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The Journey of Self-Realization: Buddhism and Black Identity in *Oxherding Tale* by Charles Johnson

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Abstract

This paper examines how Charles Johnson's Oxherding Tale reimagines the African American slave narrative through the lens of Buddhist philosophy, constructing a unique path of self-realization for its mixed-race protagonist, Andrew Hawkins. Rather than depicting freedom solely in terms of physical escape or social equality, Johnson recasts liberation as an inner journey, aligned with the Zen Buddhist path toward enlightenment as expressed in the Ten Oxherding Pictures. Hawkins's life is framed as a spiritual pilgrimage: "I saw the ten oxherding pictures of my life... what I sought I already was" (153). This moment of awakening deconstructs not only the master/slave binary but also the illusion of a fixed racial self. The narrative explores the Buddhist doctrine of anatta (no-self) through Hawkins's gradual detachment from ego, desire, and identity: "I was neither Black nor white, neither slave nor free. I simply was" (178). This declaration underscores the novel's challenge to both racial essentialism and Western notions of stable identity. Johnson thus offers a metaphysical resistance to racial determinism, one that resonates with both Buddhist non-duality and Black existentialism. By merging Buddhist insight with African American historical memory, Oxherding Tale presents a radical model of subjectivity rooted in awareness, impermanence, and ethical transformation.

Keywords: zen, self, slave, race, identity

Introduction

Charles Johnson's Oxherding Tale (1982) is a pioneering work in African American literature that revises the traditional slave narrative by integrating Zen Buddhist philosophy. Set in the antebellum South, it follows Andrew Hawkins, a mixed-race son of a white planter and an enslaved woman, on a spiritual quest for self-realization rather than physical freedom. Drawing on the Zen Ten Oxherding Pictures, Johnson frames Hawkins's journey as one of internal transformation: "I saw the ten oxherding pictures of my life…what I sought I already was" (153).

Theoretical Framework: The novel intertwines Buddhist ideas—dukkha (suffering), anatta (non-self), and detachment—with Black identity to challenge fixed racial categories. Hawkins's declaration, "I was neither Black nor white, neither slave nor free. I simply was" (178), signifies transcendence beyond racial binaries toward spiritual awakening. This paper argues that Oxherding Tale reimagines the slave narrative as a metaphysical journey, portraying Black identity through spiritual liberation rather than victimhood or resistance.

Using an interdisciplinary framework of Zen Buddhism, Black identity theory, and Black existentialism, this study examines Hawkins's transformation. The novel's structure follows the Zen Ten Oxherding Pictures, charting the path

from seeking the true self to enlightened return. Johnson highlights how Eastern philosophy offers "a vocabulary for transcendence" missing in Western thought (Johnson, Being and Race 56).

Engaging African American thought, the paper draws on Du Bois's "double consciousness," which captures racial self-conflict, and Fanon's critique of imposed racial identities. Fanon asserts in the seminal text Black Skin, White Masks (1952) that "the Black man is not. No more than the White man" (206) parallels Hawkins's metaphysical disidentification: "I simply was" (178). This fusion of Buddhist detachment and Black existentialism reveals liberation through shedding racial constructs.

Together, these perspectives reveal how Johnson moves beyond racial binaries and slavery's legacy toward a vision of freedom grounded in consciousness, impermanence, and non-duality—redefining Black identity via spiritual awakening.

Literature Review

Charles Johnson's Oxherding Tale has garnered attention for its philosophical complexity and its intersection of African American history, Eastern philosophy, and Western metaphysics. In Being and Race, Johnson advocates for moving beyond essentialist portrayals of Black identity to explore "consciousness, morality, and suffering—not merely racial grievance" (14). This vision is central to Oxherding Tale, where Buddhist concepts like non-attachment and awakening reframe slavery and trauma.

Scholars highlight Johnson's integration of the Zen Buddhist Ten Oxherding Pictures to chart Andrew Hawkins's spiritual evolution. Gary Storhoff notes the novel "superimposes a Buddhist soteriology onto the slave narrative" to challenge Western selfhood (304), while Keith Byerman sees Hawkins's journey in the book Seizing the Word: History, Art, and Self in the Work of W.E.B. Du Bois (1994) as one that "seeks a self beyond victimhood" (221). These perspectives emphasize how the novel replaces linear liberation with cyclical spiritual growth.

