As we have seen, the postmodern slave narratives by Reed, Butler, and Morrison liberate the historical representation of slavery by dismantling traditional conceptions of history, realism, and objectivity. In their place, these writers re-form the past by embracing literary forms and genres traditionally associated with popular entertainment (the gothic), escapism (speculative or science fiction), and political detachment (the postmodern novel). Through the union of history, the fantastic, and oppositional politics, the contemporary author, the slave protagonist, and the text itself claim an authority over the past that traditional history, realistic historical novels, and postmodern texts cannot, or, in the case of the latter, will not. Even a text like Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada*, marked as it is by parodic, anachronistic, and at times ribald situations, assumes an authority over more traditional narratives through its critique of romanticized depiction of the slave’s search for freedom, its interrogation of black strategies for liberation, and its examination of slavery’s legacy in postmodern commodity culture. In contrast to the fractured, destabilized postmodern subject, slave protagonists like Raven Quickskill, Dana Franklin, and even Sethe, though battered and scarred by slavery, achieve an autonomy and agency essential to a project of liberation. In turn, Reed, Butler, and Morrison assert their authority to re-form the history of slavery through their implied connection to the subject (both thematic and individual) of their narratives. Far from deconstructing a unified concept of the black subject and the black community, most writers of postmodern slave
narratives rely on a conception of a unified, coherent, and stable black identity in order to establish historical authority even as they undermine the mimetic conventions of traditional historical narratives. But what happens when the slave narrator as subject becomes the object of re-formation or postmodern deconstruction? What are the implications of using non-mimetic devices to depict an unstable and indeterminate black subject as opposed to an autonomous and stable one? The postmodern slave narratives by Charles Johnson force us to consider these questions and, as a result, shift the terms of critique established by the previous writers.

In *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and *Middle Passage* (1990), Charles Johnson struggles with an alternative vision of black subjectivity that undercuts the identity politics espoused by other writers I have examined thus far. Emphasizing the multiple and often conflicting cross-cultural influences instigated by slavery and the Atlantic slave trade, Johnson focuses on the transcultural aspect of black subjectivity and views identity not as a unitary or fixed entity but as “a process dominated by change and transformation” (Little, “Charles Johnson’s Revolutionary *Oxherding Tale*,” 165). In an effort to avoid what he sees as the reductive trap of racial essentialism, Johnson re-forms the slave subject and, by extension, the nature of black subjectivity, by deconstructing the conventional first-person slave narrator so integral to the formal structure of the nineteenth-century slave narratives. Through a series of metafictional intrusions, philosophical digressions, and often parodic narrative situations, all of which undermine the autonomy and reliability of his protagonist, Johnson self-consciously draws attention to the first-person narrator; he critiques the device as both a convention of the slave narrative form and as a symbol of black subjectivity. In re-forming the slave narrative, Johnson produces complex and hybrid texts that simultaneously use elements of the picaresque narrative, the comic novel, postmodern metafiction, and, of course, the slave narrative itself. In spite of this complexity, his novels push the boundaries of realism less overtly than other postmodern slave narratives I have examined. In place of material anachronism, time travel, and the gothic supernatural, Johnson emphasizes textuality and narrative form to undermine the realistic dimensions of his text. Even in the rare occasions when fantastic events occur (the seemingly omnipotent slave catcher Horace Bannon or the mythical African tribe the Allmuseri, for example) they are isolated moments in the text and are open to both literal and figurative interpretation. Nevertheless, these instances work in tandem with Johnson’s preoccupation with literary form; the fantastic reinforces the disjuncture between Johnson’s novels as textual constructs and the external history they depict. Johnson departs
from the strategies other writers of the postmodern slave narrative employ. Whereas other postmodern slave narratives assert their narrative authority over the past, Johnson’s narratives maintain a more postmodernist stance toward narrative historical representation by bracketing the text from the history it depicts.

