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THE THREADS THAT CONNECT US
An Interview with Charles Johnson*

by Geffrey Davis

In the spring of 2009, Charles R. Johnson, holder of the S. Wilson and Grace M. Pollock Professorship for Excellence in English and former director of Creative Writing at the University of Washington, taught his last course as a full professor of English. His retirement is the appropriate moment for a retrospective look at the life and career of one of the most prominent black writers of our time. Johnson’s prolific and influential publication history includes four novels, *Faith and the Good Thing* (1974), *Oxherding Tale* (1982), *Middle Passage* (1990), and *Dreamer* (1998); three collections of stories, *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* (1986), *Soulcatcher and Other Stories* (2001), and *Dr. King’s Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories* (2005); and works of philosophy and criticism such as *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970* (1988) and *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing* (2003). As a cartoonist and journalist in the early 1970s, Johnson published over 1,000 drawings in national publications. A husband and a father, Johnson is also a screenwriter, an avid essayist, and an international lecturer.

In 1984, Johnson guest edited an edition of *Callaloo* focused on the illumination of new black writing. Since that time, his work has received numerous awards for contributing to that effort. He has received an international Prix Jeunesse Award and a Writers Guild Award for his PBS drama “Booker” (*Wonderworks*, 1985), a Guggenheim Fellowship (1986), two Washington State Governor’s Awards for Literature, the 1990 National Book Award (fiction) for *Middle Passage* (Johnson was the second African American male to win this award after Ralph Ellison for *Invisible Man* in 1953), a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship (1998), and the Academy Award for Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (2002), as well as several other awards and degrees.

More recent works by Johnson maintain his early commitment to developing an American understanding of inter-connectedness. With the election of the United States’ first black president, Johnson’s article “The Meaning of Barack Obama” (*Shambhala Sun*, 2008) provides a timely examination of the significance and implications of Obama’s cosmopolitan identity and potential as a leader. In another piece, titled “The Cultural Challenge of Barack Obama” (*Life*, 2008), Johnson explores Obama’s ability to transcend “the racially provincial and parochial” and declares that this moment in American history “is not so much revolutionary as it is evolutionary” (175). In his article “The King We Need: Teachings for a Nation in Search of Itself” (*Shambhala Sun*, 2005), Johnson reminds us how Dr.

* This interview was conducted electronically, concluding in May 2010. I would like to thank Dr. Johnson for generously sharing his time on this project.
Martin Luther King, Jr. “understood that our lives are already tissued, ontologically, with the presence of others in a we-relation” (49). This fundamental recognition of solidarity, coupled with King’s advocacy for the practice of agape—a love that recognizes everything as process—creates an integration and interdependence that Johnson sees as necessary for positive social change. The provocative “The End of the Black American Narrative” (The American Scholar, 2008) further interrogates and unsettles racialized notions of American literature and identity that are based on what Johnson sees as dated narratives, arguing instead for new, individual narratives that are humbly self-aware of identity’s tentative nature. In a piece titled “Northwest Passage” (Smithsonian, 2008), Johnson locates Seattle as an exemplary cosmopolitan site of cultural exchange, “peopled with every sort of American [imaginable.]” Johnson’s work continually pushes against the limits and boundaries of our understanding of identity, asking us to rethink logics we have come to take as given.

DAVIS: I guess my first question will be the most obvious one: how did it feel to make the decision to retire from the University of Washington?

JOHNSON: This is my thirty-third year of teaching at the University of Washington. I started here as a twenty-eight-year old assistant professor in 1976, and I feel these last three decades at UW have been rewarding. But I’ve also been thinking about retirement and becoming a professor emeritus for several years now, devoting all my time to creative work and study.

DAVIS: It’s interesting to hear you say that you’re looking to devote some time to study. What subjects in particular are you looking forward to spending more time with?

