title story, possibly also against the title’s hint at the parabolic nature of the collection (*Bedtime Stories*). In such context, it may generate somewhat different readings (tendentious or otherwise) than it would within the collection in which the story originally came out. “Executive Decision” was first published already in 1997 in *Outside the Law: Narratives on Justice in America*, which its two editors Susan Richards Shreve and Porter Shreve (a mother and a daughter) conceived as a thematic collection of essayistic and literary reflections on the US legal system. In a preface to the book, Porter Sheve makes it clear that the editorial intention was to gently pit justice against the law (in anticipated alignment with Kant’s categorical imperative in Johnson’s tale). And indeed, as the essays and stories started cropping up and Sheve pondered on their relevance to the assigned topic, the editorial hunch turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. “If there was one thing everyone seemed to be saying, it was this: Justice is outside the law,” she concludes.³⁷⁸

This historical framing suggests that the story was also written as a tailored creative assignment, though perhaps not as narrowly defined as had been the case with the *Soulcatcher* stories.³⁷⁹ The editors of *Outside the Law* had presumably “asked several writers to examine the idea of justice.”³⁸⁰ This ideological tilt is confirmed by Johnson, who qualifies his motive for writing the story as an attempt “to clarify [his] feelings about [...] affirmative action.”³⁸¹ Consequently, if a reader opens up *Outside the Law* to page 75 and starts reading Johnson’s story, s/he is already preemptively conned by the knowledge of the explicit assignment from the editors, and by Kant’s succinct epigraph which cunningly previews the story. Such contextualizing, which hammers it home to the reader that *this is a story about justice*, outstrips even Johnson’s usual proactive philosophical guidelines. Both of these conning and cunning devices in effect make any reader who squirms out of this interpretive straitjacket a dissenter.

Rogue readings

As has been pointed out, through the combined con-textual impact of the *Outside the Law* preface, Kant’s epigraph and Johnson’s admission that by writing the story he was trying to get his head around affirmative action, the reader is being browbeaten into reading “Executive Decision” simply as a story which examines the fuzzy line between justice and law. While this prescriptive prism may still allow enough interpretive wiggling room, it must be seen as

³⁷⁷ William Gleason, “It Falls to You,” 75.

³⁷⁸ Porter Shreve, “Preface,” *Outside the Law: Narratives on Justice in America*, eds. Susan Richards Shreve and Porter Shreve (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997) viii.

³⁷⁹ The *Soulcatcher* stories were summarily published in 2001, yet they had been originally commissioned by Hartcourt Brace already in 1996, thus preceding “Executive Decision”. Jim McWilliams, “An Interview with Charles Johnson,” 275.

³⁸⁰ Porter Shreve, “Preface,” *Outside the Law: Narratives on Justice in America*,” vii.

³⁸¹ William R. Nash, “A Conversation with Charles Johnson,” 222.

prima facie tendentious, because the readers are arm-wrestled into a certain ideological perspective. By that token, any dissenting reading of the story should be regarded as non-tendentious, even though it may follow a much more eclectic and narrow interpretive path. Let us therefore take a look at some such eclectic readings.

In order to appreciate the relevance and ingenuity of Johnson's intertextual engagement, we first need to narrow down our focus and examine some other aspects of Melville's source story that may have appealed to Johnson. "Bartleby the Scrivener" seems as enigmatic to its exegetes as Bartleby himself is to the lawyer who has hired him. The story tends to generate vastly different interpretive positions which seem to defy consensus in the same way Bartleby is defying Melville's narrator. In addition to the philosophical investment described above, the interpretive positions which most obviously resonate with Johnson's update are, not surprisingly, left-leaning readings offered by David Kuebrich, Michael Gilmore and Raymond Williams, which rely heavily on historical context and class analysis. Since there is a significant overlap between these three analyses, we shall use David Kuebrich's article as the primary point of reference.

Kuebrich places the creation of Melville's story within the context of working class demonstrations that seized New York in the middle of the 19th century. He emphasizes the strength of the nascent worker resistance, triggered by the gradual displacement of artisanship by factory production. "United under the banner of New York Industrial Congress," Kuebrich claims, "the movement was sufficiently powerful to win the right to hold its meetings in the supreme court chambers of the new city hall."³⁸² Their critique of the system was based on a synthesis of Christianity and socialism, summarized in Horace Greeley's *Hints towards Reforms*, a compilation of newspaper articles and speeches. Anglican Greeley took particular exception to the Protestant notion that somebody's poverty should be seen as evidence of his or her depravity, and regularly criticized "complacent Christians for the way in which they "harmonized their faith with glaring social injustice."³⁸³ Historical record strongly indicates that Herman Melville read Greeley's articles on a regular basis and even bought *Hints toward Reforms* immediately upon its publication in 1850,³⁸⁴ i.e. several years before he completed "Bartleby".

Teasing his own conclusions out of this research, Kuebrich is not fooled by the fact that the upper middle class lawyer, who monopolizes the narrative voice in "Bartleby", presents himself as a benevolent boss who overlooks the shortcomings of his three erratic

³⁸² David Kuebrich, "Melville's Doctrine of Assumptions: The Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in "Bartleby," *New England Quarterly* 69.3 (1996): 381. Kuebrich does not draw attention to the symbolism of the workers' "occupation" of the court of *law*, yet the analogy with Melville's story is obvious. Bartleby may be a scrivener in the first third of the story, but in the remaining part the epithet should perhaps change to Bartleby the Squatter.

³⁸³ Greeley's chastisements of Christian hypocrisy are perfectly analogical to Frederick Douglass's exhortations against the pharisaic nature of American Christianity vis-à-vis black slavery, delivered within the same loose timeframe (1846-1850). Frederick Douglass, "An Appeal to the British People," *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Yuval Taylor (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999) 32. Douglass corresponded with Greeley and made several appreciative comments about him in his writings from that era, yet the extent of their mutual influence is impossible to ascertain. Frederick Douglass, "Hon. Horace Greeley and the People of Color," *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 185-186.

³⁸⁴ Merton Sealts, *Melville's Reading* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 88. Quoted in David Kuebrich, "Melville's Doctrine of Assumptions," 381.

employees and later reasons fairly patiently with his newly hired and obstinate scrivener. In opposition to this self-presentation, Kuebrich sees the lawyer as a character who has been hoodwinked by dominant ideological assumptions of his time, thereby inevitably sliding into an unreliable narrator. These ideologically-tinted glasses prevent him from seeing the presumed misbehavior of his employees through to its source, namely the dictatorial and stereotypical workplace without any semblance of professional advancement. The narrator sees himself as a vastly superior personage and a generous provider of work, thereby wincing at Nippers's attempts to improve his professional expertise (and financial status) outside of his official contract. The narrator attributes these attempts to Nippers's "diseased ambition" and dismisses his clients as "ambiguous-looking fellows in seedy coats." (BS 2237) These ideological assumptions have been inculcated in him by the likes of James Bennett, Greeley's main opponent, who claimed that poverty was the result of human decrepitude and a lack of "persevering industry,"³⁸⁵ phrasing it in such a way as to legitimate the increasing social inequality and class privilege. On the other hand, Bartleby's principled refusal to work (as well as the frustrations of the other clerks) is better understood as a response to the impersonal, unequal, and exploitative working conditions that kept inspiring an organized working-class resistance.³⁸⁶ The conflict between the lawyer and his copyist thus subliminally "copies" the conflicting positions of Bennett and Greeley.

Not surprisingly, this classist reading is also endorsed by Ralph Ellison, whose essay "Perspective of Literature" describes the story as a "contest of wills" between an affluent "representative of law, and thus order," a man of "aristocratic propensities", and his employee, "who owns hardly anything but the clothing on his back." In his persisting effort to "bend Bartleby to his will" and overcome his "obstinate negativism," Ellison concludes, the lawyer "reveals how little he understands of basic human attitudes which makes the law and the order it imposes quite necessary." Despite this persistence and the brutally unfavorable power ratio, the underdog Bartleby is never "cajoled to agree," using verbal denial as the last resort.³⁸⁷

If we emphasize this classist theme in the interpretive pairing of "Bartleby" and Johnson's "Executive Decision", we must inevitably attribute a different significance to the Rawls/Epstein dichotomy used by Johnson. In his dismissal of affirmative action, Epstein argues that such preferential treatment is in blatant denial of "the basic doctrine of employment as it developed during the 19th century," as pointed out by Gleason.³⁸⁸ However, if we take a close look at Epstein's arguments in his excursion into the common law as it developed throughout the 19th century in the US, we realize that his views involuntarily court those expressed by James Bennett in his "Lockean" prioritization of private property over social solidarity.

³⁸⁵ David Kuebrich, "Melville's Doctrine of Assumptions," 382.

³⁸⁶ David Kuebrich, "Melville's Doctrine of Assumptions," 386.

