



FACULTY OF ARTS  
OF CHARLES UNIVERSITY  
IN PRAGUE



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

**DISSERTATION REPORT**  
**Panoptical Tropes and Negotiations Between Art and Politics**  
**in Charles Johnson's Short Fiction**

Mgr. Jakub Ženíšek

Notwithstanding the title, the first half of *Panoptical Tropes and Negotiations Between Art and Politics in Charles Johnson's Short Fiction* is not about Charles Johnson's short fiction. This is not necessarily a bad thing since the candidate demonstrates here his familiarity with the African-American literary history, and with critical scholarship that ranges from philosophy and literary criticism to sociology (particularly of race). The first chapter establishes the theoretical framework, drawing primarily on Theodor Adorno's "Commitment" (incorrectly titled here as "Commitment to Art"), a short essay from by Roland Barthes "The Poor and the Proletariat," and Michel Foucault's notion of panopticism. The subsequent two chapters offer a historical overview of African-American literature (or primarily literature) viewed through the lens of the aforementioned theories and centered on authors such as Charles Chesnutt, George Samuel Schuyler, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and W. E. B. Du Bois. In the second half (chapter four), the dissertation shifts to selected stories from Johnson's collection *Soulcatcher* (1998) and to two earlier works, "Executive Decision" (1997) and "Alēthia" (1979). The candidate's ultimate objective is to defend these stories as "autonomous" rather than "tendentious" art.

I will return to the theoretical framework shortly but the shortcomings of the introductory survey are generalizations about the character of African-American literature; somewhat rushed observations about individual works and artists, such as a disputable claim that Sutton E. Griggs's novel *Imperium in Imperio* supposedly "openly endorses racial separationism by prefiguring Garvey's Back-to-Africa movement" (48); and a rather ambitious conclusion that "[t]hese 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" (84)—which is questionable for example given the preference of the survey for male authors (with the exception of Wheatley and Morrison).

While the candidate's choice of primary works seems to me idiosyncratic but understandable, I am less convinced by the selection and employment of critical scholarship. The theoretical framework seems needlessly over-complicated on the one hand (particularly "the structured inquiry" on pages 20-21, and the prisms and typologies introduced in the third chapter and utilized throughout); on the other hand, it could have been more refined. How can we speak about ideological aspects of art without any discussion of ideology? What is understood here as ideology? On what grounds can it be stated that "philosophy is of course not ideology" (102)? What about Buddhism, which has informed much of Johnson's writing? How can we differentiate between "partisan and universalist writing" (29)—why cannot universalist writing be "partisan" (whatever that means) and "partisan" writing universalist? The whole dissertation seems underwritten by an anxiety about art's "ideological contamination" (33)



---

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

and the desire to “rehabilitate” and “redeem” art, to free it from “an unwelcome strait-jacket” (22) and get it “purged of all ideological concerns” (24). Rather than trying to attribute this dichotomy to Adorno's aforementioned essay, could the candidate elaborate on his own aesthetic position?

Next, to distinguish between autonomous and tendentious writing on the basis of the text's allusive potential seems to me problematic without any discussion of allusion. As the candidate is certainly aware, Johnson's oeuvre has been frequently analyzed as metafiction, among others by Barbara Z. Thaden (whose discussion of *Middle Passage* draws on Linda Hutcheon), Virginia W. Smith and Linda F. Selzer (who turn to Henry Louis Gates's theory of signifyin[g]), Rudolph P. Byrd (who refers to Bakhtin's dialogic imagination) and Frederick T. Griffith (who considers echoes of Plato's *Symposium* and Jean Toomer's *Cane* in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, including the story “Alēthia”); in addition, Stephen Lucasi in *Critique* interprets selected stories from *Soulcatcher* as parabiography and introduces further criticism of Johnson's writing as metafictional play. The dissertation may rank together with these studies; however, the “allusive resonance” (143) of “Martha's Dilemma,” “The People Speak” and “Mayor's Tale” needs to be illustrated more carefully and convincingly. For example, it is argued that “The Mayor's Tale” signifies on Richard Wright's *Native Son* and “Martha's Dilemma” on Edgar Allan Poe's “The Black Cat” and “I, Too” by Langston Hughes, whereas “The Plague” introduces no such external allusions, but following the candidate's logic, could “The Plague” be read for instance as an echo of “The Comet” W. E. B. Du Bois? Why could—or could not—the story be read in this way? How is “allusive resonance” established here and (to return to my questions from the preceding paragraph) how does it supposedly guarantee artistic autonomy?

Finally, given that the candidate's objective is to stand by Johnson's universalism, I wonder if he could consider its political risks, in particular when it involves history in general and the history of slavery in particular. How would the candidate front criticism along the lines of Aida Ahmed Hussen, who—in reference to *Oxherding Tale* and drawing on the work of Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, Jennifer Hayward and Richard Hardack—argued that “Johnson's standard of liberating universalism [...] is troubling here, for it seems to draw a false equation between de-racialized universality and whiteness” (“Manumission and Marriage?: Freedom, Family, and Identity in Charles Johnson's 'Oxherding Tale'”)?

The text is logically structured; the prose is fluent, sophisticated and generally clear, with the exception of a few overly-complicated formulations and problematic expressions that I would recommend to amend (e.g. Jake Brown “is a 1<sup>st</sup> World War deserter, which is in itself deemed bad PR for any ethnic community with paranoid defensive reflex” [64]). The present tense in the first paragraph of subchapter 1.2 is confusing—the past perfect would have worked better to describe issues already covered. Paragraphs are not always correctly indented (on pages 52, 90, 97, 101, etc.) and there are a few typos I noticed (“intra-dietetically” → “intra-diegetically” [71], “inter-dietetic” → “inter-diegetic” [72], “*Imperium in Imperia*” → “*Imperium in Imperio*” [132], “Turk” → “Turkey” [162], plus there are various





FACULTY OF ARTS  
OF CHARLES UNIVERSITY  
IN PRAGUE



---

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

errors in punctuation on pages 43, 62, 68, 80, 90, 92, etc.). The section "References" needs further editing. Also, it is not clear to me why two texts are referred to through abbreviations when they are not cited more frequently than others (moreover, *Being and Race* is abbreviated in the main text as BR and not BE as is indicated on page 197). However, these are relatively minor problems in the context of a generally well-structured and well-written work.

To sum up, in my view, the dissertation may be recommended for defense and, subject to the evaluation of the others on the committee and on the candidate's performance during the defense, it may be awarded a passing grade ("prospěl").

Pavla Veselá, PhD.

May 25, 2017