JOHNSON: I’m presently in my tenth year of studying Sanskrit, a language I love. I try to devote at least one hour a day to study, review, and translation, but given my schedule of teaching, writing, speaking engagements, and public appearances, it’s often hard to find that hour every day. I look forward to having more time to think in Sanskrit. Also, I’m very passionate about the remarkable breakthroughs I see happening in all the sciences and have subscriptions to five science journals for lay people, which pile up in a corner of my study during the school year—I can usually only read a stack of them when I’m in an airport, on a plane, or in my hotel room when I’m out of town for some engagement. But all of it thrills me, from new work in cosmology to cloning, from nanotech to DNA sequencing. One day I plan to write a very philosophical science-fiction novel, perhaps soon after I retire.

DAVIS: Have you made any plans to travel more frequently after you finish teaching?

JOHNSON: I don’t have any travel plans. But if I do travel, my preference is to visit Theravada Buddhist countries in the Far East, such as Thailand, a country I knew was my spiritual home the moment I arrived there in 1997 to do two weeks of research on “The Asian Sense of Beauty” for an article Microsoft hired me to write for their on-line travel magazine “Mungo Park” which, unfortunately, was cancelled before I could get back to the states and write that particular piece.
DAVIS: You were living in Stony Brook, New York, before accepting the assistant professor position in creative writing at UW; you had recently published *Faith and the Good Thing* (1974). Was publishing that novel key to your decision to accept the position in Seattle?

JOHNSON: Yes, I think it was. The English department at UW wrote to me in early 1976, after I published the novel, asking if I would be interested in a position here. At the time, I was a PhD student in philosophy, had taken my qualifying exams, and proposed my dissertation project (this later became the book *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970*). I was naturally thinking about applying for positions in philosophy departments, although these were few and far between, especially for someone who was ABD (All But Dissertation). So I sat down in New York City at a restaurant with critic Roger Sale, now retired from UW, for an interview; he was traveling through the East and also interviewed writer Clarence Major. To my surprise, UW’s English Department hired us both. This was a blessing for me at the time because in 1975 our first child was born, we were living on my $4,000-a-year TA salary, and I had hanging over my head not only the dissertation to write but a second novel, *Oxherding Tale*, to compose. That first year at UW gave me the financial stability and creative space to work on that second novel, teach furiously, and begin in the winter of 1977 what became twenty years of writing screen-and-teleplays for first PBS, then Hollywood in the 1990s.

DAVIS: Buddhism has been a major influence in your writing, especially since the publication of *Oxherding Tale*, and in your life in general. Has it also influenced your teaching?

JOHNSON: Everything I do is informed by the Buddhadharma, including teaching. It has always been my practice when I enter the classroom to leave my ego, desires, and miscellaneous list of personal “likes and dislikes” outside the door. Students aren’t paying their good money for any of that—only for what I can teach them about craft and aesthetics. So, yes, teaching for me is, like everything else, an opportunity for spiritual practice, selflessness, and a chance to serve others.

DAVIS: What do you feel, or hope, students have gained most from this style of teaching?

JOHNSON: I describe my approach to teaching—I call it “applied aesthetics”—in a 2003 article, “A Boot Camp for Creative Writing,” which was published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and will soon be reprinted in *Writer’s Digest*. That approach places almost as much work on my students as it does on me, not just in terms of their producing a great deal of their own writing in ten weeks but also in respect to students helping each other. I let them know on the first day this is their workshop, not mine, that my goal is for it to feel like a kind of institutionalized Paris café where we meet weekly, share our creations, and constructively critique each other’s efforts. They must perform as both creative writers and critics, as class leaders and editors for the work of others. So the class does sharpen their creative, critical, pedagogical, and even social skills.
DAVIS: Now that you have taught creative writing at UW for over thirty years, are there relationships that you have developed or maintained with former students of yours that are particularly significant to you?