Ashraf H. A. Rushdy explores Johnson's interrogation of race as an illusion, arguing the novel asks us to see race as something we are conditioned to inhabit (Rushdy 189). Similarly, Jan Willis views African American engagements with Buddhism as pathways to inward liberation beyond historical trauma. Clarence Major praises Johnson in the text Configurations: New and Selected Poems, 1958–1998 (1999) for "reaching across traditions" to write a Black novel "that need not be only about Blackness" (67). This is reflected in Hawkins's revelation: "I was neither Black nor white, neither slave nor free. I simply was" (178).

Building on these insights, this paper examines how Johnson uses Buddhist philosophy not merely as symbolism but as a transformative lens to destabilize fixed racial identities and imagine liberation through impermanence and ego-negation.

Rewriting the Slave Narrative as a Spiritual Quest

Charles Johnson's Oxherding Tale transforms the traditional slave narrative by shifting focus from physical bondage to metaphysical entrapment, and from political emancipation to spiritual awakening. While classic slave narratives such as Frederick Douglass's Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845) or Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) emphasize slavery's horrors and legal freedom, Johnson reinterprets the genre through a Buddhist lens, locating true liberation within the self. This enables a dual critique—of historical slavery and the illusions that perpetuate suffering and self-alienation.

The protagonist, Andrew Hawkins, is born into privilege and servitude—his white father the plantation master, his Black mother the enslaved housekeeper. This complex lineage positions him at the intersection of race, power, and identity. From the outset, Andrew experiences what W.E.B. Du Bois called in the text The Souls of Black Folk (1953) "double consciousness," the sense of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (2). Yet rather than seeking social reconciliation, Johnson's narrative urges transcendence. As Andrew confesses: "Everywhere I turned, identity seemed a mask. There was no authentic face beneath it" (89).

This existential crisis—marked by alienation and illusion—aligns the novel with the Buddhist framework. In Zen, the ego-bound self is a delusion, and awakening involves realizing identity is fluid,

impermanent, and empty (anatta). The Ten Oxherding Pictures, alluded to throughout the novel, allegorize this journey from confusion to clarity. Hawkins's comment, "I saw the ten oxherding pictures of my life… what I sought I already was" (153), reflects a pivotal insight, mirroring the ninth stage where the search itself is revealed as illusory.

Johnson retools the slave narrative as an inner pilgrimage, challenging the linear, teleological structure of 19th-century autobiographies. Instead of a climactic escape or legal freedom, Oxherding Tale offers moments of dissolution: of ego, race, desire. This aligns with Buddhist teachings that freedom lies not in grasping new forms of self, but relinquishing the notion of a stable self.

Moreover, Johnson's narrative rejects conventional realism. Infused with surreal episodes, philosophical interludes, and metafictional moments, it distances itself from historical verisimilitude. This break from testimonial tradition opens space for spiritual allegory. As Gary Storhoff notes, "Johnson's text liberates itself from the historical conventions of slave narratives by rewriting slavery as a condition of metaphysical delusion" (Storhoff 310). The plantation becomes a metaphor for samsara-the cycle of suffering fueled by attachment and ignorance. Thus, Johnson shifts the axis of liberation from social systems to inner consciousness. While not dismissing slavery's historical horror, he uses it as a backdrop for deeper spiritual truths. This radical synthesis positions Oxherding Tale as a novel that liberates the genre of liberation itself.

Unmasking Race: The Illusion of Identity in Oxherding Tale

In Oxherding Tale, Charles Johnson stages race not as an immutable truth but as a socially constructed and spiritually deceptive identity—one that must ultimately be unlearned. Central to this project is the Buddhist principle of anatta, or "no-self," which posits that the self is a composite illusion, constantly shifting and devoid of permanent essence. Johnson's protagonist, Andrew Hawkins, undergoes a journey of radical disidentification, gradually shedding not only his attachments to race and social roles, but also to the ego that seeks to define and stabilize them.