³⁸⁷ The accentuation of *verbal* denial makes it clear that Ellison sees Melville's story as a cautionary tale that drives home the message that the "symbolic capabilities of language" enable humans at the same time "to maintain and to evade our commitments as human beings." Ralph Ellison, "Perspective of Literature," *Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003) 776.

³⁸⁸ William Gleason, "It Falls to You," 78.

The common law, like the Lockean philosopher, knows only a single rule of individual ownership of labor. It is a rule that permits all labor to be assigned to some unique owner, without incurring the enormous costs of coordination from the center-or from the top.³⁸⁹

Epstein bases this “laissez faire” argument on the conviction that the bleak Hobbesian view of the world as “a war of all against all” only accounts for smaller portion of humanity, and the social depredations of excessive self-interest are therefore “surely overdrawn as a universal portrait.”³⁹⁰ Reading the entire Epstein’s book makes it obvious that he has a much more nuanced grasp of the argument than this sketchy characterization suggests. And yet the quoted argument, in a somewhat cruder form, was used in Melville’s time as a logical stepping stone towards the endorsement of ideologically unhindered free market in which everybody could compete and sell their labor with limited legislative and *executive* interference. And it is precisely this notion of evenhanded free market that gave people like James Bennett³⁹¹ and characters like Bartleby’s boss their sense of entitlement. This sense of entitlement, involuntarily endorsed by Epstein, finds both realistic and symbolic expressions in the two stories.

Bartleby the Squatter and Cicero the Slumlord

One of the insignia from Melville’s story that Johnson quite literally retained is the “plaster-of-Paris bust of Cicero” in the narrator’s spacious office. (58) The bust is an interesting item. It makes sense for an office of an attorney to feature a bust of an ancient master rhetorician and lawyer, yet when we perceive it through a very deliberately selected ideological prism, it may also exude rather different symbolism.

Even without access to any publishing statistics, it is easy to agree with Gleason’s speculation that a vast majority of Johnson’s admirers became acquainted with the “Executive Decision” within the *Dr. King’s Refrigerator* collection which came out in 2005, not within the original legalistic anthology in 1997. Once we have severed the story from the original editorial plan, we may also experimentally relegate Johnson’s authorial intentions to the background and playfully pair the story up in an intertextual relationship with Michael Parenti’s provocative book *The Assassination of Julius Caesar: The People’s History of Ancient Rome*, published two years before *Dr. King’s Refrigerator*.

In this revisionist treatise, Parenti undermines the standard exegetical paradigm of the late republic in Rome. He does not regard the assassination of Julius Caesar as a response of democratic patrician forces against a wanton tyrant, but as an aggressive response of

³⁸⁹ Richard A. Epstein, *Forbidden Grounds: The Case Against Employment Discrimination Laws* (Boston: Harvard, 1992) 16.

³⁹⁰ Richard Epstein, *Forbidden Grounds*, 24.

³⁹¹ Bennett is a fairly common and inconspicuous English surname, so it is rather hard to see Johnson’s privileged white female competitor Claire Bennett as signifying on Greeley’s opponent Bennett, whose dismissive attitude towards the working class as morally decrepit makes him a natural antagonist of Bartleby (i.e. Childs). In an inverse scenario, Johnson may be also capriciously alluding to Bennett Capers, a highly credentialed African American Professor of Law who specializes on “relationship between race, gender and criminal justice.” Biography of Bennett Capers, www.brooklaw.edu, Brooklyn Law School, 15 January 2015<URL> 3 February 2015 <<https://www.brooklaw.edu/faculty/directory/facultymember/biography.aspx?id=bennett.capers>> 24 April 2016.

senatorial oligarchy against a populist emperor who had been cutting into their privilege by pursuing mildly redistributive and egalitarian policies. Cicero, who had risen through the ranks of the senatorial oligarchy from provincial origins, had much to lose from the incursions of populist rulers like Caesar. In Parenti's rendering, he was a profiteer from slave labour and owner of slum tenements in the "downtown" of Rome,³⁹² and had repeatedly rejected or denounced laws with any egalitarian inklings, for example the "law that granted freedmen the right to vote along with their former masters" or "the secret ballot".³⁹³ In Parenti's own summary, Cicero was a "slaveholder [and] slumlord [who] deplored even the *palest moves toward democracy*." Cicero's description of poor commoners was eerily reminiscent of James Bennett's rhetoric, as he too saw penury as a result of moral decrepitude, dismissing even slightly more fortunate lower classes as "artisans and shopkeepers and that kind of *scum*."³⁹⁴

Incidentally, Cicero could also be called the ultimate "scrivener" of his age. Invoking John Gager's criticism of biased historical "paradigms created many centuries ago," Parenti points out that "gentlemen chroniclers" like Cicero have historically exercised a de facto monopoly on the portrayal and interpretation of the times they lived in,³⁹⁵ thereby effectively blotting out any semblance of popular sentiment or working class perspective.

With this unflattering interpretive take on Cicero, the prominent presence of his *white* bust in the office of Melville's white solicitor and Johnson's white inheritor may easily solicit a host of different associations, some of which pertain to Johnson's recurrent topics. The image of penurious squatter Bartleby falling asleep under the watchful gaze of Cicero the slumlord perhaps smacks of cheap emotional blackmail, yet the pairing also offers more nuanced symbolic meanings. In view of Cicero's alleged monopoly on *written* historical records from his era, one that virtually *blots out* different perspectives, the interpretive pairing of Childs and Bartleby provides even more elaborate allusive significations.

As Melville's narrator states at the beginning of the story, "[scriveners are] somewhat singular set of men, of whom as yet *nothing* that I know of *has ever been written*" (BS 2234; emphases added).

Johnson undoubtedly casts Childs as Bartleby,³⁹⁶ and Childs very ostentatiously identifies himself with black racial uplift. By associative progression, we may arrive at the conclusion that Melville's narrator's pluralistic use of *scriveners* in his reminiscence may be a generic equivalent of *African Americans* in Johnson's story. This is also supported by the

³⁹² Michael Parenti, *The Assassination Of Julius Caesar*, 28.

³⁹³ In Parenti's rendering, Cicero's objections to secret ballot display nearly Orwellian overtones, describing it as "a subterfuge that ensured the secrecy of a wrong-headed vote thus keeping aristocracy in the dark about *what each man thought*." Michael Parenti, *The Assassination Of Julius Caesar*, 87.

³⁹⁴ Michael Parenti, *The Assassination Of Julius Caesar*, 87; emphasis added.

³⁹⁵ Michael Parenti, *The Assassination Of Julius Caesar*, 18. This dominance is directly or obliquely acknowledged by many other historians. For example Susanne Rasmussen quite uncontroversially claims that "Cicero is far better known from his surviving texts than any other ancient author." Susanne William Rasmussen, *Public Portents in Republican Rome* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2003) 183.

³⁹⁶ The "singular" character of scriveners has its associative and structural equivalent in the word "different" which Johnson poignantly uses in connection with Childs, and also after the narrator's epiphanic discovery that Gladys is black. In fact, the word "different" as used in the final passage is a cataphoric reference that tips us off that the secretary is African American, even before the narrator's inner monologue confirms it. Johnson's story also uses a very deft Manichean inversion in casting *black* Childs as a stand-in for the morbidly *pallid* Bartleby.

narrator's reference to Gladys as a factotum, including the reclusive Bartlebyan manners dictated by her racial passing, the accentuated subordinate position of African Americans within the company, symbolically underscored by the black janitor who keeps drudging at ten in the evening. Let us therefore experimentally juxtapose Melville's musings on the invisibility of scribes (i.e. formulaic writers) to Johnson's reminiscence about the invisibility of African American literary achievements in the 1970s.

Even in the early 1970s, it was rare for the work of a black author (or artist) to be accepted by major white publishers. In the universe of American education, these works by black authors were "dark matter," *invisible* to the eye and *unknown*. [...] I was sometimes tempted to condemn the white teachers and professors I had since the 1950s for not placing this history, this art, this literature before me. But I realize now that they themselves had not been taught or exposed to any of this[...].³⁹⁷

Perhaps even more poignantly, Melville's narrator previews his story by singling out the exceptional feature of Bartleby as a one-of-a-kind scribe whose uniqueness has, sadly, gone unrecorded.

[I waive the biographies of all other scribes for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was the scribe the strangest I ever saw or heard of. While of other law copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist for a full and *satisfactory biography* of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. (BS 2234; emphasis added)

Keeping in mind Johnson's conflation of Childs with Bartleby, let us compare the above passage to Johnson's lament that there are not enough African American male role models in the public sphere.

As an artist and a father, I am filled with [...] anger because I know my own son, now approaching his twenty first birthday [...] must negotiate [his] way through an uncivil public space soured by the steady bombardment of media images that portray black people in the worst imaginable ways – as welfare cheats, criminals, incompetent parents, ex-cons, poor students, crackheads, as an affirmative action liability at the workplace, and, to put it bluntly, as the corrupting worm coiled inside the American apple.³⁹⁸

This is a perennial theme whose variations can be found in Johnson's non-fictional writings. This also helps us contextualize Johnson's previously mentioned criticism of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker for parading "black men who are fuck-ups."³⁹⁹

³⁹⁷ Charles Johnson, "Afterword," 232.