JOHNSON: Obviously, yes. I first taught David Guterson (*Snow Falling on Cedars, The Other*) in the late 1970s or early 1980s, and we remain friends to this day. Last Friday, on October 24th, I read my tenth Bedtime Story, “Night Hawks,” at the tenth anniversary of Humanities Washington’s yearly fundraiser—five of my previous stories for this are in the collection *Dr. King’s Refrigerator and Other Bed-time Stories*—and one of the other readers was Daniel Orozco, who was one of my graduate students in UW’s MFA program fifteen years ago and is now a successful writer and teacher in Idaho. It was a delight to read with him. A few years ago at this event I also read fiction with writer Kathleen Alcala, whose MFA thesis committee I served on in the 1980s. I have many, many former students spread all over the world, and many have done very well, among them Richard Gelfond, co-owner of IMAX.

DAVIS: In your autobiographical essay “I Call Myself an Artist” (1994), you describe your arrival in Seattle, Washington: “From the moment we arrived . . . I felt I’d found the region, the landscape, and the lifestyle I’d been looking for since I left Evanston” (24). In a recent article titled “Northwest Passage” (2008) which appeared in the *Smithsonian*, you describe the atmosphere of Seattle. Being a native of that area—I was born in Seattle and raised in Tacoma—you describe the surrounding area rung true and made me ache for that green-gray beauty of the Puget Sound. I think you accurately identify its cosmopolitan feeling and its influence on creativity and the imagination. I wonder if you could talk more about specific influences Seattle has had on your writing. Have other places had similar or opposite effects on you or your work?

JOHNSON: Over the last thirty-three years I’ve come to realize that the only place in America I want to live is Seattle or somewhere nearby in the gorgeous Northwest. Writer Jonathan Raban put it so well when he wrote that other places have their “school rules” that are “hard and explicit.” You have to conform, shape yourself to fit in if you’re in Chicago, New York City, Los Angeles, or even some rural town in South Carolina. You don’t have to do that in Seattle. Here you can simply be yourself. A day hasn’t passed in the last three decades when I haven’t been aware of that rare freedom we have here, and the stunning beauty of Nature right outside our windows.

DAVIS: The piece you mentioned earlier, “Night Hawks,” focuses on the important role that fellow Seattleite the late August Wilson played in your life—the ways in which he helped you to reflect on the cultural turmoil you have witnessed and to understand the significance of a life “devoted unselfishly day and night to art.” Can you tell us more about this relationship?

JOHNSON: Writing is a solitary, lonely activity. What August and I enjoyed were long evenings—seven to ten hours—of just relaxing and talking and letting our hair down.
This is rare for so-called “successful” writers, and even more rare for black male writers in America. My friend, writer John McCluskey—we co-authored Black Men Speaking—told me that he and a few other faculty members at Indiana University invited filmmaker Melvin van Peebles to their campus. After van Peebles’s presentation, they all went to dinner. At some point in their conversation, McCluskey told me, van Peebles got tears in his eyes. The others at the table were surprised, and asked him if anything was wrong. No, he replied. He said he simply never has the chance to sit down with other black artists and writers. The experience brought tears to his eyes. August and I experienced this joy as often as we could whenever we both were in town. We couldn’t have been farther apart in, say, our politics, but that didn’t matter one bit. In August, I saw a man with the true spirit of an artist, someone who loved the creative process as much as I did, who had devoted himself to it since the 1960s as I had done, and who shared my deep respect for the generation of our parents, the hard-working, moral men and women who raised us at the very end of the era of segregation. Here in Seattle we did many literary events together; we were, naturally, at the same literary events for the fifteen years he lived in Seattle.

DAVIS: I’m struck by this rarity you mention for “successful” black male authors to meet informally and talk. Could we hear more on this, especially any thoughts you might share about what it means to you to be a black male author?

