

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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"When the people lead, the leaders will follow."
Mahatma Gandhi

Introduction

Throughout his creative career, Charles Richard Johnson (1948-) has worn an impressive number of hats. Having first tested his artistic mettle as a teenage cartoonist during the Black Aesthetic Movement of the 1960s, he eventually became an award-winning novelist and scholar. His most acclaimed novels, such as *Oxherding Tale* (1982) or *Middle Passage* (1990), ostentatiously borrow the tropes of black American lore but give them a new historiographic spin and philosophical dimension. As a prolific writer of postmodern fiction, a literary scholar and a professor of philosophy, Charles Johnson is uniquely poised to appreciate the developmental trajectory of African American literature on its path from sociological commentary and uplifting ideology towards artistic autonomy. That is why we will conclude by examining one of Johnson's most palpably ideological short stories in order to demonstrate that he can retain a considerable amount of artistic autonomy even within such a one-dimensional and ideologically constrained venue.

Before we examine and exemplify his position on this subject, let us briefly survey this dichotomy between ideologically invested literature on the one hand, and racially disengaged and apolitical literature on the other, a dichotomy which has simmered within African American literary and artistic community for at least a hundred years, either as an uneasy symbiosis or open antagonism.

Methodology

It can be argued that the most undiluted ideological position in African American literature is panoptical in its essence. 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. Foucault abstracted his Panopticon construct away from Jeremy Bentham's late eighteenth century 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 keeps people from giving in to their brutish natures, even in the absence of actual law enforcement.

The Foucauldian panoptical reflex can be used across a wide range of social and literary scenarios. 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)”, which kick-starts a slippery slope of stigmatization and surveillance (Foucault, 1995, p. 199). That is also why the principle seems applicable to the African American community and its literary output, where the dialectical tension between one’s artistic leanings and the implicit browbeating of the communal gaze can be regarded as a perennial theme.

Panopticon as employed within this paper 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 assimilationism and gentrification. As Robert Bone points out in one of the earliest syntheses of African American literature, this middle class segment dominated the African American literary output especially in the early development stage of postbellum America. It can also be argued that a huge portion of black American literature up to the late 19th century relied primarily on white readership, and was therefore panoptically induced by the white gaze. The main thrust of our argument tends to echo Robert Bone’s position which perceives the ideological leanings of early African American literature as an artistic footnote to the socially upward aspirations of the 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 buy into the American dream ideology. 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 developmental trajectory of black American literature, at least for some time (Bone, 1965, p.15).

This panoptical self-vigilantism was eventually disrupted by the arrival of Harlem Renaissance literature in the modernist decades of the 1920s and 30s. And yet, the old self-policing paradigm did not go without a fight. An iconic clash between the two took place in the middle of the most prolific Modernist decade of the 1920s, when E. B. Du Bois’s attacked Claude McKay’s 1928 bestselling novel *Home to Harlem* on the grounds that it was much too open about black sexuality and in effect encouraged white readers to stereotype African Americans as sexually unrestrained people (Cooper, 1987, p. 244).

The universalist artistic maxims of Charles Johnson

As has been pointed out, Charles Johnson is one of the most recent detractors of this entrenched expectation that black fiction should be read as a sociological probe. He has frequently articulated his resentment concerning 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 (Johnson, *The Role*, 2003, p. 85). This position can be extended to accommodate Johnson’s discomfort with any African American literature

which “focuses on the black experience from a limited, restricted or essentialized perspective” (Conner & Nash, 2007, p. xii). However, his claim that African American writing should rise above the overtly political “racial melodrama” and ideological tendentiousness (Johnson, 1988, p. 22) sits uneasily next to some of his writings which seem to deliberately assume the very panoptical position he criticizes, at least on surface reading. The close-up analysis of this paper consequently focuses on one of his ideologically commissioned short stories, by way of establishing whether even the most racially invested and sociologically anchored stories by Charles Johnson align with his proclaimed artistic maxims.

The choice of Charles Johnson as a practical case in point for this type of inquiry also ensues from his liminal 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” (Johnson, 2007), thereby straddling the dual occupation of a major novelist and a literary theorist. And it is precisely this amphibious quality, along with Johnson’s endorsement of autonomous art, which explains the choice of this author as the focus of our analysis.