³⁹⁸ Charles Johnson, "The Second Front: A Reflection on Milk Bottles, Male Elders, the Enemy Within, Bar Mitzvahs, and Martin Luther King Jr.," 177.

³⁹⁹ Jonathan Little, "Interview with Charles Johnson," 238.

Why are there no stories about the late astronaut Ron McNair? Why are no stories about Colin Powell? The expansion of our images and the stories we tell is important because there is so much of the human experience that is never told.⁴⁰⁰

In contrast to this invisibility of positive male role models to *subscribe* to, Childs is virtually an epitome of virtues that go against all these slandering images. While the austerity of Melville's *Bartleby* does not have any tangible origin and objective (at least not explicitly articulated within the frame of the story), Eddie Childs, if cast against Johnson's often mentioned artistic and personal preoccupations, stands for the "importance of delayed gratification" that should be taught to young black children by way of prepping them for their relatively disadvantaged position within the "workings of capitalist economy".⁴⁰¹ The austerity prefigures the asceticism of the black professor in "Alēthia" who is going to be addressed in the next segment, only this time it is introduced as an undeniable virtue and the need to defeat the "enemy within."⁴⁰²

This visibility/invisibility dichotomy may also be related to the discrepancy between visible and invisible victimization in the two stories. The only tangible reason for *Bartleby's* forlornness as furnished by Melville is his previous employment in the Dead Letter Office. Given the statistically anchored drawbacks that plague the African American community, baldly revealed in Johnson's story, it is easy to conclude that *Bartleby* is a tragic hero without a cause in comparison with the historically hindered Eddie Childs.

The nameless white man in charge and other thematic comparisons

Kuebrich reads the narrator of Melville's story as a fairly well-meaning man who is, nevertheless, hopelessly caught up in the capitalistic dialectic and cannot see that his top-down directorial manners are grating on Nippers and Turk, and trigger the defiant attitude of *Bartleby*. Even after this confrontation, Melville's narrator is not "smashed into a larger vision of life under the pressure of events,"⁴⁰³ to use Johnson's definition of epiphany. Until the very end of the story, he thinks of *Bartleby's* position as perverse and anomalous, is surprised at his open antagonism, and even tries to ascribe the behaviour to *Bartleby's* melancholy presumably brought about by his previous employment in the dead-letter office. By emphasizing these other circumstances, he is unwittingly diverting our attention from the inherent flaws of the capitalist system, while also getting his own managerial peremptoriness off the hook.

In contrast, Johnson's head lawyer is not completely blind to social inequities. As has been pointed out, he was active in the civil rights movement as a college student, and his awareness of social imbalance occasionally surfaces throughout the story, even though the silver spoon in his mouth has clearly taken its due. In the following inner monologue, he

⁴⁰⁰ Beth Grub, "A Man of His Word," *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson*, ed. Jim McWilliams (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002) 206-213.

⁴⁰¹ Charles Johnson, "The Second Front," 183.

⁴⁰² Johnson uses the phrase "enemy within" for African Americans who deride hardworking and studious black people as "white men in black bodies." He attributes this phrase to Stanley Crouch. Charles Johnson, "The Second Front," 183.

⁴⁰³ Jonathan Little, "An Interview with Charles Johnson," 226.

muses about the lingering systemic underprivilege of the company's African American employees.

Lately some of the black employees have been grumbling to you and Gladys about the absence of African Americans in the firm's *administrative* wing. [...] You can see them at their desk through the glass *walls that separate* their tiny, cluttered workstations from your spacious chamber[...]. (58; emphasis added)

The narrator's deliberate description of the company's spatial layout, which bears suspicious resemblance to Bentham's original Panopticon, is clear evidence that the inequity impinges on his conscience, albeit not enough to change things. That means that he starts his journey from a less ideologically entrenched position than Melville's narrator, an advantage that is capitalized on at the end of the story. Johnson redeems the groping capitalist in Melville's *Bartleby* by making him empathetically reach out in what seems to be an earnest attempt to level the field. Through his *executive* decision, the *administrative* wing of the company has been diversified.

In her 2005 review of Johnson's story, African American writer ZZ Packer described "Executive Decision" and "The Queen and the Philosopher," another story from the collection, as "fiction exercises that fall under the weight of the experimental burden they're expected to bear." While her assessment of "Executive Decision" is certainly true in terms of the relative lack of narrative suspense, the weight is not quite as unbearable when propped by "Bartleby the Scrivener" (a connection which ZZ Packer does not mention in her review). The review complains that the issues in the story are "presented dossier-style, but regrettably, aren't brought to life."⁴⁰⁴ This "lifelessness" makes perfect sense when paired up with "Bartleby the Scrivener", because Melville's story does the exact opposite. Melville manages to make us emotionally invested precisely because the reason of Bartleby's enfolding tragedy does not explicitly reveal itself. Johnson, on the other hand, (perhaps deliberately) puts us off by dragging Childs's class and race complaints into open light. In so doing, he enables the legalistic mind of the narrator to adjudicate the case in a more redistributive and democratic manner, and subsequently make the correct *executive* decision, unlike Melville's boss, whose ideological capitalist indoctrination in effect *executes* Bartleby in punishment for his *pale* move toward democracy.

Melville's nameless narrator laments that the outstanding nature of Bartleby has not left a mark, has not been recorded in writing, even though he eventually ousts him from his company. Johnson's nameless narrator in "Executive Order" makes sure that the outstanding character of Eddie Childs leaves an imprint on his company.

In light of this class analysis, let us also consider the fact that the elitist Turk, who objects to hiring Eddie Childs (a perfectly eligible candidate with all necessary credentials),

⁴⁰⁴ ZZ Packer, "Dr. King's Refrigerator: Thinking Outside the Icebox," <http://www.nytimes.com>, *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, 3 Mar 2005 <URL> 6 Mar 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/06/books/review/dr-kings-refrigerator-thinking-outside-the-icebox.html?_r=4> 23 June, 2016.

was in fact originally hired on the basis of the narrator's pleading. Since the narrator's pleading had to do with the fact that he and Turk had become chummy while attending Harvard, we must inevitably conclude that he was hired on *aristocratic* rather than purely *meritocratic* basis, a fact confirmed by Gladys. Through this prism, the fact that self-made Childs is going to be hired as a replacement for Turk attains special significance with regard to the democratic and socially redistributive appeal of the story, thus providing yet one more riposte to the elitist framing of Melville's "Bartleby."

Other rogue readings and remarks in conclusion

As has already been mentioned, the *contextual* packaging of "Executive Decision", especially when read within the original *Outside the Law* collection, proactively straitjackets the reader's interpretive options by its blatant emphasis on legalistic and philosophical meanings. This legitimates any rogue readings of the story which ignore this proactive interpretive prism, even though they may themselves be very tendentious and extrapolated. One such tendentious reading that wiggles out of the straitjacket is the historicist reading of "Executive Decision" as an emblematic story which pits black social uplift against female emancipationism.

Claire Bennett is the first candidate introduced within the interviewing process as mediated by the narrator. Her proto-feminist characterization ensues from the notion that she would be the first woman to break through the glass ceiling, further underscored by the portrayal of her compliant husband, who was ready to relocate if she got the job and whose subsidiary and supportive position within the marriage is emphasized by the narrator describing him as an "Old English sheepdog of a fellow." Eddie Childs is introduced as a second item⁴⁰⁵ and his ideological alignment with black social uplift is even more conspicuous than Claire's feminist characterization. His conspicuously long litany about the depressing African American statistics can be read as an exhortative highlight to alert the reader: This is not going to be a meritocratic competition between two people of considerable accomplishment, but an arena for two contestants carrying overt ideological banners, namely *racial uplift* and *feminism*.

The notion of female emancipation as opposed to or competing with black social uplift does not (yet) constitute a time-tested typology in African American literature. However, the theme does resonate throughout American history, perhaps most obviously in reference to the late 19th and early 20th century suffragist movement. As many scholars have observed, the suffragist movement only got traction when their leaders began to see themselves as a part of the so called progressives, or "the united national front" in leftist lingo. Prior to this, however, the historical record attests to the fact that the suffragist leadership had actually appealed to the embedded racist and xenophobic sentiments⁴⁰⁶ by way of getting political leverage and sanction. This obviously did not only relate to black male population. Despite her strong feminist leanings, bell hook does not hesitate to find cracks in the "fierce romanticism" with which many historians assume that just because "many white women's rights advocates were

⁴⁰⁵ The order in which the candidates are introduced within the narrative can hardly be seen as a hint as to what their relative chances are. Pitching Childs as the second item may covertly suggest that he is the *secondary* consideration, yet it may also symbolically advance his chances as the *final* choice.