JOHNSON: I described my fifteen years of good, long dinner conversations with August Wilson. My best friend, Art Washington—he did the Showtime dramas on Jimi Hendrix and Adam Clayton Powell, and has spent more than thirty years in the industry—and I have been like brothers since we worked at KQED. We talk or email each other almost every day. But notice the difference in our disciplines of choice. Wilson was a playwright; Washington is a full-time screenwriter. I’m primarily a novelist, short story writer, essayist, and cartoonist. There is little overlap in terms of our primary creative focus, and therefore no professional competition. When you have two black male writers, or any two writers in general, regardless of race or gender—Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, say, or Wright and James Baldwin, who told Wright he was the “father,” and therefore he, Baldwin, had to “kill” him—there is the possibility for a kind of Cain/Abel jealousy and professional competition to arise. I find it remarkable and refreshing that this did not seem to arise between Ellison and Albert Murray. With August and Art, I always deferred, graciously and gratefully, to their greater experience in theater and Hollywood, and they deferred to my greater experience as a literary and visual artist, and as a philosopher. Mutual respect was always present, and there was even the desire to collaborate on new projects. Art and I have worked on things together for decades, and pitched stories together to Barbara Streisand, Denzel Washington, and Wesley Snipes, and conference called together with Marvel’s Stan Lee.

DAVIS: In writing, you have described your wife, Joan, as “educated, extremely independent, and, though kind toward everyone, [having] one of Hemingway’s ‘built-in shit detectors,’” and you have compared her values to those of your father: frugality, lack of pretense, and unshakable morality (“I Call” 18–19). I wonder if you can you talk more
about Joan’s influence on your work or on your life in general? Can you talk some about the impact of Joan’s own commitment to social work in Seattle?

JOHNSON: We were born exactly seven days apart in April 1948, and really only a matter of miles from each other in Evanston and South Chicago. I’m older by a week. I often joke that our fathers possibly impregnated our mothers at exactly the same moment. She is, I know, the only woman on this earth I could have spent my life with, the only woman I’ve ever met who I felt it was my personal duty to make happy. Our values are identical. We met when we were twenty years old in the summer of 1968. What impressed me about her was how she and her three sisters and two brothers had grown up poor in a violent housing project, but her spirituality was so deep, so clear, so uncompromised that she emerged from that experience not only beautiful but also kind, generous, balanced, forgiving, and resourceful when times are hard. She was a K-12 teacher right after we married, has a master’s degree in social work from UW, and until recently worked with patients dying of cancer and AIDS, and with teenage girls in one of those facilities where they are one step away from being incarcerated. Since childhood she has loved the description of the perfect wife in the Book of Proverbs, which I published an essay about. I can testify that she is that mature and solid woman in the Book of Proverbs, the one whose “children arise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and praiseth her.” I believe the late Paul Newman said when he was asked about other women that, “Why should I go out for hamburger when I have steak at home?” That’s always been how I’ve felt about my wife Joan.

DAVIS: Toward the end of “I Call Myself an Artist,” you list certain events you saw as “the finest moments of my life”: your marriage to Joan New, the births of your children, and the tribute to Ralph Ellison during your acceptance of the National Book Award for your novel Middle Passage (1990). Do you see a common thread between these moments? What qualifies a moment as “fine” for you? Have there been any additional fine moments since your tribute to Ellison?

JOHNSON: I would include on that list the day SUNY Stony Brook lured me back to their campus under the pretense of giving me an honorary degree, which they did give me, but also my real PhD in philosophy, back-dated to 1988, when I published Being and Race. One of my old Stony Brook colleagues said to me that, to his knowledge, this has only happened one other time in the history of philosophy—when Wittgenstein, who was famous but had not finished his doctorate, wanted to teach, so his old profs got together and awarded him the degree. I add this moment because my doctorate in philosophy means as much, and in some cases more, to me as the literary prizes or awards I’ve received. The PhD in philosophy was one of my dreams since I was eighteen years old. Philosophy, which literally means “the love of wisdom,” is my passion, pre-dates my interest in writing literary fiction, and obviously informs my devotion to Buddhism.

DAVIS: Your drive as a writer has been devoted to writing “philosophical fiction,” and you have recognized such writers as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Jean Toomer as influences. Now that you are retiring from university teaching, what does a retrospective
A glance reveal to you about your sense of accomplishment thus far with your life goal of filling the void of “genuine philosophical black literature”? Are there other writers or thinkers that you feel have influenced your writing and/or philosophy?

