



TO TRANSCRIBE AND TRANSFIGURE: AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES JOHNSON

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He is a minority among minorities, a genius among even the keenest of intellectuals. He is Dr. Charles Johnson, the only African American novelist to have a Ph.D. in philosophy and one of only two black men ever to win the National Book Award. (The other was Ralph Ellison, one of Johnson's greatest literary influences.) In a career that spans over 40 years, Johnson has channeled his perspective of the world into a dazzling multitude of incarnations. He is a philosopher, essayist, book critic, martial arts practitioner, cartoonist, MacArthur Fellow, lecturer and the S. Wilson and Grace M. Pollock Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Washington in Seattle.

It is, however, through his vocation as a fiction writer that Johnson has made the most resonant impact on America's aesthetic landscape. In 1974, with the tutelage and support of his mentor, novelist and famed fiction teacher John Gardner, Johnson published his first novel, *Faith and the Good Thing*. Johnson followed this critically acclaimed debut with *Oxherding*

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Tale (1982), *Dreamer* (1998) and the short story collections *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1986), *Soulcatcher and Other Stories* (1998) and *Dr. King's Refrigerator and Other Stories* (2005).

But it was *Middle Passage* (1990), Johnson's third novel, which gave him immortality and assured his seat in the lineage of great American writers. The novel's protagonist, a newly freed slave named Rutherford Calhoun, undergoes a profound and traumatic psychic metamorphosis when, in a desperate bid to flee his debtors and a forced marriage, he unknowingly makes himself a stowaway on the *Republic*, a slave ship bound for Africa. Calhoun is one of only five characters aboard the ship to survive its doomed return voyage. In an effort to understand the atrocities he witnessed and maintain his sanity, Rutherford writes a detailed account of everything that happened on the *Republic*. Concerning his compulsion to write, Rutherford notes that he "came to it with . . . a need to transcribe and thereby transfigure all we had experienced, and somehow through all this I found a way to make my peace with the recent past by turning it into Word."

In the following interview, conducted in the late spring of 2006, Dr. Charles Johnson offers, among other insights, his candid considerations about women, retirement, the pursuit and possession of real happiness and his own mastery at taking his life experience and molding it into luminous, immutable Word.

HAWKINS: Most readers and critics think *Middle Passage* is the crown jewel of your literary works. Do you agree? Or do you feel that you have yet to produce your greatest writing? Is such a notion even important to you?

JOHNSON: My second novel, *Oxherding Tale*, is the work I always whimsically refer to as my "platform novel" (borrowing that phrase from the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch in Buddhist history). It is somewhere around 25% more complex and ambitious than *Middle Passage*, a work where I addressed similar issues—for example, "What is the nature of the self?" If I hadn't written *Oxherding Tale*, I'm sure I wouldn't have been in-

terested in writing anything else. So I have a special affection for that novel; when I was writing it, I felt everything important for my life was at stake, while with *Middle Passage* my basic intention was to address some of the same issues, yes, but also to create a rousing good sea adventure story that would be more accessible than my second novel. Comparing one's works is always difficult—it's like trying to compare one's children, and just as futile as an exercise, in my view.

HAWKINS: In *Middle Passage*, Rutherford's mother's name is Ruby and his brother's name is Jackson. Your mother's name was Ruby and her maiden name was Jackson. Given that, how much is Rutherford—or any of your protagonists (or antagonists, for that matter)—not just a product of your imagination, but also a reflection or extension of who you are?

JOHNSON: Every writer I'm acquainted with draws upon the world that envelops him (or her), and their own personal history sometimes for character names, sometimes for anecdotes or incidents that they re-invent in their stories. "Real" life is always grist for the mill of storytelling.

HAWKINS: In a 1996 interview, you said that you had completed two screenplays for the film adaptation of *Middle Passage* and were confident that Hollywood would eventually produce it. Are you still confident *Middle Passage* will become a movie, considering that it's been over 10 years since you made that statement and Hollywood has already released a slave rebellion epic with Steven Spielberg's "Amistad"?