⁴⁰⁶ We must not forget that this was the time when racial eugenics was also gaining momentum, partly because of the immigration of presumably inassimilable ethnic groups, a topic addressed in subchapter 2.

also active in the abolitionist movement,” the entire suffragist movement was “anti-racist”.⁴⁰⁷ This is endorsed by Ruth Crocker, who points out that even after the first decade of the 20th century some proponents of women rights “sought a winning strategy by distancing itself from labor and marginalizing women of colour”.⁴⁰⁸

However, since the African American *male* population had been enfranchised before white female population in the US, some white women leaders used black male enfranchisement as a yardstick against which to validate their own claims for first class US citizenry. This can be understood as a reflexive response to Frederick Douglass’s public claim that “the black man’s right to the vote was more urgent than woman’s,” as he deemed black male suffrage as “a necessary and more viable step towards universal suffrage” than the female vote.⁴⁰⁹ Partly as a result of this attitude, but also due to inherent racism within some segment of white abolitionist population, woman suffragist movement to some degree “clashed with the interests of black suffrage” in the 1870s, “as cohorts of reformers who had previously collaborated fought bitter public battles over whether black men should attain voting rights before women,” a development that Colleen C. O’Brien calls the “great schism.”⁴¹⁰ Unfortunately, this rivalry often spilled over into racial stereotyping with ugly essentialist subtext. As O’Brien also points out, some leading feminists like Elizabeth Stanton and Paulina Davis protested against the passing of the 15th Amendment, arguing that the black male enfranchisement would in effect “place them in sexual jeopardy at the hands of black “tyrants””⁴¹¹ who might “use their political power to pursue helpless white women.” These public statements convoluted the straightforward political pursuit of black suffrage by cloaking it in “pathological sexual mythology.”⁴¹²

If we juxtapose this historical circumstance to the previously mentioned recent claim of Ishmael Reed that some major white feminists endorse the demonization of the black male,⁴¹³ we may quite regard “Executive Decision” also as a very explicit riff on this lingering tension between the two historically underprivileged groups.

Despite appearances, “Executive Decision” does not belie Johnson’s non-partisan creed, even though it was in fact commissioned as a semi-legalistic assignment. A perfunctory reading of the story indicates a very pronounced motif of “race loyalty.” The career motivations of the central black character are possibly informed by panoptical considerations, which is even more transparent in the character of Gladys who chooses to pass for white in fear of *possible*

⁴⁰⁷ bell hooks, “Racism and Feminism: The issue of accountability,” *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, eds. Les Back and John Solomos (London: Routledge, 2000) 376.

⁴⁰⁸ Ruth Crocker, *Mrs. Russell Sage: Women’s Activism and Philanthropy in Gilded Age and Progressive Era America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 211.

⁴⁰⁹ Waldo E. Martin Jr., *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) 156.

⁴¹⁰ Colleen C. O’Brien, “‘The White Women All Go for Sex’: Frances Harper on Suffrage, Citizenship, and the Reconstruction South,” *African American Review*, 43.4 (2009) 605.

⁴¹¹ “Annual Meeting of the American Equal Rights Association,” *The Revolution* 27 May (1869): 247. Quoted in Colleen C. O’Brien, “‘The White Women All Go for Sex,’” 605.

⁴¹² Colleen C. O’Brien, “Colleen C. O’Brien, “‘The White Women All Go for Sex,’” 605.

⁴¹³ This is cursorily addressed in subchapter 4.1. Ishmael Reed fictionalizes this notion of white and (to a lesser degree) black feminist conspiracy in his 1986 novel *Reckless Eyeballing*, which Johnson analyzes at some length in his *Being and Race*, with reference to Reed’s larger aesthetic leanings.

(though unrevealed) consequences. The spatial panopticism of the entire situation is symbolically rendered by the positioning of the narrator's office as a distinct "matrix of control". And yet, despite these tropes and typologies, indicative of tendentious art, the complementary intertextual engagement of Johnson's story with "Bartleby the Scrivener" redeems its pedestrian and didactic overtones. The story is clearly pitched as a meditation on the limits of Kant's categorical imperative when contrasted with a morally dilemmatic and seemingly irresolvable conundrum. However, even if we refuse to be conned by this contextual pitch, thus respectfully relegating the philosophical conceit of the story to the background, we are still left with a very allusive texture lurking behind the tendentious front.

4.2.4 Disengaged or Disingenuous? Ascetic and bourgeois self-surveillance in Charles Johnson's "Alēthia"

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.

One particular facet of this communal and personal self-policing, whose permutations have made various appearances throughout black American fiction, is the schism between spontaneity and self-restraint. This reductive variation on the classical dichotomy between *ecstasis* and *ascesis* permeates canonical 20th century African American writing, and is also given a sporadic yet reasonably thorough scrutiny in Charles Johnson's fiction. An interesting and very explicit rendition of this dichotomy between ecstatic abandon and prim asceticism can be detected in Charles Johnson's early short story "Alēthia", first published in 1979.

Riffing on ancient and modern dichotomies

The narrator of "Alēthia", 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”.⁴¹⁴

The professor, a monkish bachelor, 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.⁴¹⁵

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 (SA 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.

Alēthia 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

⁴¹⁴ Charles Johnson, “Alēthia.” *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice: Tales and Conjurations* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) 99. All quotations from *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* follow the Penguin edition of 1986. Page references are given in parentheses in the text.

⁴¹⁵ Linda F. Selzer, *Charles Johnson in Context* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009) 35.

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 autobiographical⁴¹⁶ 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.⁴¹⁷ 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 Alēthia, namely "a guide away from symbolizing thought" to "the self-given phenomenon"⁴¹⁸ 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*.⁴¹⁹

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" (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

⁴¹⁶ The autobiographic overlay of the story, including a detailed analysis of the overlapping topography and other realia, is also looked at by Linda Selzer. Selzer, *Charles Johnson in Context*, 44-45.

⁴¹⁷ Selzer, *Charles Johnson in Context*, 31.

⁴¹⁸ *Charles Johnson in Context*, 42.

⁴¹⁹ *Charles Johnson in Context*, 43.

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 citizens⁴²⁰, 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.⁴²¹ Mills's point is again reiterated by Cornel West who in fact extends his 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". This in turn forces black intellectuals to assume an anxious and defensive stance which, Cornel argues, may contaminate their subsequent scholarly development.⁴²²

This can in fact be seen as yet another re-casting of the pharmakon 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. In fact, the covert racialism of college-level philosophy courses can be substantiated by simply pointing to the fact, as John Pittman did, that "'philosophy" is usually introduced to college audiences by displaying the writings of some select group of "dead white men," all European or Anglo-American." As a result, Pittman understandably sees philosophy as the most resilient vestige of uncontested white privilege in the academia, the one place where "the weight of tradition is heaviest", a "conception" that "many philosophically schooled African American writers" have come to accept as an entrenched stereotype that underlies their field of professional expertise.⁴²³ In fact, we do not need to infer Johnson's opinion on this from "Alēthia," as Selzer does, we can take it straight from his own mouth. In a fairly recent online interview in 2011, he took the following jab at the white entrenchment in philosophical academia, along with the residual white prejudice in general.

I've always noticed with equal amusement how in the book world my Ph.D. in philosophy, represented by "Dr." before my name, is frequently dropped, as if the work required to earn a doctorate in a *field dominated by white males* for 2500 years never took place.⁴²⁴

Johnson's choice of Immanuel Kant as the professor's current specialty is particularly meaningful in this respect. While the criticism of race-biting in Aristotle can be dismissed as

⁴²⁰ This recognition was also predicated on the ability of African Americans to *interpret* textual documents, which was often required at the ballot box as late as 1960s, as discussed in chapter 2.

⁴²¹ Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: essays on philosophy and race* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998) 17.

⁴²² Cornel West, "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," *The Prentice Hall Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Rochelle Smith and Sharon L. Jones (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000) 1076.

⁴²³ John P. Pittman, "Introduction to the Routledge Edition," *African American Perspectives and Philosophical Traditions*, ed. John P. Pittman (New York: Routledge, 1997) xi.

⁴²⁴ E. Ethelbert Miller, "Nothing but a President: Barack Obama and the Mythology of Black Men," 18 Aug 2011 <URL> 30 Aug 2011 <<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.cz/2011/08/nothing-but-president-barack-obama-and.html>> 13 July 2016. Emphasis added.

unfair presentism (i.e. the tendency to assess ancient events and attitudes through the prism of modern-day morality), this apologia is not quite so tenable in the case of Immanuel Kant, some of whose tenets actually still reverberate through modern practical philosophy and ethics. When invoking Immanuel Kant's conviction that black people "have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling" and their reasoning abilities are fundamentally different from whites,⁴²⁵ Paul Gilroy concludes that such provincial and blatant racism "sits awkwardly alongside the compelling features of [Kant's] cosmopolitanism."⁴²⁶

Gilroy expands on the underlying toxicity and belligerence of Kant's racist snippets by referring to Adolf Eichmann's claim that he was "guided by Kantian precepts during his service to Hitler"⁴²⁷, as related by Hannah Arendt. In this case, Gilroy lets Kant off the hook by arguing that many complex aspects of Kantian philosophy lend themselves to reductive readings and, given Arendt's understandable emotional investment during the Jerusalem trial of 1960, she might have inflated Eichmann's description of Kant's philosophy as a practical guidance for the "household use of the little man"⁴²⁸ beyond its significance. Despite this ad-hoc relativistic stance, Gilroy generally concurs with Arendt and Ronald Judy in concluding that "Kant's democratic hopes and dreams simply could not encompass black humanity."⁴²⁹

Consequently, when the narrator of "Alēthia" 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 with epistemic so grounding), 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 mercenary motivation with no epistemic grounding). Both of these are underpinned by self-restraining and assimilationist trope.