The focus on a piece of short fiction is dictated by the fact that Johnson himself sees the short story as a more formulaic and didactic medium than a novel. In his essay “Progress in Literature” (2003) 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 to its formulaic ossification at the turn of the 20th century (Johnson, 2001, p. 124). By virtue of their brevity, short stories are considerably more conducive to formulaic and tendentious synopses than novels, which Johnson explicitly acknowledges by claiming that “*there is always a structure, always a formula*” in a short story (Levasseur & Rabalais, 2002, p. 267). This is why an ideologically commissioned short story is the best narrative material for ascertaining the degree to which Johnson the writer abides by his own scholarly principles.

Some of Johnson’s stories are clearly more conducive to ideological readings than others. His 2001 collection *Soulcatcher* stands out in this respect, having been conceived as complementary material for a 1998 TV series *Africans in America: America’s Journey through Slavery* which WGBH Educational Foundation created for PBS. The task of producing literary renditions of the slavery period in the United States inevitably shackles Johnson’s creative autonomy, and in turn invites ideological readings. We should also account for the fact that Johnson selected the thematic stories in the *Soulcatcher* from a vast plethora of antebellum sources (Johnson, 2001, p. xii), and in so doing he could certainly exercise his own ideological preferences. That is why the stories in this collection are especially interesting as a litmus paper for ascertaining his authorial autonomy.

In order to put Johnson’s impartial writerly dictum to a test, the analyzed story needs to be overtly prone to sociological emphasis and antithetical racialism, the combined input of which Johnson describes as “racial melodrama”. However, if the analysis establishes that even this overtly antithetical and racist story also contains intertextual significations and allusions beyond

its literal meaning, then we may conclude that Johnson has made good on universalist principles even in the most unlikely circumstances.

“The People Speak” as a case in point

“The People Speak” from the *Soulcatcher* collection is a short story which recreates the earliest separationist tendencies within the African American community. It 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” in the USA (Johnson, 2001, p. 67).

We immediately learn that the Society 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 enthusiasm” by these 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 Society immediately establishes itself not only as a refuge for underprivileged black people in the American North (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 dilemmatic question as to whether the African American people, “once released from bondage”, are likely to ever be “accepted in or assimilated by American society” (Johnson, 2001, p. 68). The dilemma is not just presented to the congregation in a summary statement. The 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 get a glimpse of the power balance 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 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 (Johnson, 2001, p. 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 concludes, “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” (Johnson, 2001, p. 69). He is awarded by a long round of applause, as is the speech of the next person, shipping tycoon Paul Cuffe, a Quaker philanthropist who has founded a school for African American children and used his fleet to help some black people migrate to Sierra Leone, free of charge. 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 emigration.

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 (Johnson, 2001, pp. 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 is also 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, presiding Reverend Allen calls for order and concludes with the following exhortation:

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 [and] your decision carries as much weight for the direction of this nation as that of the white men who assembled at the Constitutional Convention (p. 72).

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.” (Johnson, 2001, 73; emphases added).

In a simple literalist and historicist reading, this story is written in a palpably ideological vein. 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). 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 country” (Ford, 2002, p. 147).

With such a sociological theme as the central plotline, rehabilitating the artistic autonomy of the story would entail a search for connotative meanings and allusions that do not instantly reveal themselves. Let us not draw 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. In this case, we may choose to appreciate the intertextual nuances of the exhortative appeal *of* the story, not *within* the story.

Allusion no. 1: A yardstick of grassroots democracy

Given the fact that Johnson himself calls this story’s vehicle “a mock-newspaper article” (Johnson, 2001, p. xiv), 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 necessarily imply that Johnson doctored the facts he presents, 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” War of Independence, declared 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 could vote (Robertson, 2010, p. 81). If we factor in the nonexistent voting rights for women, 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, judging by modern-day criteria, and the lingering undemocratic momentum which lasted until the racially preferential Jacksonian democracy of the 1830s, has been explored by left-leaning American historians (Beard, 1986), as has been the racial exclusionism that lasted for another century. Ironically, the subsequent arrival of Jacksonian democracy did bring 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 (Ford, 2001, pp. 137-145).

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 overtly 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” (Johnson, 2001, p. 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*, even though the pre-voting exhortation of Reverend Allen specifically addresses the assembly as *gentlemen*, making it clear that the ballots are only going to be submitted by the male attendees. Johnson himself explicitly pleads guilty of intentionally exaggerating 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 (Johnson, 2001, p. 67).