JOHNSON: As I write these words, a theatrical version of *Middle Passage* is being prepared for next year. I think some day a film adaptation will be done. We came close ten years ago, but the people involved just couldn't carry the project through. It would be an expensive film—it takes place on the water (always hard to control) and is a costume drama (every prop has to be period)—which would place its cost today, I believe, at around \$100 million. Warrington and Reginald Hudlin simply couldn't get it green-lighted at first Tri-Star, then Interscope with them-

selves attached as directors. Not that long ago (two years, I think), John Singleton contacted me again (He optioned the film rights for Warner Brothers) since he felt he finally had the perfect actor to play Capt. Falcon. I haven't heard from him since then. It's important to remember that *Middle Passage* is an epic sea adventure story, and Hollywood has never done a black epic. Its cost would be a great risk (most black films are budgeted around \$15–20 million), one that could break (or make) a studio for the year of its release. The film "Amistad" is, at best, a courtroom drama—there's only one significant on-board montage of slaves being dumped into the ocean. But I suspect it will get done one day; my second script for the adaptation (written at Interscope) opens up the story even more dramatically, including a section where the sailors on the Republic (but not Rutherford) raid and destroy the village of the Allmuseri. Very powerful stuff in that new material.

HAWKINS: Did you have any idea while you were writing it that *Middle Passage* was the book that would place you in the pantheon of great American authors?

JOHNSON: All I can really say is that from the beginning of my work as a fiction-writer I knew the significance of what I was doing with those two sister disciplines, fiction and philosophy, and that these works filled an aesthetic void in American literature.

HAWKINS: Some of your fiction, particularly the hilarious and tender love scene between Rutherford and Isadora at the end of *Middle Passage*, is highly reminiscent of John Donne (one of my favorite poets) and his simultaneously metaphysical, religious and erotic love poetry. Although you're a Buddhist and Donne was a Christian minister, you both are incredibly adept at wedding the flesh with the spirit in your writings. What would you say to critics who think sex and divinity should stay segregated in literature?

JOHNSON: I would simply say that an expansive work of fiction treats ALL of human experience, or as much as an artist can

possibly render. One wishes to be, as one person put it (whose name I forget at the moment), a writer on whom nothing of significance in the world around him is lost. Naturally, that includes all kinds of love—eros, philias, and agape, all three of which I believe my novels and stories treat.

HAWKINS: The magical realism in your fiction is reminiscent of the magical realism in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novels and short stories. Was Marquez an influence for you with that technique? If not, how did you acquire your skills using magical realism in your stories?

JOHNSON: Actually, Marquez was not an influence. My work has sometimes been called "magical realism," but that critical term would apply to only a few works, not to the strictly "realistic" stories, say, in *Soulcatcher and Other Stories*.

HAWKINS: When I was in college in the mid and late 90s, there was only one black male in the undergrad English program. Almost without exception, every other black male student on campus majored in Math, Engineering or Business Administration. What, if anything, would you say to a black male college student who likes to write and is considering getting an English degree, but also has the talent to become (and knows he'll make a whole lot more money as) an engineer or corporate executive?

JOHNSON: I truly believe we, as black people, need more scientists and engineers. (See my October 14, 2005 op-ed piece on "The Crisis in Black America" in *The Wall Street Journal*.) If a young black male (or anyone) is interested in a degree in English (which, incidentally, I don't have, my two advanced degrees are in philosophy), I would suggest they pursue that discipline passionately, as my own teacher John Gardner did, learning everything there is to know about classical and contemporary literature in order to determine what he (or she) might do to ADVANCE that body of literature, thematically and technically. Yes, it's true: they won't make as much money as an engineer, but this isn't about money. It's about passion

and, as Horace Mann once said, “Being ashamed until you have won some great victory for humankind.”

HAWKINS: There’s a strong undercurrent of romance and love (erotic and otherwise) in many of your stories. I’m thinking especially of the bond between Rutherford and Isadora (and Squibb and Maud) in *Middle Passage*, between Moses and Harriet (that is, before she’s murdered) in “The Education of Mingo” and the sweet and suggestive dialogue between the newlywed Martin Luther and Coretta Scott King in “Dr. King’s Refrigerator.” (Even in your story “China,” Rudolph tells Evelyn that he’ll fight better in his first martial arts match if she’s there.) And then there’s this wondrous excerpt about Felicia’s feelings for Fortunata in your story “Cultural Relativity”:

Everyone knew animals didn’t kiss. They licked.
The reason for *having* lips in the first place,
Felicia decided just before daybreak, was so
people could use their God-given soup coolers
as the most romantic, the most erotic, and the
most natural way to show they loved someone.

No man—gifted writer or not—could describe a feeling so beautifully or romantically unless that feeling was already buried somewhere inside of him. Most readers of your work know something of how you evolved into Buddhism. But where did your depth and clarity about love, romance and the complex web of erotic feelings between a woman and a man come from?