JOHNSON: Well, the great writers and philosophers who influenced me strongly are legion, and not just limited to Wright, Ellison, and Toomer. Sadly, my first philosophy professor, Dr. John Howie, whose course on the pre-Socratics I took in 1966, died a few weeks ago. I last saw him when I delivered the 16th Paul Tillich Lecture on Tillich’s critique of Buddhism—a version of which I published in the winter 2006 issue of *Tricycle*—at Harvard Divinity School a few years ago. He came to that lecture, and I dedicated it to him. He was a graduate of Boston University, where he was influenced, as Martin Luther King, Jr. had been, by the school of Boston Personalists, who I mention in my novel *Dreamer*. I also owe much to phenomenologist Don Ihde, my dissertation advisor, and especially to John Gardner, who brought me into the book world in the first place and provided me with a model for the wide range of things an inventive literary writer and scholar could do.

As for my goal of enriching black American, and American, fiction with 2,000 years of Western and Eastern philosophy—well, that’s done. Although I’ve prolifically turned out books, essays, articles, stories, drawings, and more since 1998, my “job” in regard to that specific project or literary program I started in the 1970s was over with *Dreamer*. I’m confident I did the work God put me here to do.

DAVIS: So let me make sure that I understand: are you saying that your job as a writer is complete, or is it that your writing project itself has changed, has assumed a new “job” other than creating philosophical writings?

JOHNSON: My creative work will continue until the last day of my life, until I take my last breath. But decades ago I made myself a promise that by the age of fifty, which is the year I published *Dreamer*, I planned to have all my duties and responsibilities to everyone in my life—parents, teachers, colleagues, editors and publishers, friends and family, and students—discharged or completed. For the last ten years, there hasn’t been anything I “have” to do, only the things I want to do creatively that nourish me spiritually, intellectually, and artistically. See this in terms of the Hindu “Four Stages of Life.” In youth (spring), our job is to study and acquire skills. In adulthood (summer), we enter the work world with its various obligations and put those skills and that knowledge into play. In middle-age (fall), we serve our family and community as householders, creating wealth so that we can help others achieve happiness and avoid suffering. Then at the beginning of old age (winter), we retire from the worldliness of the world to devote ourselves exclusively to matters of the spirit, to knowledge (vidya), and preparation for death. In every “stage,” I create, but the intention and motivation behind the creative work matures, changes, and evolves during one’s passage through life.

DAVIS: I know at least one critic, Linda Selzer, who argues that your fiction is not only important because it incorporates philosophical ideas into literature, but also because it enriches the practice of philosophy itself by pushing beyond the analytical to imbue
philosophical questions with phenomenological force. Can you speak a bit about why such an approach to philosophizing might be valuable?

JOHNSON: People mistakenly believe that philosophy is all about abstractions, that it happens in an irrealized realm of ideas divorced from the messiness of the world. That is a mistake, a major misunderstanding. Philosophical ideas begin in the muck and mud of experience, of daily living, and we only abstract them—or lift them out of immediate experience—in order to discuss and analyze them. As a writer of philosophical fiction, I saw my job as being one where I returned those perennial philosophical questions back to the drama—the sweat and struggle of everyday life where they arose in the first place.

DAVIS: In your recent article “The Meaning of Barack Obama” (2008), which appeared in the Buddhist publication *Shambhala Sun*, you describe Obama’s background as an “interpenetration of backgrounds that transcends dualism” and “seemingly exotic but in fact very common”: “a kind of blank slate on which Americans have projected their deepest and most visceral social and cultural longings” (20). And you quote David Brooks in the *New York Times*: “people on almost all sides of an issue can see parts of themselves reflected in Obama’s eyes. But it does make him hard to place” (20). In various ways, these descriptions, for me, echo the fluidity or mobility of some of the characters in your fiction. I’m thinking here of characters such as Rutherford Calhoun and the god of the Allmuseri in *Middle Passage*; Andrew Hawkins and Horace Bannon in *Oxherding Tale*; and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Chaym Smith in *Dreamer*. What do such figures tell us about your understanding of identity?