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 of 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” (Parenti, 2011, p. 161). 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 Kelley & Lewis (2000), 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 (Johnson, 2001, pp. vii-viii).

Drawing on this active participation of black people in the process of shaping American democracy, 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” (King, 2009, p. 310).

Allusion no. 2: Bridging the class divide

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 favor 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, discussed 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” (Yates, 2014). Regardless of these dissenting voices, the ensuing legislation reflects this aristocratic bias (Zinn, 1980, p. 91). 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.

Allusion no. 3: An anti-colonialist appeal

In addition to this black agency motif 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 (Johnson, 2001, p. 71).

Even the simple fact that the ordinary black Philadelphians were not lured in by this pastoral recreation 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 modern-day 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 Stephanson (1995), 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” (p. 5). The white American alignment of the Exodus story with Manifest Destiny obviously goes very much against the liberationist associations that the biblical narrative

historically evoked in the African American community. As Eddie Glaude (2000) 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 (p. 4).

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" (Twiss, 2009, p. 69).

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 but potentially toxic colonialist condescensions. We must not forget that the notion of ex-slave settlement in Africa was not just a figment of imagination. The failed historical attempt of the Province of Freedom colony in Sierra Leone 1787 provides a chastening historical counterpoint to Paul Cuffe's eye-moistening account of the African west coast. The relatively more successful attempt in Liberia in 1821 can, in retrospect, be classified as an act of colonization with many of its ugly connotations (Everill, 2013, pp. 19-31). 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. Everill describes this mix of messianism and mercantilism in his comprehensive study *Abolition and Empire in Sierra Leone and Liberia*.

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 (Everill, 2013, p. 1; emphasis added).

The intertextual resonance of "The People Speak" may also pertain to other American fiction, as the theme of African expatriation as an antidote to US racist oppression makes a sporadic appearance in late 19th century and early 20th century American literature. The white literary muckraker of the abolitionist movement, Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852), made one of her central characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the technological prodigy George Harris, argue fervently in favor 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 mighty republics, that, growing with the rapidity of tropical vegetation, shall be for all coming ages (Stowe, 1852, pp. 377-8).

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. 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 (Stowe, 1852, p. 378).

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.

Johnson's story nominally takes place in the early 19th century, it is therefore clearly not informed by the most visible rift between the nationalist and assimilationist view in the African American community, 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. And yet one has to bear in mind that the separationist position in African American public thought and literature was frequently formulated *in collusion with not in opposition to* the messianic US foreign policies. One of the few 20th century authors who chose to render the topic was Eric Walrond in his short story "A Senator's Memoirs". 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 also be read as a redemption narrative which the American audiences would unwittingly associate with the American foundational story.

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 larger anti-colonialist significance.

In lieu of a conclusion

"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. The panopticism remains virtually unchanged no matter whether we read the story as a historical narrative without any intertextual significations, or a document to be read by a third (white) party. As has already been insinuated, the general plot and theme of the story is rather conducive to the summary label as tendentious literature. “The People Speak” is ostentatiously rendering a historical event, and in doing so it also 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.

However, this is only true if we insist on the literalist reading. If we 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 almost none of these challenging parallels are overtly stated in the story, they all summarily qualify as indirect signification, which amplifies the polyvalent and multidimensional quality of the story, thereby also boosting its artistic autonomy. 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. 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.

“The People Speak” is a story whose perfunctory literalist reading lends itself to very ideological and narrowly racialist 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. This alone would lead to the conclusion that the story, ostentatiously commissioned as an appendage to a TV documentary on the legacy of

slavery in the US, is more readily appreciated as playful historiographic metafiction, not a documentary. Charles Johnson (2001) ostentatiously takes the backbone of his story from a real source, identifying it as “A NEWS ITEM from the Philadelphia Liberator” (p. 68). In so doing, he appears to be relegating his own literary licence to the background, which makes the account slightly less compatible with postmodern historiography or the New Journalism, 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, along with all the other authorial acknowledgments of tampering with the original story, inevitably puts “The People Speak” within the realm of historiographic pastiche based on the notion that history as we know it is part fiction, emplotted from scarce and ambiguous factual record.

It can therefore be argued that even this short piece of historically-grounded fiction attests to Charles Johnson’s allegiance to artistic autonomy as his primary compass, regardless of how narrowly framed and ideologically commissioned his creative pursuit may be on certain occasions.

About the author

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