JOHNSON: Well, I guess the answer is that I’ve always loved women. I think no beings on earth are as beautiful as women. Growing up, I had a very old-fashioned, even romantic view of women—especially the woman one loved—that resembles the idea of the perfect wife in the Book of Psalms (my wife loves that description), someone a man could ride into battle for, revere and dedicate himself completely to. But, like I said, I’m very old-fashioned in that way.

HAWKINS: Because the characters’ accumulation of money without having earned it has such deadly consequences in your

short story “Exchange Value,” I can’t help but wonder: What are your thoughts on the issue of reparations for the descendants of African and African American slaves?

JOHNSON: Right now what I think is that reparations for black Americans, after 9/11, is unlikely to happen since this nation has generated a debt in the war on terrorism that won’t be paid off until our grandchildren are very old.

HAWKINS: What’s the secret to writing good moral/philosophical fiction without proselytizing and/or boring a potential reader to tears with one’s particular ideology?

JOHNSON: As a phenomenologist, I’ve always been opposed to ideology (which, by the way, Buddhism is not) and explanatory models for human experience. Philosophical ideas do not begin in some far away, airy realm of Forms. Rather, they emerge from the grit and mud and sweat of human beings living their lives. A philosophical writer does nothing more than return those ideas to the messy, quotidian context of lived experience in which they initially arose, examining them through the dramatic possibilities inherent in character and event.

HAWKINS: What is your advice to writers who cannot and/or have no desire to be as profoundly philosophical and, to borrow a phrase from your novel *Dreamer*, go “from surface to seabed” in their writings as you do, but still want their work to be powerful, poignant and taken seriously?

JOHNSON: Take emotional risks. Honestly explore the things you fear most. Make each of your stories a private act in a public place. Show us the naked workings of the human heart, uncensored. That approach is best, as Saul Bellow once said, because no community altogether knows the secrets of its own heart.

HAWKINS: You’re at a point in your writing career where you can write anything you want without reprisal or compromise. But was there ever a time when you felt pressured to choose be-

tween your literary vision and the demands of the marketplace? If so, how did you handle that?

JOHNSON: I simply ignored the market place. My agent of 33 years, Georges Borchardt, once remarked that “Charles never sold out.” I never did. I didn’t know how to do that. I’m a college prof, so early in my career I didn’t have to pay my bills through what I wrote—I was free to simply do what I felt was best for me to do. I admire my writer friends who literally write their next meal onto the table, because I value productivity and creative pressure, but I don’t admire some of the things they feel they had to write to pay the bills, and I wouldn’t want my name on those books. They write, say, a book a year, and have no time for revision, for deepening their text through massive research and prodigious re-writing. Me, I’ll spend five or seven years on a novel because I know a new work may wind up being my literary last will and testament if I die right after it’s done. So, no, there was no way I could ever sell out—writing for short-term monetary goals to satisfy literary fads and fashions—when what was at stake with each book was an intellectual and artistic declaration, one that my children possibly might turn to in order to answer the question, “What was Dad’s vision of the world?”

HAWKINS: Your birthday (April 23rd) is the same day as William Shakespeare’s. Do you have any thoughts about Shakespeare’s literary prominence and immortality and/or your own literary legacy?

JOHNSON: I always give proper respect to the Bard, and I’ve enjoyed his plays since my early teens. As for my own literary legacy, well, future generations will have to determine that. An old rule of thumb is that a literary work should be around for about 50 years, and have influenced two or three generations, before we say it is an important cultural artifact.

HAWKINS: Speaking of great playwrights, you were friends with the late August Wilson. Do you care to share any thoughts

about Mr. Wilson, his literary impact and/or the friendly competition between you two?

JOHNSON: August was my good friend for the 15 years he lived in Seattle. I miss him greatly. We used to have 7 to 10 hour dinner conversations. I've given two tributes to him in Seattle since last Thanksgiving. We couldn't exactly be in competition since he was a playwright and I work primarily in prose (novels, short fiction, essays, philosophical articles, TV scripts for PBS, comic art) and have little experience with theater.

HAWKINS: You've been remarkably consistent in stating that your main goal as a writer is to expand black philosophical fiction. Is that a lonely enterprise for you, or are there other black writers helping you to build on that foundation? If so, who are they?