Rather than using non-mimetic elements solely to liberate his slave protagonists (and contemporary readers) from the constraints of realism, Johnson uses these elements to liberate his protagonists from constraining definitions of black identity. His slave narrators, Andrew Hawkins (Oxherding Tale) and Rutherford Calhoun (Middle Passage), in both their actions as fictional characters and in their function as first-person narrators, reflect the complex, dispersed, and transcultural dimensions of their identities. Johnson’s emphasis on transcultural subjectivity is a response to what he views as the black literary tradition’s limited conceptions of black identity and its desire to place art in the service of ideology.3 In Being and Race, Johnson criticizes the constraining ideological dimensions of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts movement, two of the major African American literary and cultural movements of the twentieth century.4 For Johnson, one significant limitation that arose out of these movements was the conception of an essentialist and authentic black identity. Such a conception, Johnson argues, marks a descent into ideology and can only result in intellectual, artistic, and philosophical stasis:

The control and reconstitution, which arises out of the noble work of counteracting cultural lies, easily slips toward dogma that ends the process of literary discovery. . . . It cannot be through ideologies that genuine creative work is achieved. Rather, all presuppositions, all theories, must be suspended before experience and meaning can be brought forth in black literary art. (Being 29)

Johnson, more than any other writer I have discussed so far, rejects the elements of black cultural nationalism that, in some ways, inspired the reclamation of history in postmodern slave narratives. Even as he engages in a similar project as Reed, Butler, and Morrison, Johnson critiques their implicit claims of authority suggested by their texts. Although none of these writers explicitly identify with the Black Arts movement, all acknowledge the ideological foundations of their work and acknowledge their political identities as black writers. For Reed, Butler, and Morrison, the road to freedom for the contemporary author and the slave subject lies primarily in constructing a stable, politically autonomous communal sense of
black identity in the face of the physical, psychological, and cultural subjugation of slavery and its legacy. For example, by the end of *Flight to Canada*, Uncle Robin resists the dehumanizing effects of white consumerism by hiring Raven to tell his story. For Dana Franklin, her transportation into the past forces her to acknowledge her history and cultural identity in ways she had previously ignored. In *Beloved*, Sethe’s only hope for survival at the end of the novel is to relearn that she is “her own best thing.” In each of these instances, the key to liberation lies in the reclamation of a strong sense of black identity across time and space. By contrast, Johnson’s goal as a writer is to preserve a distinction between the literary and the ideological and to free black creative expression from the limitations that ideology imposes. In advancing this goal, however, Johnson fails to acknowledge the ideology inherent in his own work; deconstructing racial essentialism in favor of a transcultural subjectivity constitutes an ideology in its own right—one that ultimately determines the ways Johnson rejects realism in order to expand the parameters of the slave narrative and black subjectivity. Where other authors turn to popular or contemporary forms like science fiction, the gothic, or the postmodern novel, Johnson re-forms the slave narrative by explicitly examining the philosophical dimensions of the slave narrative itself. Johnson’s preoccupation with the intertextual nature of narrative form in general, and his use of metafictional intrusion (*Oxherding Tale*) and allegory (*Middle Passage*) to examine it, emphasizes the fantastic dimensions intrinsic to the slave narrative as a form.

As a narrative construct and a representation of the individual slave subject, the slave narrator/protagonist operates at the site where literary form and ideological content explicitly converge in the slave narrative. In the original slave narrative and its contemporary counterpart, the slave narrator functions as a heroic cultural archetype—a politically driven figure who achieves freedom in spite of all the obstacles in her way. In the act of narration, the former slave achieves both a sense of identity and an ability to speak out against an institution that sought to suppress that identity. Johnson undermines the heroic dimensions of Andrew Hawkins and Rutherford Calhoun as racial archetypes and focuses on their function as textual constructs. This emphasis on the formal aspects of the slave narrative allows Johnson to relegate the sticky subject of ideology to the margins of his novels. Nevertheless, Johnson’s ideological project manifests itself in the very nature of his deconstruction of the slave narrator. For Johnson, identity itself is intertextual—the product of multiple and varied cultural traditions. As such, the historical impact of slavery and its legacy...
ultimately has more to do with the complex process of transculturation than with continued subjugation. Although Johnson does not deny the economic or physical abuses of slavery as a system, for him its legacy lies not in the lasting effects of these abuses but in the transculturation the Atlantic slave trade engendered. As a result, his texts (and his narrators) become playgrounds of transculturation and intertextuality that openly reveal and revel in a diverse range of sources and influences.