In an inverted rendering to this racist point, we may reconsider the professor's self-identification as "two-reel" as a playful signification on the African American double-consciousness and intellectual diglossia as a part of the white mainstream. This is a topic which Johnson himself has addressed on several occasions.

A Czech proverb captures this nicely "You live a new life for every language you learn"[...] Substitute "culture" for "language"[...] and it's clear that every immigrant of color understands what it means to have this dual, profoundly integrationist position in a Eurocentric society.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960). Quoted in Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race* (London: Penguin, 2000) 58-59.

⁴²⁶ Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race*, 59.

⁴²⁷ Gilroy, *Between Camps*, 54.

⁴²⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (London: Penguin, 1965) 136. Quoted in Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps*, 61.

⁴²⁹ Gilroy, *Between Camps*, 60.

⁴³⁰ Charles Johnson, "Afterword," *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, 234.

From this liminal position, Johnson argues, ensues the fact that African Americans “have to know how to carefully ‘read’ American society from at least two perspectives,” and manage to “momentarily identify with the themes, figures and tropes of the racial other”.⁴³¹ If we push this logic even further, this “cultural bilingualism” could make African Americans better equipped also for navigating philosophical discourse, so the *two-reel* quality of the narrator may be a compliment in disguise.

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 exhortative 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” (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, mainstream perceptions and self-image, and motivation for the reader or onlooker), but that very process also inevitably induces the excelling African American into a classic pharmakon 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.⁴³² 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”.⁴³³

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 pharmakon which heals and poisons at the same time.

However, Johnson’s philosophy professor from “Alēthia” 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

⁴³¹ Charles Johnson, “Afterword,” 233-34.

⁴³² Charles Johnson, *Dreamer* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998) 49.

⁴³³ Cornel West, “The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual,” 1074.

Cemetery (all black), or (e) the ooga-booga of Christianity” (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 unruly 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, Alēthia 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 “Alēthia” 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 (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 (109)”.⁴³⁴

On a perfunctory level, the professor’s hypochondria can again be linked to Immanuel Kant who was “a notorious hypochondriac”, as Linda Selzer reminds us.⁴³⁵ The tenacity with which the story seems to conflate the professor with Kant himself may generate various dichotomical readings. A triangular dichotomy would only concern Kant and the man who lectures on him. Much like Kant, the professor is torn between sanitized *rationalism* (the self imposed exile in the ivory tower of academia and his own monastic apartment) and daring and probing *empiricism* (lewdness implied on purpose, in match with the story’s ending). Pushing this further along the synopsis of the story, we may playfully suggest that the professor (like Kant) is unable to strike a healthy balance between *deduction* (a priori rationality) and *induction* (experiential empiricism without theoretical grounding). That is why Wendy, like Charles Sanders Peirce, needs to *abduct*⁴³⁶ him and alert him to the possibility of an

⁴³⁴ Emphasis added.

⁴³⁵ Selzer, *Charles Johnson in Context*, 32.

⁴³⁶ American pragmatist Charles S. Peirce bridges the Kantian “induction vs deduction” quandary by suggesting that a hypothesis “ought, at first, to be entertained interrogatively”, only to be “tested by experiment as far as

unconflicted symbiosis between the two modes of existence: intellectual rigor and discipline are not necessarily eclipsed by organic spontaneity and a sense of communal belonging. This last variation on the theme is a rather far-fetched linguistic pun rather than the product of a sober analysis.

In any case, all these dichotomies are just functional equivalents of the ascetic/éxtasis binary opposition.

Teacher/preacher persona as an assimilationist trope

In an extended racialist reading, the also story pledges loyalty to a standard African American lore by employing the teacher vs. artist dichotomy as an embodiment of the ascetic/ecstatic duality. The deployment of music as shorthand for cathartic therapy and artistic emotional abandon, as a way of transcending pain, can be seen as a near-opposite⁴³⁷ of the competing ascetic trope - a teacher or preacher. The teacher and (to a lesser degree) preacher typology in black American fiction may come across as an epitome of relative social distinction attained against odds (in remedial pharmakonist trope) but may also be spun as an assimilationist Uncle Tom or (worse) a disciplining thug in cahoots with the white gaze, somebody who holds the black lower class community “at arm’s length like a dirty sock”, to paraphrase Robert Bone.⁴³⁸

Possibly the most classic renditions of teacher/preacher versus artist duality in modern African American can be found in the work of James Baldwin.⁴³⁹ The teacher-musician dichotomy is explored abundantly in his 1957 story “Sonny’s Blues”, written less than two decades before “Alēthia”. Much like “Alēthia”, the story is told by a teacher in first person singular, who is unnerved and saddened by the fact that his younger brother does not seem to be able to find himself in life. He is moving uneasily between pity and patronage, not unlike the professor in Alēthia. Both stories also end in a convergence of the two opposites: the unnamed narrator of the Wendy is not a musician, yet she is explicitly linked to music twice in the story via the allusion to James Brown’s vocalists and the music party in South East Chicago.

The teacher-artist dichotomy also holds some biographic currency in terms of Charles Johnson’s professional development. Reminiscing about his formative years under the stern

practicable” by being “abducted” and exposed to environments which vary drastically from the context in which the hypothesis was originally formulated. See Charles S. Peirce, “Abduction and Induction”, *Selected Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955) 150-157. It can be argued that this philosophical position is the essence multi-perspective evaluation and to some extent also graded exposure, typically used in psychology.

⁴³⁷ A full structural opposite of artistic abandon would be *military* discipline as the redeeming plot device. This duality also features in some major African American works of literature, perhaps most famously in August Wilson’s 1983 play *Fences*. In fact, these two roles are conflated in “Sonny’s Blues”, as the narrator is both a teacher and a veteran soldier, presumably from the Korean War.

⁴³⁸ Bone uses this rather condemning phrase in reference to J. McHenry Jones’s novel *Heart of Gold*, whose middle-class heroine has fallen on harder times and has to teach school in the a Robert, A. Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 18.

⁴³⁹ A superb example of the compromised preacher/uncompromised artist dichotomy can be found in Baldwin’s 1968 novel *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*, briefly synopsisized in the section on tropes and typologies, where these two principles are also embodied by two brothers in a similar basic scenario. Much like “Sonny’s Blues”, the novel is built around a binary trope whose basic archetype is found in Luke’s biblical parable of the Prodigal son, as is also the case with some other works by Baldwin.

yet valuable guidance of his father, Charles Johnson describes the situation when he, then a high-school freshman, announced to his father that he would like to pursue the career of a graphic artist, a political cartoonist, which his father found hard to approve of.

He'd never met any self-supporting artists of color, and so he initially opposed my desire at age fourteen to commit my life to commercial art, saying "They don't let black people do that." He rethought his position and admitted his error when I brought him examples to the contrary, and he then paid for my lessons [...] financially backing me up on something he barely understood.⁴⁴⁰

The gradual loosening and un-scrupling of the main character in *Alēthia* eventually 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, in a close alignment with Johnson's universalist stance, 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.

As is the case with much of Johnson's work, the story touches on philosophical themes that are revisited in some of his other artistic pursuits, and in fact provides a compact piece of philosophical argument. The antagonism between abstract formalism and emotional involvement is in fact riffs on through a wide range of reference which goes way beyond the The Sheler/Kant dichotomy. The notion of love as a personal enactment rather than dry abstraction also reverberates throughout modern-day African American thinking. Within African American canon, this may be seen as an analogy with the religious beliefs of Martin Luther King, who moved away from arid Baptism to towards the Boston personalists.⁴⁴¹ Since such philosophical underpinnings are proactively advertised by author as the recommended interpretation, let us instead purposefully stoop to a more obtusely literalist reading of the story.

Palpably tendentious tropes and typologies

⁴⁴⁰ Charles Johnson, "The Second Front: A Reflection on Milk Bottles, Male Elders, the Enemy Within, Bar Mitzvahs, and Martin Luther King Jr.," *Black Men Speak*, eds. Charles Johnson and John McCluskey, Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) 182.

⁴⁴¹ King's eclectic appropriation the personalist teachings, with a view of fostering his concept of *beloved community*, is discussed at length in a recent study by Rufus Burrow. See Rufus Burrow, Jr., *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Theology of Resistance* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2015) 60-79.

