

## Postmodern Cautionary Tale of Grassroots Democracy in Charles Johnson's "The People Speak"

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### Abstract

Charles Johnson's 2001 short story collection *Soulcatcher* was commissioned with the purpose of complementing a PBS series *Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery*, by way of imaginatively revisiting some memorable events, personalities and generic idiosyncrasies of the antebellum United States. The task of producing literary renditions of such an ideologically-charged historical period is valuable in its own right, yet it puts considerable constraints upon the artistic autonomy of the writer. As an African American novelist and scholar, Charles Johnson straddles two mildly dichotomous positions in this respect. As a literary scholar, he has criticized the lingering tendency to read and appreciate black fiction as a sociological probe, thereby downplaying its own artistic merits. He particularly deplores the implicit inauguration of a black writer as a spokesperson for his or her race, which may have generated a panoptical reflex within the African American literary community. Johnson regards this reflex as inevitably conducive to tendentious writing which he summarily calls "racial melodrama". The paper therefore examines one story from the *Soulcatcher* collection, namely "The People Speak", which displays overt symptoms of ideological literature. The analysis first identifies some panoptical anxieties within the narrative, but it ultimately looks for intertextual echoes which go beyond the literal frame of the story. In doing so, the paper seeks to point out that Charles Johnson manages to retain a considerable degree of artistic autonomy even when dealing with what seems to be a one-dimensional and baldly ideological topic.

**Key words:** African American literature, autonomous art, Charles Johnson, communal gaze, historiographic metafiction, intertextuality, panoptical, *Soulcatcher*, substantive democracy, tendentious art

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