The foundation of Johnson’s re-formation of the slave narrator lies in the textual representation and archetype of black subjectivity: the slave narrator. Johnson draws attention to the slave narrator’s status as a textual construct most explicitly in one of the metafictional chapters of Oxherding Tale. In “The Manumission of First-Person Viewpoint,” an authorial narrator, presumably Johnson, interrupts Andrew Hawkins’s narrative in order to reflect on what he calls the slave narrative’s “only invariant feature”: the first-person viewpoint. Johnson asserts, “what we value most highly in this viewpoint are precisely the limitations upon the narrator-perceiver. . . . [W]hat we lack in authority we gain in immediacy” (152). Johnson points out that an author, by granting readers access into a character’s thoughts, produces the illusion of a speaking subject whose authority lies in his personal experience of slavery. Beyond the facade of a unified and autonomous individual who reports on the experience of slavery lies a formal convention of the text. Johnson states:

The Self, this perceiving Subject who puffs on and on, is, for all purposes, a palimpsest, interwoven with everything—literally everything—that can be thought or felt. We can go further: The Subject of the Slave Narrative, like all Subjects, is forever outside itself in others, objects; he is parasitic, if you like, drawing his life from everything he is not, and at precisely the instant he makes possible their appearance. (152)

By drawing attention to the first-person narrator as a construction with a distinct form and function, Johnson strips the illusion of individual subjectivity and authority away. Johnson’s metafictional intrusion, characteristic of many postmodern novels, emphasizes the purely textual and literary dimensions of the slave narrator and undermines a conception of the slave narrator as authentic (or, at the very least, authoritative) that other writers of postmodern slave narratives maintain. Johnson ends the chapter by stating, “having liberated the first-person, it is now only fitting that in the following chapters we do as much for Andrew Hawkins” (153). Liberating the first-person slave narrator from the constraints of narrative realism also
allows him to liberate it from limiting conceptions of black identity and false claims of authority. For Johnson, both are forms of slavery.

Johnson’s evocation of the palimpsest (a parchment or tablet that has been written upon or inscribed multiple times with the previous text or texts having been imperfectly erased and remaining still partly visible) as a metaphor for the slave narrator suggests that the perceiving subject of the slave narrative carries all the traces of those narrators and literary traditions that preceded it. The palimpsest operates as the symbol of the transcultural dimensions that each literary form and individual subject retains from its past. In Being and Race, Johnson returns to this image to illustrate the nature of language and the word, stating, “like a palimpsest, the word is a tissue of interpretation. Language is the experience, the sight . . . of others formed into the world” (39). In another metafictional chapter from Oxherding Tale, “On the Nature of Slave Narratives,” Johnson argues that the slave narrative itself, grounded as it is in language, reflects the textual traces of its literary precursors much like a palimpsest. Rather than a product of a purely African American tradition, Johnson asserts:

As a form, the . . . Slave Narrative is related, as distant cousins are related, to the Puritan Narrative. . . . In point of fact, the movement in the Slave Narrative from slavery (sin) to freedom (salvation) are identical to those of the Puritan Narrative, and both these genuinely American forms are the offspring of that hoary confession by the first philosophical black writer: Saint Augustine. . . . No form, I should note, loses its ancestry; rather, these meanings accumulate in layers of tissue as the form evolves. It is safe to conjecture that the Slave Narrative proper whistles and hums with this history. (118–19)

Emphasizing its intertextual and inherently transcultural characteristics, Johnson asserts that the slave narrative contains the forms and histories of those texts that preceded and influenced it. Johnson’s inclusion of this metafictional chapter signals to the reader that his revision of the slave narrative explores not only the nature of black identity but also the historical and cultural dimensions of the form itself.