JOHNSON: They tell us that we are *process*, not product; that we are *verbs*, not nouns. That our “identity” is fluid, not fixed or static, and better described by Heraclitus than Parmenides, and put rather well by Alfred North Whitehead when in *Process and Reality* he talks about actual entities and subjective aims. This question of “identity,” or what is the self—which is for me the deepest of philosophical questions from which all others arise—came to mind for me today when I read this passage by Joseph Goldstein in *Insight Meditation*:

> When perception is stronger than mindfulness, we recognize various appearances and create concepts such as “body,” “cat,” “house,” or “person” . . . . On some clear night, go outside, look up at the sky, and see if you can find the Big Dipper. For most people that is a familiar constellation, easy to pick out from all the other stars. But is there really a Big Dipper up there in the sky?

> There is no Big Dipper up there. “Big Dipper” is a concept. Humans looked, saw a certain pattern, and then created a concept in our collective mind to describe it. That concept is useful because it helps us recognize the constellation. But it also has another, less useful effect. By creating the concept “Big Dipper” we separate out those stars from all the rest, and then, if we become attached to the idea of that separation, we lose the sense of the night sky’s wholeness, its oneness. Does the separation actually exist in the sky? No. We created it through the use of a concept. Does anything change in the sky when we understand that there is no Big Dipper? No. (112)
We are deceived often by concepts and the creations of our own minds. “Race” is one of those illusions, as is the idea of an enduring, unchanging self, a notion David Hume beautifully exploded in *A Treatise of Human Nature*.

**DAVIS:** The same David Hume that, as you say, exploded the notion of race is also known for making vitriolic statements about the inferiority of the “Negro Race.” Understanding that we all have contradictions—and I know your short story “Alethia” from *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* takes up the mixed record of philosophers on race—I wonder if we might hear more on how or if you reconcile these conflicting gestures made by Hume.

**JOHNSON:** The anti-black racism found historically for 2,500 years in Western thinkers before 1970 is well documented. All these white men and women were predictably flawed products of their times, and they reflect the cultural/intellectual limitations of their times. Just as we reflect the strengths and weaknesses of our present moment in human history. However, just because Hume erred egregiously on the subject of black people, that does not mean he erred when discussing the question of our experience of the self. He didn’t. Hume got it exactly right in a remarkable stroke of brilliance: the absence of any empirical evidence for the “self” or “soul” that recalls Buddhism’s use of *vipassana* meditation to determine what is or is not in our thoughts, and also phenomenology’s use of noetic analysis. There is really nothing here that needs to be reconciled if we understand that it isn’t necessary to throw the baby out with the bath water. See it in light of the Yin/Yang symbol: a spot of darkness, ignorance, in the light; and a spot of light, wisdom, in the darkness. My story “Alethia” does address this question, as literary scholar Linda Selzer magnificently demonstrates in her new book. A black student or scholar encountering these flaws and mistakes in white writers, and any other writers for that matter, will cringe, but he needs to behave like a grown-up. He or she needs to respond to it analytically and critically, and not allow himself or herself to be overcome with anger or emotionalism, which serves nothing. It would be rather silly, don’t you think, to dismiss the groundbreaking work of James Watson on DNA just because he’s poorly informed and mistaken about black people? I admire him for the former and pity him for his ignorance about the latter. And that ignorance might well change if he takes the time to learn a few things about the African Diaspora.

**DAVIS:** Where does, or should, the physical body fit into our understanding of self? During a recent reading, poet Li-Young Lee talked briefly about what he saw as the danger of a Western tendency to champion the mind over, and sometimes at the consequence of, the body in our attempts to understand ourselves and our connections to those around us. Characters in your fiction have also pushed my understanding of how to live well inside a body. I’m thinking again about figures such as the god of the Allmuseri and Horace Bannon. I wonder if you could talk specifically about how you see the body in relation to knowledge and/or identity.