JOHNSON: Very lonely. In the history of the United States, only 35 black Americans have been awarded Ph.D.s in philosophy from American colleges and universities. There has been about one black philosophy Ph.D. for every one million black Americans living today, and most of them didn't teach. They went into the ministry. In fiction, I'm the only black writer to earn a doctorate in philosophy. So, yes, it's a lonely journey in that sense, though I have friends on both side of the fence, old chums in philosophy from my graduate student days, and writer friends.

HAWKINS: You have a nonfiction book called *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing*. But I'd like to ask you about another symbolic wheel: the hamster wheel that so many Americans are stuck on. Every morning, tens (and perhaps hundreds) of millions of people in this country wake up and trudge through the day with no joy, no fulfillment and no sense of their divine purpose. As a man with an abundant and purpose-driven life, what would you suggest for someone who wants to get off the "hamster wheel" and live better and more deeply?

JOHNSON: The best way to get off the "hamster-wheel" is to find something you love and are passionate about, and pursue it

with all your heart and soul. My 24-year-old daughter Elisheba is doing that right now with her first business, Faire Gallery/Cafe in Seattle. Two years ago she graduated from Cornish College of the Arts, and she is a conceptual artist. She worked a few jobs she hated after graduation. Then she came up with the idea for Faire (French for “to make, to do”). She’s combined art showings (monthly) with commerce (a well-stocked cafe). Faire has been open now for two months, and she’s having the time of her life creating a space for Seattle folks (and especially young artists) to come together as a community. I handle all my meetings and appointments there, at Faire, because the ambience is very comfortable, her customers nice people, and there’s a new art show to look at every 30 days. She’s sold a lot of art there. You can visit her website at www.fairegallerycafe.com. The just out May issue of *The International Journal of African American Art*, edited by Juliette Harris, has a nice little notice for the gallery/cafe.

HAWKINS: You have so many talents; you’re like the Russian matryoshka dolls that are stacked inside of each other. You’re a writer, of course; then there’s your role as a philosopher, professor and cartoonist. You’re also a lecturer and a book critic. Are there any talents you don’t have that you wish you did? Or is there something you haven’t done yet but still want to accomplish?

JOHNSON: I think I’ve accomplished everything in life that I set out to do. I love science and technology, so I wish I had a better background in math, but it’s not possible to do EVERYTHING in one lifetime. I just have to be content as a lay reader of science.

HAWKINS: I went to Rosa Parks’s funeral last year, and at the service, I noticed something. It hit me that of all thousands of people in that sanctuary, and of all the bishops, senators, judges, so-called black leaders (Farrakhan, Sharpton and Jackson), celebrities, former presidents and presidential candidates, the best leader and the one person who had brought

about the most good and the most significant change in this world was the woman lying in the casket. I remember thinking that the age of the great black American civil rights leaders died with Mrs. Parks and would never return. What do you think about the notion of great black civil rights leaders in the 21st Century United States?

JOHNSON: As I said in that op-ed article called “The Crisis in Black America,” in *The Wall Street Journal*, in the 21st century we all must become, each and every one of us, the intellectual and spiritual leaders we have been looking for.

HAWKINS: What hobbies or major time-consuming activities do you have outside of writing, teaching, practicing Buddhism and studying Sanskrit? What, if any, kinds of music do you listen to? Do you like any major league athletes or sports teams?

JOHNSON: I’ve never been interested in spectator sports. But I do enjoy listening to soft jazz, especially when I’m drawing.

HAWKINS: As the human body ages, it becomes more difficult to command the dexterity, power and discipline the martial arts require. You’ll be 60 in a couple of years. Has your body rebelled against practicing the martial arts yet? If so, are you sad or melancholy about it, considering all that you’ve achieved as a martial artist?

JOHNSON: I still practice my sets—empty hand and with traditional weapons—to keep them polished. And now I find myself doing more Tai Chi Chaun than kung-fu. As one gets older, it’s natural (and also traditional) to shift to a “softer,” internal system like Tai Chi.

HAWKINS: Do you think you’ll ever retire from teaching and/or writing?

JOHNSON: Nope. Unlike a job or a career, art (creating) is a life-long passion. August Wilson worked on revising his last play, “Radio Golf,” until he was too weak last fall to go on. And the great painter Jacob Lawrence was working on his canvasses until the day of his death.

HAWKINS: After your physical body dies and your spirit is released into the next realm, if you're able to look back at your life on this earth, what might be the epitaph you assign to it?

JOHNSON: Long ago I advised my family to place on my tombstone, not words, but the simple Taoist symbol for a person traveling the Path. That symbol appears on the title page of my novel *Oxherding Tale*.

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