In his rejection of a racially essentialist view of the slave subject, Johnson presents us with an almost transcendental view of the slave narrator as textual construct. In this sense, Johnson departs from postmodern conceptions of narrative and subjectivity by positing an almost romantic or even Platonic view of narrative and literature. More than a representation of black subjectivity or even a narrative convention, Johnson views the
first-person slave narrator as “an opening through which the world is delivered: first-person (if you wish) universal” (153). However, it is important to acknowledge that, by drawing attention to and emphasizing the formal construction of the slave narrator, Johnson creates a tension between the text and an external reality that neither he nor we as readers can fully resolve. Although Andrew’s and Rutherford’s status as textual constructs allows him to expand our preconceived notions of the slave subject, as I will argue later in this chapter, Johnson cannot (and I suspect does not want to) escape the implications his revisions have on black identity external to the text.

As I have pointed out, in spite of his rejection of black nationalism and its ideological view of literature, Johnson’s re-formation of the slave narrative constitutes its own ideology. In Being and Race, Johnson acknowledges the inevitability of ideology when he discusses the historical dimensions of literary form:

No literary form is neutral. None is a value-empty vehicle into which we can simply “pour” the content of experience. . . . Each form, whether it be a fairy tale or a nonnarrative work, reveals a Lebenswelt, or vision of the world that is appropriate to its particular universe, and the use of any form will transfigure with startling results the “content” one wishes to express through it. (48)

Beyond an investigation into the slave narrative’s textual history, Johnson’s invocation of its form allows him to transfigure the content of the slave experience and to incorporate his own particular “vision of the world.” Rather than an ideology of racial essentialism or an ideological conception of art, what emerges from Johnson’s work, then, is an ideology of transculturation. Although his conception of the palimpsest as a metaphor for the transcultural dimensions of both black textuality and black identity seems idealistic, Johnson’s preoccupation with slavery, as suggested by his two postmodern slave narratives, forces us to regard these concepts, in and of themselves, as multiple, complex, and historically determined. In spite of his emphasis on textuality and the nature of literary form, Johnson’s reformation of the slave narrative reveals the structures of power and domination inherent in the process of transculturation that is the byproduct of slavery. As a result, the metafictional and overtly allegorical dimensions of his texts (both non-mimetic in effect) allow Johnson to critique modes of narration that obscure the racial and historical complexities of black identity and black textuality.
Finding a Way: Transcultural transference in Oxherding Tale

One of the most disconcerting aspects of Johnson’s postmodern slave narratives is their deconstruction of the boundary between the enslaver and the enslaved. Although Johnson’s use of non-mimetic or fantastic elements never goes so far as to completely obscure or abstract the actual economy of the Atlantic slave trade, they do highlight the ways the processes of transculturation blur the lines between slave and master and between black and white identity. The crucial meeting that occurs early in Oxherding Tale between two prototypical characters of the slave narrative—the slave narrator and the slave catcher—illustrates this deconstruction. The interaction between the escaped slave, Andrew Hawkins, and Horace Bannon, the man hot on his trail, offers us two contrasting representations of transculturation and its impact on individual identity. By chance, Andrew Hawkins is introduced to Bannon, commonly referred to by those who fear him as the Soulcatcher. Infamous throughout the South, many believe that Bannon possesses the ability to consume the souls of the runaway slaves he has captured, a feat which allows him to intuit the actions and feelings of those slaves who try to elude him. This meeting foreshadows the critical role Bannon will play in Andrew’s quest for freedom: the two will meet again in the final pages of the novel. But even in this initial meeting Johnson establishes Andrew and Bannon as parallel figures. Each must negotiate the violence of American slavery in order to achieve a sense of identity, however different their strategies as slave and slave catcher may be.