The philosophical and universalist underpinnings of the story have been consistently referred to throughout the analysis, partly with reference to Linda Seltzer's insights. Let us therefore briefly summarize the degree to which the story ties up with traditional African American panoptical tropes that can be seen as symptomatic of tendentious committed writing.

First of all, it is important to note the overall thesis and starting point of the story is dominated by the professor's outlook, which partakes of a classic *assimilationist* typology. Apart from that, it can also be argued that the story clearly reinforces racially-flavored stereotypes, for example the notion that an Equal Opportunity Program black student is an academic underachiever (though very smart, as it turns out) who does not hesitate to *blackmail* an African-American teacher (presumably the only African-American teacher at the department of philosophy) to keep up her scholarly minimum and save herself from flunking the term. Wendy's coercive behavior is a mimetic admission of criminal tendencies (i.e. a confirmation of panoptical anti trope). If we skip the mimetic realism of the story and go by the basic semantics employed by the narrator, we may find some telling symbolism. Despite the fact that the teacher is trying to keep a distance from the vulgar demimonde by flaunting his knowledge of "Hebrew, Greek or Sanskrit" (102) and his distaste of "tabloid or lurid newspapers" (103), he inadvertently identifies himself as a criminal, namely a stalker (of Kant) and a thief (gulping snippets of academic knowledge). The latter is also pointed out by Selzer, who theorizes that these two extrapolated nouns may "criminalize [...] the narrator's presence in the academia".⁴⁴² In addition to this direct reading, we may also think of the two inflammatory self-descriptions (stalker/thief) as deliberately feeding off the stereotypical mindset of racial profiling. These last two items, if read at face value, can therefore be regarded as falling within the category of Adorno's tendentious art.

The basic narrative momentum of the story is therefore predicated on the fact that a black student needs to blackmail a teacher in order to keep her credits up (i.e. the confirmation of a racist stereotype), yet this stereotype is offset by the impressive eloquence which Wendy shows at an unguarded moment, which might be seen even as a subliminal critique of the cultural bias of the institutions of learning and the relative relevance and compatibility of what they have to offer. This may be, on the other hand, read along the lines of a different panoptical typology, one partaking of the complimentary black cultural self-sufficiency trope.

"Alēthia" also features several minor explicit several instances of *panoptical* paranoia induced by the white gaze. Perhaps most explicitly, the professor's lurking suspicion that he is "a two reel comedy" presumes some audience watching the spectacle of his academic endeavours and finding it comical. Also, since the professor does not elaborate on his notion that if he "lingers too long" he will never be able to get back to college, even that phrasing allows panoptical connotations. The more obvious interpretation is that by fraternizing with the drugged underclass he may lose the moral fibre and stamina that have brought him to his current position. However, it may also connote the fear of scandalization, which is distinctly panoptical. Wendy's speculation that the narrator used to dream that he "could contribute to

⁴⁴² Selzer, *Charles Johnson in Context*, 33.

the uplifting of the Race”, partly confirmed by his own admission that he used to read “Lives that Lift” in the vein of Horatio Alger, also bears a perceptible mark of panoptical inducement, riffing on the “credit to the race” motif.

The story at the same time upholds and undermines socio-ethnic stereotypes, as can be demonstrated with reference to the two-pronged case of an underachieving African American college student who turns out to be very eloquent and smart in an unorthodox fashion. The South Side segment of the story also runs a subtle re-enactment of the black criminal stereotype, while Wendy’s opportunistic and lascivious overtures can be seen as a riff off the Jezebel stereotype of the black seductress. None of these stereotypes or counter-stereotypes has been abstracted away in a manner which would qualify as Adorno’s artistic autonomy or Barthes’ diluted myth. Even the final cathartic moment, when the professor relinquishes his lifelong attachment to “distinctions”, and dissolves his panoptical anxieties and ontological partisanship in the pool of unruly and messy humanity,⁴⁴³ cannot completely refurbish the story in this respect.

Even the fact that an African American student threatens to go to a white dean and snitch on her African American teacher can be read as a loose riff off an old antebellum stereotype. In his classic study of the Great Migration, Nicholas Lemann describes “an old tradition [...] of blacks gaining some *temporary advantage* by informing on their own people, tipping off the white folks about an errant black person’s inclinations and intentions - to slip off a plantation, say.” However, he counters that by admitting that the revulsion of the larger community towards this tendency “was so intense that keeping your mouth shut was considered not merely a matter of prudence with regard to whites, but also of honor within black society.”⁴⁴⁴

Intertextual significations

In addition to these rather explicit renderings, most of which would place the story squarely within the realm of Adorno’s tendentious literature, Alēthia also features several symbolic or metonymic riffs whose covert nature precludes deliberately ideological readings, and would therefore be more readily identified as Adorno’s autonomy or Barthesian diluted mythical meaning, even if the signification cross-referenced other black sources.

Let us revisit the introductory passage of the story and reexamine the spots which were purposefully neglected during the synopsis. “God willing”, begins the narrator “I am going to tell you a love story”. He then proceeds to boast that his dignified forehead and forked beard make him a look like W.E.B. Du Bois. After this, he assures us (rather suspiciously at such an early stage) that the story is not a fabulation in the vein of “the poetic genius who wrote *Essentials* and that hallucinatory poem called *Cane*”, namely Jean Toomer. The narrator does not mention Toomer by name, yet the circumstantial textual evidence (i.e. name dropping)

⁴⁴³ In the story’s racist and classist context, the phrase “unruly and messy humanity” is more appropriately read as a sanitary hypernym for “black underclass”.

⁴⁴⁴ Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (New York: Vintage, 1991) 36. The notion of “keeping your mouth shut”, lest the whites learn something they should not know, is a classic panopticism, but the example is too thematically remote to be of any interpretive value here.

makes this obvious. In other words, at the outset of the story, the narrator speaks admiringly of Du Bois - “a towering sociologist” and, perhaps more importantly, the narrator’s lookalike.

His comment on Toomer also reads like an accolade, yet the subliminal message is more ambiguous than in the case of Du Bois. While complimenting Toomer as “a pale genius”, he confides to us that Toomer wrote “a *hallucinatory* prose-poem”, and also castigates him as a fabulist prone to the conjuration and “transfiguration of things” (SA 99). This is a nuanced distinction, and yet further close reading gives us the hindsight realization that the narrator finds drugs repulsive, so even the word *hallucinatory* was almost certainly not neutral or even complimentary. So, by these nuanced semantic clues, the narrator allows us to infer that he identifies with Du Bois rather than Toomer at the beginning of the story. What does the Du Bois/ Toomer dichotomy tell us? The thesis has abundantly established that Du Bois was a staunch proponent of artistic self-restraint and discipline, especially if it meant defying or defusing mainstream stereotypes about African American population. Du Bois identified his cause with that of the African American uplift and he practiced what he preached, in life and in writing, arguably to the detriment of its artistic viability.

Jean Toomer, in contrast, grew to be ambivalent about his racial heritage as an important part of his personality, particularly in relation to his artistic range. Shortly before the publishing of his seminal “prose-poem” *Cane*, as referenced by the narrator, Toomer expresses some disappointment about his correspondence with Sherwood Anderson, complaining that the pioneer of American modernism “limits [him] to Negro“ and ignores his overtures towards more universalist creative interactions.⁴⁴⁵ This attitude is further cemented by Toomer’s refusal to mention his “colored blood” in the promotional material for *Cane*, responding by the following famous sentence: “My racial composition and my position in the world are realities which I alone may determine.”⁴⁴⁶ Apart from his racial ambivalence, Toomer was a left-leaning intellectual whose politics, however, did not *tendentiously* impinge on his untrammelled modernist literary endeavors. Du Bois, on the other hand, did try to impart political message also in his novelistic efforts, even though by doing so he was “tempted into waters beyond [his] depth”, to borrow Robert Bone’s phrase.⁴⁴⁷ Compared to Toomer’s organic subordination of ideology within art, Du Bois’s clumsy insistence on political writing was largely seen as outdated in the mid 1920s. It is therefore telling that Wendy concludes her unbelievably articulate volley of invectives by calling the professor “passéiste”, a French adjective for backward or outdated. Since the narrator seemingly undergoes a hallucinogenic experience towards the end of the story, we may see him as being more akin to Toomer’s hallucinogenic prose than he was at its beginning. The story’s overt description of a trajectory from self-restraint to spontaneity can therefore also be read, with some imaginative leeway, as a figurative transition from tendentious to autonomous or ideologically disengaged African American writing. This eclectic interpretation may be also

⁴⁴⁵ Kathleen Pfeiffer, *Race Passing and American Individualism*, 99.

⁴⁴⁶ Kathleen Pfeiffer, *Race Passing and American Individualism*, 102. With all due squeamishness about Manichean racialism, it should be mentioned that both Toomer and Du Bois were very light-skinned.