Throughout the novel, Andrew's mixed-race status renders him both insider and outsider—never fully accepted in either white or Black worlds. Early in the narrative, he observes: "I was a Negro and a gentleman, a slave and a freeman, a bastard and a son" (27). This paradoxical identity becomes a site of spiritual tension. Rather than seeking to resolve the contradictions, Johnson uses them to expose the inherent instability of racial categories. Race, in this context, becomes a performance—a mask rather than a metaphysical reality.

Johnson pushes this idea further when Andrew reflects, "My color was a fact, but not a truth" (65). This line encapsulates one of the novel's most profound assertions: that while race has material and historical consequences, it does not constitute the essence of being. In Buddhist terms, clinging to identity—racial or otherwise—is a form of tanha (craving) that perpetuates dukkha (suffering). Johnson asks not merely how to live as a Black man in America, but how to live beyond the conditioned identities imposed by history.

The character of Reb, the old mystic slave who serves as Andrew's spiritual mentor, plays a crucial role in articulating this vision. Reb teaches him that liberation lies not in revenge or rebellion but in detachment: "You want peace, boy? Then let go of all your names. That's the only way" (91). Reb's voice echoes the Zen master's tone—cryptic, compassionate, and transformative. He calls on Andrew to transcend his historical and social conditioning, echoing the Buddhist directive to see through the illusion of selfhood.

This vision culminates in one of the novel's most pivotal declarations: "I was neither Black nor white, neither slave nor free. I simply was" (178). Here, Johnson reconfigures the conclusion of the classic slave narrative. Where Douglass' journey ends with literacy and legal manhood, Andrew's ends in ontological stillness. The binaries that once defined his life are now dissolved—not by denial of history, but by spiritual reorientation. His insight embodies the tenth oxherding picture—returning to the world with empty hands and an open heart, no longer seeking to assert identity, but to live in attunement with impermanence.

Scholars have recognized the subversive power of this move. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy notes that Johnson's protagonist "does not achieve identity

but transcends it" (Rushdy 193). This transcendence challenges both white supremacist essentialism and certain strands of racial nationalism. In doing so, Johnson risks alienating readers who may seek more affirmational narratives of Black empowerment. Yet his purpose is not to negate Blackness, but to reveal its impermanence, and in so doing, to offer a form of liberation that is ontological rather than merely sociopolitical.

Ultimately, Oxherding Tale invites readers to unmask the socially constructed nature of identity and to consider a more fluid, consciousness-based understanding of self. The novel does not argue for racial color-blindness, nor does it erase the legacy of slavery. Instead, it reframes these realities as part of the larger Buddhist insight: that the self we cling to—racial, historical, egoic—is not who we are. Liberation lies not in affirming the mask, but in knowing that it is a mask to begin with.

Desire and Detachment: Navigating Love and Longing in Hawkins's Path

In Oxherding Tale, Charles Johnson complicates the spiritual journey of his protagonist, Andrew Hawkins, by juxtaposing the call toward detachment with the human entanglements of love, lust, and longing. Central to this tension is the Buddhist understanding that desire (tanha) is a root cause of dukkha (suffering). Yet desire, particularly romantic and sexual desire, is not vilified in the novel. Instead, it is explored as a potent—if perilous—force that both tempts and teaches the seeker. Johnson shows that spiritual awakening cannot bypass human intimacy but must pass through it, transforming desire rather than merely suppressing it.

Andrew's romantic experiences, particularly his relationships with the white woman Peggy Undercliff and the enigmatic scholar/lover Minty, serve as crucibles for his inner evolution. With Peggy, Andrew is caught in a dangerous cross-racial dynamic that is saturated with racial fetishization and power imbalance. Peggy, fascinated by Andrew's exoticized identity, represents not love but possession. "I was to her a specimen—curious and rare," Andrew reflects (Johnson 59). This realization underscores how erotic desire, when shaped by racial ideology, can become a form of dehumanization. Their relationship ends disastrously, reinforcing the idea that unchecked desire is entangled with suffering and illusion.