Upon his first meeting with Bannon, Andrew hides his identity by passing for white. As Andrew wears his ambiguous ancestry as a means of self-protection, he finds Bannon’s racial ambiguity particularly striking:

The Soulcatcher’s voice, I swear, was black. The kind of deep-fried Mississippi Delta twang that magically turned floor into flow. Door into doe. [He was] a manhunter, a great, slack-shouldered monster with a gray Cathedral beard, a racial mongrel, like most Americans, but the genetic mix in the Soulcatcher was graphic: a collage of features that forced me, as he labored toward the door, looking down at me, the corners of his mouth turned up, to stare. Here the deltoid nose of a Wazimba, here “a snotcup” (so my stepmother called them) cut deeply above his lips, which were the sheerest line, slash; here curly hair coarsely textured like my father’s; here heavy lidded eyes, one teal blue, one green beneath a low brow that bulged with veins. . . . I could not shake the feeling that Bannon was in masquerade, a slave who, for reasons too fantastic to guess, hunted slaves. (67–68)
By spending his life in pursuit of escaped slaves, Bannon has become a racial mongrel, appropriating the souls of those he has captured into his physical being. Whether we interpret the Soulcatcher’s appearance in literal or symbolic terms, as a slave catcher of mixed ancestry (much as Andrew is a slave of mixed ancestry), or as a spiritual amalgamation of a multiracial and multicultural South, Bannon represents the violent intermixture of cultures and physical forms in graphic terms. Like Andrew, Bannon possesses the ability to masquerade as something he is not. However, because of Bannon’s possible biraciality and Andrew’s own racial intermixture, this “masquerade” might actually belie the palimpsestic aspects of American identity that arise out of slavery. Both men are transcultural in nature—graphically reflecting their entwined racial histories upon their facial features. Whereas Andrew stands at the crossroads of constructing a liberating transcultural identity in spite of his enslavement, Bannon has already developed a transcultural self, using it to enslave, consume, and destroy.

Johnson’s use of these contrasting symbolic figures forces us to acknowledge that transculturation, in the context of American slavery, is always laden with some form of exertion, some form of power. Nowhere is this more evident than in the way Bannon uses his ability to incorporate black identity into his being as a means of capturing and killing escaped slaves. However, even as transculturation allows Bannon to consume and exploit more proficiently the minority cultures the slaves represent, this cross-cultural exchange also allows Andrew to manipulate a white Eurocentric culture that seeks to subjugate him. In each instance, transculturation involves an interplay of power relationships sometimes violently oppressive, sometimes empowering and liberating.

Although Johnson establishes Andrew and Bannon as parallel figures, Andrew’s quest for a liberating identity in the face of American slavery is the primary subject of Oxherding Tale. At the outset of the novel, Andrew forces us to revise our expectations of his role as slave narrator and his representation of black identity. Drawing on one of the most basic and identifiable characteristics of the first-person slave narrative—the “I was born” statement that establishes the narrative as an autobiographical document—Andrew gives the reader an account of his origins. Although many of the original slave narrators are unable to identify one or both of their parents, Andrew, recalling Sterne’s comic narrator Tristram Shandy, identifies the moment of his conception. Andrew narrates this moment in ribald fashion, speculating on the drunken exchange of wives between his father, George Hawkins, a field slave, and Jonathan Polkinghorne, the slave owner. In contrast to the suggestions of violence and sexual abuse that run
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as an undercurrent through many slave narratives, Andrew refers to his origins with humor and irony, characterizing George and Jonathan's exchange as a comedy of errors. Johnson transforms the voice of the slave narrator from one of impassioned protest against the depravities of slavery to one of humorous speculation. Unlike Reed who overtly undermines the realistic dimensions of his text through the parodic use of material anachronism, Johnson forces us to straddle the line between realism and the fantastic. Although certainly possible, Andrew's conception and his characterization of it represent such a marked departure from other narrative accounts of slavery that it reinforces the novel's status as a textual construct.