⁴⁴⁷ Robert, A. Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 99. Bone is referring specifically to Du Bois’s pan-Africanist novel *Dark Princess*, whose overt ideological didacticism was deemed obsolete in 1928 when it was published.

seconded by the explicit and repeated reference to South Side Chicago, which is increasingly seen as the crucible that gave birth to black protest fiction.⁴⁴⁸

All in all, this early story written by Johnson in late 1970s is built around a classic assimilationist and essentialist trope and anti trope,⁴⁴⁹ rendered most palpably in the classic dichotomy of ascetic self-repression versus ecstatic abandon. At the outset narrator is defined by his self-imposed asceticism (motivated by social uplift) and fringe hypochondria, which he, in the very last line of the story, seems to have overcome by “let[ting his] mind sleep”. The character of Wendy provides an obvious counterpoint to the pathological self-restraint of the narrator. Her abrupt turnaround from a blackmailer to a liberator, an anti-assimilationist trope in its essence, is underscored by many other minor things that alert the reader to her unrestrained spontaneity. In the final pre-sex scene she hammers that point down by throwing “her cigarette still burning into the corner” of her bedroom. In addition to this, the two main characters are characterized by deference to or defiance against the white panoptical gaze, respectively. In addition, the story is told by a nameless narrator, in a first person singular diary format, which is a device that invites generic readings and was used to such an end by the core canon of African American ideological writings such as the 19th century slave narratives. This confessional and elucidatory aspect pledges allegiance with the classic *exegetical* trope. Even this minor nuance can therefore be seen as a signification on the African American tropes of tendentious committed writing.

If we go by Johnson’s proactive guidelines that bid us to read his fiction along philosophical lines, the story can be readily understood as an allegory illustrating transition from Kantian abstract formalism towards Shelerian devotion through emotional (and fleshly) involvement. Yet if we insist on an obtusely racist reading, the story endorses several explicitly political and panoptical tropes that can be found in classic African American writing, mostly in the tendentious vein. The basic antidote to this is the ending of the story, which may also be read along traditional tropes (she redeems him, he uplifts her),⁴⁵⁰ but makes it harder to pin Alēthia down against the *tendentious* and *autonomous* scale. By building his story on the universally approachable and widely applicable ascetic-vs-ecstatic dichotomy and endowing it with very overt philosophical meaning, Johnson managed to outgrow the tenets of formulaic black fiction. Despite its essentialist and assimilationist overtones, this story alone does not contradict Johnson’s professed universalism.

⁴⁴⁸ The argument that the Chicago, not New York, was the ultimate cradle of protest fiction, whose culmination overlapped with the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, is shared by Robert Bone, Hazel Rowley and many other scholars specializing on the period. Possibly the most recent synthesis of the politics and writing of the Chicago Renaissance is provided by Michelle Yvonne Gordon in her dissertation thesis. Michelle Yvonne Gordon, *Black Literature of Revolutionary Protest from Chicago’s South Side: A Local Literary History, 1931-1959* (University of Wisconsin, 2008), an unpublished doctoral dissertation.

⁴⁴⁹ The word trope here is again not used in the literary connotation of the word as a poetic figure of speech, but in the second meaning, namely “a common or overused theme or device” (Merriam Webster).

⁴⁵⁰ A very conspicuous rendition of this trope takes place in Du Bois’s *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911). The main female character, Zora, hates school and occasionally indulges in stealing and lying. Her comparatively educated boyfriend, Bles, is ambivalent about Zora, enjoying her sensuous nature but abhorring her uncultured peasant ways. Robert Bone reads this aspect of the novel as reflecting Du Bois’s latent insistence that the “black masses” should “redeem” themselves before joining middle class progressives (like himself) in their fight. In Johnson’s story it is Wendy who is clearly the redeeming agent, yet the ending of the story does not make it clear whether this will be reciprocal. See Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 44-45.

IV. CONCLUSION

The dissertation positions Charles Johnson's scholarly and fictitious work as possibly the most recent and erudite synthesis of the ambivalent relationship between ideology and aesthetics in African American literature. As a literary scholar and an author of a bona fide book-length developmental analysis of 20th century African American literature, Johnson has repeatedly emphasized the need for black writers to move away from the limitations of overtly ideological informed writing and obligatory racial representation in literature, two shortcomings which he summarily calls "racial melodrama." Johnson's scholarly endorsement of autonomous black fiction informed the focus of the analysis, which seeks to examine whether Johnson's pleading for artistic autonomy also trickles down to his own fictitious pursuits. Based on this inquiry, the analytical part of the thesis has examined a segment of Johnson's short fiction which overtly displays features of ideological racialist writing, at least on surface reading, thereby belying the author's scholarly dictum.

In order to put Johnson's artistic autonomy to a test, the analyzed stories were selected according to several criteria. They needed to display very obvious *antithetical template* (thesis and antithesis) and they should explicitly create confrontational or contestational situations, *pitting African American characters against white characters*. This *prima facie* tendentious or melodramatic nature of the stories was ascertained against typologies and tropes of ideological writing. One such crucial component of black ideological writing is a panoptical narrative stance, defined as an artistic reflection of *communal self-policing* triggered by the awareness of being under the constant scrutiny of the mainstream white population. This presumed scrutiny of the black community by the mainstream population is summed up by the abstractive phrase *normative white gaze*.

The thesis uses panopticism as an umbrella term that subsumes various defensive literary devices and self-policing scenarios found in African American fiction. The panoptical anxiety of a black character or narrator can be directly acknowledged in the story, or it can be expressed by inter-diegetic rhetorical means, typically as *exegetical* and *exhortative* rhetorical stance, or modal trope, gesturing towards the presumed audience. The presence of either of these modal tropes is understood as a confirmation of the tendentiousness of the story.

A similar inquiry is made about other two typologies which are understood as panoptical in their origins. If a black character or narrator makes an overt reference to phenotypic racial essentialism, adopting either the position of racial pride or racial self-deprecation, it is understood as a confirmation of the story's tendentiousness. The same assumption is used in the case of sociologist typologies embraced by the characters or the narrator: a discernible stance of ethnic nationalism and ethnic assimilationism is understood as textual evidence that the story is tendentious.

After this initial inquiry, undertaken with the ostentatious aim of confirming the *prima facie* tendentiousness of the seven stories (which had been presupposed), the analysis proceeds to rehabilitate them as works of autonomous fiction that match Johnson's

universalism. In order to establish this, the thesis uses a narrowly defined criterion of artistic autonomy derived from Theodor Adorno's "Commitment to Art" and Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*. The demarcation between autonomous and tendentious committed art hinges on the notion that autonomous art includes works which are overtly political, yet they also *allusively engage topics beyond their literal meaning*. In that case, a piece of writing may address some overtly ideological theme and still be regarded as autonomous, provided it also makes indirect allusion to other issues of social significance. The close reading sections therefore in their final analysis sought to redeem Johnson's claim on authorial autonomy by going beyond the literal frame of the stories in search of allusive connotations. This point of departure is also informed by the fact that Johnson's dual qualification as a writer and literary scholar makes it likely that he would deploy intertextual means by way of enhancing his stories.

As the above summary indicates, the practical part first sets up the parameters for selection, which in effect amounts to a brief synthesis, and then proceeds toward a close-up analysis. It first adverts to the typological similarities of the stories according to a given criterion, namely a clearly discernible thesis and antithesis, enacted along the theme of *black* vs. *white* confrontation. From this premise, it proceeds to analyze each of the selected stories *in its own right*, using the above-mentioned taxonomic criteria of tendentious and autonomous literature.

The analytical part examines seven stories. "Poetry and Politics," "The People Speak," "Mayor's Tale," "The Plague" and "Martha's Dilemma" from the *Soulcatcher* collection were purposefully chosen as the first segments of analysis, given their explicit historicity. Since Johnson himself describes *Soulcatcher* as a collection of "*original* short stories" (SC x; emphasis added), it is to be expected that the resulting fiction will to some degree align with his universalist artistic creed.

"Poetry and Politics" is a dialogical story between Phillis Wheatley and her mistress Susana Wheatley. The entire conversation revolves around the argument as to whether an African American writer of some renown has the moral obligation to harness his or her gifts in the service of communal uplift by addressing painful issues pertaining to the community. Since this topic is quite explicitly announced by the characters as the main focal point of the story, the story in effect gestures towards its own *tendentious* nature. The main character displays very explicit panoptical anxieties both vis-à-vis black community, both of her contemporary community and the imagined future black polity. In addition to this major panoptical mode, Phillis's deliberations also display concerns about the white gaze, as she deprecates her literary achievements, drawing on the fact that she is referred to as a sensational "Ethiop who can write verse". In addition to this overt panopticism, Phillis Wheatley (the only African American character in the story) uses *exegetical* tropes (*explaining* her motives for wanting to write a pamphleteering anti-slavery poem) and displays *assimilationist* tendencies, foreseeing black social uplift *within* mainstream American society. By overtly stating its mission, "Poetry and Politics" must be seen as *prima facie* tendentious literature. By making the act of writing its main theme, the story qualifies as metafiction, while also signifying on several historical events, yet by doing so it still communicates no perceptible allusion beyond its literalist reading. Even the fact that Susanna

Wheatley in the story assumes Johnson's position and endorses non-partisan writing cannot redeem the overtly didactic and ideological nature of the story as such. Judging by all available textual evidence, "Poetry and Politics" qualifies as a piece of tendentious committed writing.