**JOHNSON:** The privileging of the mind or spirit over the body in modern philosophy begins with Descartes’s division of human beings into mind-substance and body-substance. That ontological division is prefigured in medieval Christianity, and that is probably what
Li-Young Lee is referring to. However, we have learned from the phenomenologists, especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty, that consciousness is always embodied and cannot be experienced empirically any other way. Phenomenology dissolves the old error of mind/body dualism, because we understand that the body is the mediation between consciousness and the world, of which it is a part. Take a look at one of my most reprinted and anthologized stories, “China.” There, an aging, black postman is very out of touch with his body and is dying, physically and spiritually. But through exposure to the martial arts, then meditation, he manages to restore his body and spirit, his health, and transcend by the story’s end the false dualisms—or illusions—so many in the West fall into. Another often reprinted piece I wrote when I was still in graduate school at Stony Brook, “The Phenomenology of the Black Body,” also speaks to this issue, as well as a new book by philosopher George Yancy, _Black Bodies, White Gazes_ (2008).

DAVIS: Last year I heard Henry Louis Gates, Jr. give a talk at the Pennsylvania State University about one of his current projects, which was concerned with tracking the ancestry of black Americans in order to identify the multiplicities of our biological roots. In your Obama piece, you also use DNA research to help undo socially constructed notions of racialized difference and to highlight the historical tenets and common ancestry we all share. Do you see your work in relation to that of Gates or other black intellectuals?

JOHNSON: Dr. Gates kindly included a link for my recent Obama essay on his website, _TheRoot.com_. We recently exchanged a few messages, and I praised him highly for his interview with James Watson, which he told me received over three million “hits” in a twenty-four-hour period. I think he and I are very much in agreement about the importance DNA research has for clarifying the issue of racial identity.

DAVIS: A recent _Forbes_ essay describes the potential for an Obama presidency to “sunder the connection between ‘Western-ness’ and whiteness.” The essay goes on to discuss the cultural value of this deconstruction: a softening of non-Western resistance to the “better ideas” of the West. Do you see this evaluation in agreement with your own?

JOHNSON: That _Forbes_ article was written by Tunku Varadarajan, formerly the op-ed page editor at the _Wall Street Journal_. It was Tunku who got me to write two op-eds for _WSJ_, one of which, “Shall We Overcome? The Black American Condition Today,” brought me a tremendous amount of positive replies and was featured in _Society_ magazine (July/August 2006) with essays in response to it by seven other writers and thinkers. I hope Tunku’s position is right, that Western-ness in the twenty-first century can be seen as not monopolized by whites, who only make up 17% of the world’s population. The other 83% are people of color.

DAVIS: Your recent piece “The End of the Black American Narrative” (2008), which appeared in _The American Scholar_, seemed to be in strong conversation with earlier essays by Ralph Ellison. How do you see your article in relation to Ellison’s work or the work of other black intellectual writers?
JOHNSON: I’ve always been an integrationist, as Ellison was. As a Buddhist who understands the experience of dependent origination which states that nothing arises independently, also known in Sanskrit as pratitya samutpada, and which Thich Nhat Hahn calls “inter-being,” I’m very sensitive to the interconnectedness of all life, how all things are interwoven, and you might say my oeuvre is on one level simply about revealing those threads that connect us all.

DAVIS: This past election was a historical event that I believe many Americans will remember as they do other watershed moments in our nation’s history. Would you mind sharing with us what it felt like to you to vote in this election?

JOHNSON: I felt for the very first time in my life that I was voting for a candidate I really cared for. For black Americans in the past, and since the founding of this nation, we only had a choice between two white candidates for president, and black people would wonder, “Which one of these two dislikes black people the least?” Obama is such a global candidate, in his biology and biography, that this was not a question black voters had to consider.

DAVIS: If Barack Obama’s campaign will, as you say, take the temperature of racial attitudes in America, I see your article on the black American narrative as taking the temperature of the potential for de-racialized attitudes. Do you agree with this parallel? Given the strong response to this article, what do you think the results of the temperature-taking are so far?