Even more than the system of slavery itself, the central dilemma for Andrew is his quest to achieve a liberating subjectivity unconstrained by racial ideology. As a product of the union between George Hawkins and Polkinghorne's wife, Anna, Andrew views himself as marginalized—an individual belonging “to both house and field . . . but popular in neither” (8). Light-complexioned with Caucasian features, Andrew, like Horace Bannon, bears the traces of a transcultural identity in his physical being. In spite of his ability to pass as white, Andrew's status as a slave prevents him from achieving a liberated sense of identity that is based on his physical appearance. Confused by his inability to fully embrace either cultural heritage, Andrew spends the length of the novel searching for a way to integrate these conflicting forces into a transcultural identity. One of Andrew's first obstacles is the complicated question of paternity. Because Andrew identifies with both Polkinghorne and George as father figures, the reality of his mixed ancestry fragments his identity rather than liberates it. George Hawkins enhances Andrew's confusion by not only voicing a contempt for the white culture that has enslaved him but also by essentializing Andrew's identity in what Andrew himself sees as a limiting conception of race:

More than anything else, I wanted my father's approval—I did, in fact, clomp along in his boots when I was a child, but he was so bitter. And his obsession with the world-historical mission of Africa? I didn't want this obligation! How strange that my father, the skillful, shrewd, funny, and wisest butler at Cripplegate . . . was beneath his mask of good humor and harmless a flinty old Race Man. (21)

George espouses a racially essentialist and politically militant view of identity (one that recalls the black cultural nationalism that Johnson critiques in Being and Race) that Andrew finds constraining. Ultimately he rejects
George's worldview and sets out to construct an identity that reflects his mixed racial ancestry and a broader range of cultural influence. In essence, Andrew views his own identity as a palimpsest.

Andrew experiences an even greater conflict as a result of his formal education. Under the tutelage of Ezekiel Sykes-Withers, a transcendentalist scholar Jonathan Polkinghorne hires to educate him, Andrew follows “a program modeled on that of James Mill for his son John Stuart” (12). Inspired by the Scottish philosopher’s classical and rigorous model, Sykes-Withers teaches Andrew texts in both the Eastern and Western philosophical traditions, encouraging him to learn Greek and to read works by Xenophon and Plato, Lao Tzu, and Chuang Tzu. At first, Andrew attacks his studies voraciously, rapidly consuming these Eastern and Western canonical texts. Eventually, however, Andrew begins to notice the discrepancies between the abstract ideas of these philosophies and his circumstances as a slave: “Soon all life left my studies . . . these vain studies of things moral, things transcendental, things metaphysical were, all in all, rich food for the soul, but in Cripplegate’s quarters all that was considered as making life worth living was utterly wanting” (13). Although Andrew embraces some aspects of transcultural identity (as exemplified by his passion for these philosophical texts), his status as a slave renders most of them inconsequential. In fact, the process of transculturation, at this stage in his life, renders him nearly incapable of integrating the diverse aspects of his life into a sense of identity.