The second item under analysis is the quartet of "The People Speak," "Mayor's Tale", "Martha's Dilemma" and "The Plague," whose *prima facie* tendentious nature ensues from the fact that they all address variations on the "black agency" and "racial pride" typologies of affirmative essentialism. "The Plague" creatively inverts Manichean and biblical typology by suggesting that the white citizens of Philadelphia (Abelites) are in fact less deserving than the black citizens (Cainites). The biblical reference to Cain and Abel is the only intertextual link which the analysis managed to establish, and whose explicit nature cannot qualify as an allusion. However, "The Plague" does allusively communicate with another story within the collection, which in effect helps the readers understand a character development over a period of time.

A similar white-vs-black confrontation is the primary dramatic conceit of "Martha's Dilemma." In this story, Johnson creates some wiggling room for creative autonomy, as one of the scenes seem to be alluding to a classic African American poem "I, too" by Langston Hughes, while the wording of the final passage and several other aspects may possibly be alluding to Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Black Cat," thereby endowing an overtly didactic story with the intertextual aura of a gothic tale.

The tendentious nature of "The People Speak" and "The Mayor's Tale" is to a considerable degree tempered by their covert significations. On perfunctory reading, "The People Speak" is a recording of a church congregation in Philadelphia whose attendees vote on whether African Americans should resettle to Africa or remain and try to improve their lot within the customary and institutional racism of the early 19th century United States. In addition to the pedestrian historicist reading, the story also lends itself to less literalist interpretations, albeit also historical. The speakers in the story repeatedly refer to the white political establishment of that era, namely Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. The final decision of the Philadelphian commoners not to heed the advice of their leaders and decide against the colonial settlement can therefore be read as a jarring contrast to the elitist top-down democracy of Jefferson and Madison, and also their colonial appetites for westward expansion. This does not qualify as an intertextual reference, yet the story deliberately situates itself as a written record meant for somebody to read it, thereby strongly endorsing the possibility that it is meant to allusively signify beyond its literalist frame.

"The Mayor's Tale" partakes of similar overt racialism and didacticism, yet its narrative autonomy can be rehabilitated by the fact that it makes the modernist use of color symbolism. The Manichean nature of the story's basic plot, namely the disappearance of all black people in the aftermath of the Fugitive Slave Act (which the main character absent-mindedly endorsed) is overtly compared to the absence of *black* coal in a town covered with *white* snowdrifts. This inverted Manichean color symbolism (black is good, white is bad) can be seen as allusively engaging and subverting African American classics like Richard Wright's *Native Son* or Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, which would in itself qualify as an autonomous artistic feature. However, this needs to be tempered by the fact that the main

character of the story explicitly points out this color symbolism in his inner monologue. It can be argued that such a direct acknowledgment detracts from the authorial autonomy, as explicitly referenced symbolism loses its artistic purpose. Regardless, the very insinuating intertextual pairing with *Native Son* alone exempts “The Mayor’s Tale” from the one-track tendentious label.

In his 2003 interview with Jim McWilliams, Johnson suggests that “Martha’s Dilemma” and “The Mayor’s Tale” may have a little “phenomenological feel” to them, as “the white protagonists undergo a change in their perceptions of the slaves around them”.⁴⁵¹ This, however, is a sentiment that the stories quite overtly communicate and it in no way redeems their basic tendentious nature. Intertextuality and allusiveness therefore remain virtually the only argument that can be used to counter the overt lack of artistic autonomy of the four stories. The four stories thematically “interlock” with each other, to paraphrase Johnson’s appreciative description of African American compact short story cycles like Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) or Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of the Brewster Place* (1982).⁴⁵² The simple fact that the stories tend to intertextually signify on each other to some degree redeems them from the constraints of tendentious writing. However, since all four interlocking stories baldly assert their political engagement, the mutual significations alone cannot redeem their overall tendentiousness.

A better argument in favor of autonomy can be made about the pro-democratic and anti-colonial significations underlying the back-to-Africa theme addressed in “The People Speak” and the subversive Manichean symbolism in “The Mayor’s Tale”, strongly reminiscent of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. The intertextual engagement of “Martha’s Dilemma” with Poe’s story and Hughes’s poem is not quite as conclusive, yet it can still be used as an antidote to its tendentious nature.

Regardless of its philosophical para-text, an overt reading of “Executive Decision” suggests extreme tendentiousness. The story flaunts the topics of racial pride, black agency, panoptical concerns and the extreme either-or antithesis of a competition between a white woman and a black man within a job interview. At one point, the story even lapses into a sociological expose. However, Johnson’s intertextual pairing of the story with Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener” significantly enhances its allusive potential. By casting the African American character as Bartleby, the story opens up its narrow concern (affirmative action) to multiple other connotations such as the larger theme of redistributive justice and the dangers of self-entitlement. In a selective reading, the story can even be seen as a signification on the “invisibility” of black male role models, a theme which Johnson himself is very much preoccupied with. Despite its perfunctory tendentiousness, “Executive Decision” is in perfect alignment with Johnson’s universalist dictum. The fact that Johnson managed to endow this

⁴⁵¹ Jim McWilliams, “An Interview with Charles Johnson,” *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson*, ed. Jim McWilliams (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004) 276.

⁴⁵² Johnson compares these two collections of “powerful interlocking stories” to Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). Johnson, *Being and Race*, 109. In postmodern English novelistic tradition, perhaps the best example would be Julian Barnes’ *History of the World in 10 and ½ Chapters* (1989). Barnes’s blend of fictitious stories with historical accounts has attained a near-canonical status, which can be used to legitimate the treatment of Johnson’s *Soulcatcher* stories as postmodern historiographic fiction, not ideological pamphleteering.

story with such allusive resonance, despite the fact that it was written within fairly narrow legalistic constraints, can only be regarded as a compliment to Johnson's artistic imagination and writerly skill.

The main character of the last analyzed story, "Alēthia" from *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* collection, is overtly defined by very ostentatious assimilationism and black social uplift. This initial assimilationist thesis is contested by the female antagonist, whose *blackmailing* efforts pit the main protagonist into a confrontational relationship with the white dean. Abiding by his assimilationist impulses, the protagonist gives in, only to be whisked away from his monastic asceticism and timid assimilationism. Despite its antithetical and racist character, and the paranoid panopticism of the protagonist vis-à-vis white academia, the story is difficult to pin down to as a piece of tendentious writing. Johnson's proactive guidelines bid us to read the story as an allegory illustrating transition from Kantian formalism towards Shelerian devotion through emotional involvement, as is suggested by Linda Selzer. However, even if we relegate the flaunted philosophical meaning into the background, we can still read several segments of the story allusively rather than literally.

Judging by all available textual evidence, "The Plague" and "Poetry and Politics" are too explicitly didactic and "one-reel" to be rehabilitated as pieces of autonomous writing. This means that their literalist nature belies Charles Johnson's endorsements of artistic autonomy. The other three examined stories in the *Soulcatcher* collection yield some allusive meanings under close scrutiny, and therefore cannot be classified as tendentious. "Executive Decision" and "Alēthia" offer several allusive possibilities and intertextual connections which safely remove them from the fold of tendentious writing. All in all, out of the seven stories, all of which were deliberately cherry-picked as the most overtly tendentious pieces of Johnson's short fiction, only two cannot be redeemed beyond their literalist tendentious readings.

As was pointed out in chapter 4.1, Johnson flaunts the philosophical and Buddhist overtones of his stories, and scholars tend to be swayed by this preemptive indoctrination in their readings of his novels and short stories. That alone valorizes the first step of my analysis, namely the assessment of overt didacticism and racialism of the chosen stories. This first step of my inquiry may in some cases look like a self-fulfilling prophecy, given the initial choice of overtly antithetical stories. This objection, however, cannot apply to the second step within my inquiry, which sought to redeem the artistic autonomy of the stories. By acknowledging the overt didacticism of the story, while at the same time revealing some other allusive signification, the story manages to exude social commitment without compromising the writer's autonomy. To all appearances, this eclectic reading of Adorno and Barthes had not been undertaken before, as scholars seem to be discouraged especially by Adorno's tendency to use ostensive definitions as a way of making a point. Added to this, the analytical chapters also furnished several fresh interpretive angles on "Executive Decision" and "Alēthia," which had not been touched on by Selzer, Little or Gleason. My analysis of the five *Soulcatcher* stories did not build on any previous scholarship because, to all appearances, there had been none.

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Abbreviations used:

BE	Being and Race
BS	Bartleby the Scrivener