Minty, in contrast, offers a more complex and intellectual form of intimacy. Their bond is based not merely on attraction, but on shared philosophical inquiry. However, even this relationship cannot fully escape the pitfalls of ego. Andrew becomes possessive, fearful, and vulnerable traits that betray his lingering attachment to identity and control. "My love for her was a mirror," he confesses. "In it I saw my own hunger, my own desperation to be whole" (122). Here, Johnson reflects a core Buddhist idea: that we often mistake attachment for love, seeking in others what we cannot accept in ourselves.

The novel repeatedly emphasizes that clinging—to people, to roles, to narratives—breeds confusion. Buddhist thought, particularly in Zen traditions, stresses that true liberation arises not from repression but from non-attachment: a state of deep presence unmarred by grasping. As the Dhammapada teaches: "From craving arises sorrow… but he who is free from craving has no sorrow" (Verse 216). Johnson does not preach asceticism; rather, he suggests that until desire is purified by awareness, it remains a force of bondage.

Andrew's ultimate realization echoes this Buddhist principle. After the heartbreak, betrayals, and illusions, he begins to perceive desire not as evil, but as impermanent and therefore not worth building the self around. In one of his final epiphanies, he says, "What I loved, I clutched—and so I lost. What I released, I found" (171). This shift marks a movement from tanha to upekkha—equanimity. It also signals the arrival at a deeper understanding of love: one that is not grounded in lack, but in presence.

Thematically, Johnson suggests that spiritual maturity arises when desire is neither indulged blindly nor repressed violently but seen clearly and released willingly. In this, he aligns with the Mahayana Buddhist emphasis on the Middle Way: avoiding both indulgence and denial. This middle path enables Andrew to see people—including himself—not as objects to be possessed or roles to be played, but as impermanent beings worthy of compassion, not control. In the broader arc of the novel, desire functions as a teacher. Through it, Andrew confronts the limits of ego, the pain of

clinging, and the depth of his illusions. The journey toward awakening, therefore, is not a flight from the world, but a return to it—transformed, clarified, and unburdened by grasping. Desire becomes the fire through which the false self is burned away, leaving only what is real, which is nothing at all—and therefore everything.

Conclusion: Toward Liberation Beyond Labels

Charles Johnson's Oxherding Tale is far more than a historical novel or a revisionist slave narrative—it is a philosophical and spiritual inquiry into the nature of selfhood, race, and liberation. By integrating Zen Buddhist principles—particularly impermanence, non-attachment, and the illusion of the ego—into the structure and soul of the narrative, Johnson reconceptualizes what it means to be free. For his protagonist Andrew Hawkins, liberation is not merely a legal or social outcome, but a deep existential shift: from clinging to identities shaped by race, class, and desire, to awakening to a selfless, unconditioned state of being. Throughout the novel, Johnson critiques essentialist understandings of race. Hawkins's journey reveals that racial identity, while socially real and historically consequential, is ultimately a construct—a mask we are taught to wear. As he confesses, "I was neither Black nor white, neither slave nor free. I simply was" (178). This declaration resonates not only with Buddhist anatta (no-self) but also with a larger human longing: to live authentically beyond imposed labels and illusions. Johnson's treatment of race is therefore neither evasive nor purely political; it is ontological. He dares to ask: What remains when we cease to define ourselves by the suffering we've inherited?

Desire and identity in the novel are not obstacles to be denied, but gateways to be understood and transcended. Johnson portrays romantic and racial entanglements not as detours from the path, but as essential terrains through which the seeker must pass. Like the Ten Oxherding Pictures that guide the structure of the novel, Andrew's journey culminates not in escape but in return—return to the world, now seen with clarity and compassion, free from clinging. In a literary landscape often defined by resistance and remembrance, Oxherding Tale stands apart in its spiritual daring. Johnson does not reject the tradition of African American narrative; he expands it, inviting readers to explore freedom not only in the social realm but within the boundless space of consciousness itself. By merging the lineage of the slave narrative with the path of Zen, he offers a radical proposition: that the deepest form of liberation lies not in changing the world, but in changing how we see it—and ourselves.

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