JOHNSON: I agree with that parallel. I think Obama’s campaign has been remarkable in the sense that people worldwide love this bi-racial, black man. Whether people like it or not, in the twenty-first century we will have to experience and approach others as individuals. To do otherwise, to approach them in terms of the illusion of race, is to insult them.

DAVIS: The end goal of “The End of the Black American Narrative” is to consider what we do next if the function of the black American narrative “has outlived its usefulness as a tool of interpretation.” You provide a list of sites that would begin the interrogation you posit, including “new and better stories, new concepts, and new vocabularies and grammar based not on the past but on the dangerous, exciting, and unexplored present, with the understanding that each is, at best, a provisional reading of reality, a single phenomenological profile that one day is likely to be revised, if not completely overturned.” Ultimately, you recognize that this change will and should produce narratives “of individuals, not groups.” Are there current projects you are working on that will be the model for such narratives? What might this look like?

JOHNSON: I’ve been working on that project all my life. My story “Kwoon” has no racial identification for its central characters, also my story “Moving Pictures,” and several other stories I’ve written recently and in Dr. King’s Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories. “Race” does not figure into the drama of those stories.
DAVIS: In an interview with Jonathan Little you said:

Every major character for me is a character of evolution and change. They are not the same at the end of the book as when we first saw them. The ideal novel would be one in which there are no minor characters, where there are no flat characters . . . What I want is the process novel where everybody mentioned is a main character in the process of evolution. That would be the ultimate moral fiction. (“Interview” 112)

Later in that same interview, you also stated, “I would like to believe that I could write book after book after book and someone could believe that they had been written by different people . . . Things could absolutely change in terms of the overall experience effect, from book to book. That’s the kind of freedom I would like to see from novel to novel, from story to story” (113). Although functioning on two different levels—the micro and the macro, freedom of the character(s) and freedom of the author—these two goals of fiction appear to be running parallel. I wonder if you could talk more about how you see this “process of evolution” functioning in everyday life.

JOHNSON: Well, just to throw this in, let me say that I did a radio interview when my second collection of stories, *Soulcatcher and Other Stories*, appeared, and the woman who interviewed me said when she first read those twelve fictions, she thought they’d all been created by different people and that I had just compiled them. That’s the effect I want to create with every story. As Whitman said, we contain within ourselves “multitudes” and can draw upon any of this richness when creating a story. *Dreamer* is, for example, informed by the philosophical and social and political vision of Martin Luther King, Jr., not entirely by my vision. My story “Menagerie” is, for the most part, informed by the existentialist God-is-dead thesis, and “Exchange Value” by Marx’s distinction between use value and exchange value. As I told writer Nicholas O’Connell, another of my former students, in an interview in Jim McWilliams’s book *Passing the Three Gates*, “The great fight in life and in literature is to prevent some form of idea or situation from enslaving you. It’s to keep your mind open and your eyes open and your life open, to find new ways of not being limited . . .” (21). In other words, the goal in both life and literature, and certainly in Buddhism, is to realize our freedom.

DAVIS: As you look back at your career at the University of Washington, what do you believe will stay with you the most?

JOHNSON: The joy of working with talented students, and the benefit any artist experiences when he teaches: namely, you have to deeply understand both practice and theory if your goal is to help others in the classroom, and doing that critically sharpens an artist’s own understanding of aesthetics and his craft.

DAVIS: What is next for Charles Johnson, professionally and personally?
JOHNSON: More of what I’ve been doing professionally since I was seventeen-years-old: writing and drawing and publishing, spiritual practice, and finding inexhaustible joy in this mysterious universe in which we find ourselves.

NOTE

1. Johnson’s work on PBS projects stretches from his 1970 series on cartooning, Charlie’s Pad; to his first PBS script, “Charlie Smith and Fritter Tree” (1978); to his prize-winning 1984 PBS film, Booker; to his 1990s work on the companion volume for the PBS series, Africans in America. In 1981, Johnson was also one of two writer/producers for the second season of “Up and Coming,” the pre-Cosby series about a black family in San Francisco, shot at KQED. The other writer/producer was his long-time friend Art Washington.

WORKS CITED