An example of Andrew’s struggles as a result of his classical education occurs in one of his philosophical diversions in the text. Contemplating the long standing racial conflict between George Hawkins and Jonathan Polkinghorne, Andrew reflects on these tensions by posing philosophical questions on the nature of Man and his relationship to the heart. As he traces the etymology of the word from its Sanskrit origin to its current usage, he ultimately concludes that the heart’s meaning lies “at precisely the point where Matter and Mind, spirit and flesh, heaven and earth, subject and object, Self and Other, locked like fingers” (28). Realizing that his abstract reflections and his education in Eastern and Western philosophy has led him astray in sufficiently explaining the complexities of slavery and racial politics, Andrew admits: “Perhaps the narratives of Gustavus Vassa and Venture Smith are, as confessions, clearer about slavery and sexual politics, but I (alas) was lost in the ideas at Cripplegate” (28–29). Andrew realizes that the process of achieving a liberated identity lies beyond the consumption of cultural texts and an immersion in the rigors of a classical education. Following the example of Sykes-Withers forces Andrew to
examine the implication of a transcultural intellectualism that fails to address or incorporate the realities of his position as a slave. Ironically, the abstract transcendentalism that characterizes Ezekiel Sykes-Withers recalls Johnson’s own view of the transcendent dimensions of language and fiction. Both stances obfuscate the ideological forces at work in Andrew’s status as a slave and as a slave narrator.

Shortly after reaching this impasse in his search for a liberating identity, Andrew asks Polkinghorne for his freedom. Instead, Polkinghorne sends him to Leviathan, the plantation owned by Flo Hatfield. At Leviathan and under the tutelage of Flo Hatfield, Andrew experiences another limited (and limiting) model of transcultural identity. Flo, a woman of voracious sexual appetites, chooses Andrew as her sex slave and instructs him in the erotic arts. Even as her sexual prowess seduces him, Andrew realizes that Flo limits his identity as she consumes his body for pleasure; just as Bannon consumes slaves by hunting them down and killing them, Flo Hatfield uses sex as a means of incorporating her slaves into her self-conception. When Andrew learns that he is one of many slaves Flo has consumed (and eventually discarded), he realizes that, in its many guises, the harsh reality of slavery continuously reduces his identity to the surface of his skin:

Although anything you said about slavery could be denied in the same breath, this much struck me as true: the wretchedness of being colonized was not that slavery created feelings of guilt and indebtedness, though I did feel guilt and debt, nor that it created a long lurid dream of multiplicity and separateness, which it indeed created, but the fact that men had epidermalized Being. The Negro—one Negro at Leviathan—was needed as meaning. So it was; so it was. (52)

Although he suffered constraints upon his identity at Cripplegate because of his marginal status (between both house and field) and his ineffectual education, Flo’s conception of race undermines his goal of a liberated and transcultural self to an even greater extent. Much as George’s stance of racial essentialism defines black identity in vague and one-dimensional terms, Flo’s view of race restricts Andrew to one role. Once again Andrew must seek out an alternative, multidimensional conception of identity.

In order to escape slavery and Flo’s personal hold over him, Andrew flees Leviathan with Reb, a fellow slave on the plantation. As a member of the Allmuseri, a fictional African tribe that Johnson develops in his later novel Middle Passage, Reb represents an Africanist worldview that stresses the intersubjective links between members of the community. Part of this
view of identity suggests a relinquishing of any individual desires that separate one from the group. As he reflects on Reb’s conception of selfhood, it is clear that, although he admires him, Andrew cannot accept his view as his own:

Reward [Reb] did not expect. Nor pleasure. Desire was painful. Duty was everything—the casket promised tomorrow, a carving for the blacksmith’s daughter, the floorboards that needed fixing. This was his Way. It was, I thought, a Way of strength and spiritual heroism . . . but like Flo Hatfield’s path of the senses, it was not my Way. (77)

Andrew, in spite of his existence on the margins between house and field, between the white world and the black world, does not want to remain separate from either identity. Rather, Andrew’s quest is for a liberated sense of self in the face of slavery and the complex forces of transculturation. Only toward the end of the novel, after he passes for white, assumes the name William Harris, and marries Peggy Underhill, a white woman, does Andrew realize which ontology most suits his identity. He states:

I had seen so many Ways since leaving Hodges—the student in Ezekiel, the senses in Flo Hatfield, the holy murderer in Bannon (Shiva’s hitman), and Reb, who was surely a Never-Returner; but in all these well-worn trails—none better than another—I discovered that my dharma, such as it was, was that of a householder. (147)

Rather than a state of detachment, strength, or spiritual heroism, what Andrew desires more than anything else is a state of domestic bliss. Interestingly, Andrew fashions his “Way” based on the model of Karl Marx who appears as a character earlier in the text. Based on his experiences with him on the plantation at Cripplegate, he views Marx in a way that is quite different from our view of the historical materialist. Describing Marx he writes: “Marx . . . did not live for ideas, political or otherwise; he was, in the old sense—the Sanskrit sense—a householder. [T]he humorless student radical of the 1830s was—you cannot guess—a citizen devoted, first and foremost, to his family” (84). In essence, Andrew has become a Marxist as defined by the fictional context of the novel. It is through Marx’s sense of self, a phenomenological one that requires the domestic merger with an essential other—that Andrew has found a Way. However, Andrew’s construction of a liberated, transcultural self is flawed. In order to achieve his role as a householder he must break an earlier promise to George that he
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would never relinquish his identity as a black man. Although Andrew achieves his freedom through these means, his model of transculturation descends into a politically and culturally limited form of assimilation. The price for freedom and domestic bliss is his black identity.

Ironically, the person who understands Andrew’s conception of self most is Horace Bannon, the Soulcatcher. When he encounters Bannon for the final time in the novel, Andrew is still a fugitive slave passing for white. Giving every indication that he recognizes him from Flo Hatfield’s plantation, Bannon explains to Andrew his process of capturing escaped slaves, stating: “You become a Negro by lettin’ yoself see what he sees, feel what he feels, want what he wants” (115). Bannon points out that what escaped slaves want is respectability, “to be able to walk down the street and be unnoticed” (115). The desire for ordinariness (or, in Andrew’s case, assimilation) allows Bannon to capture those slaves who try their best to look average, which ultimately makes Andrew vulnerable to him. The primary obstacle in Andrew’s domestic bliss, then, is the Soulcatcher—his counterpart as a symbol of transculturation.

In the final chapter of the novel, entitled “Moksha” (meaning “enlightenment” or “liberation”), Andrew and the Soulcatcher stand together in a moment that recalls their first meeting. In their final confrontation, Bannon tells Andrew that he has decided to retire from his life as a slave catcher. In his retirement, Bannon, like Andrew, has settled into a life of domestic bliss with his new wife, a former prostitute named Minnie. In a final gesture of truce, Bannon allows Andrew to speak to his father whom Bannon had captured and killed. It is in this moment that Johnson's text stretches the boundaries of realism most explicitly. Unbuttoning and opening his shirt, Bannon reveals to Andrew the graphic representation of his transcultural essence:

[His chest was] an impossible tapestry of a thousand individuals no longer static, mere drawings, but if you looked at them long enough, bodies moving like Lilliputians across the surface of his skin. Not tattoos at all, I saw, but forms sardined in his contour, creatures Bannon had killed since childhood ... even the tiniest of these thrashings within the body mosaic was clearly a society as complex as the higher forms, a concrescence of molecules cells atoms in concert, for nothing in the necropolis stood alone, wished to stand alone, had to stand alone, and the commonwealth of the dead shape-shifted on his chest ... their metamorphosis having no purpose beyond the delight the universe took in diversity for its own sake. (175)
Bannon’s body represents a violent democracy of souls in which diversity, brought together by a consumptive force of slavery, struggles to cohere in one transcultural form. As James Coleman points out, the tapestry of souls reveals that Bannon “is this amoral inexorable process that is past, present, and future, and thus he symbolizes part of Johnson’s intertextual process” (636). Like Johnson’s re-formation of the slave narrative itself, Bannon’s body is a palimpsest of American slavery. Its surface contains the multitudinous voices of those consumed by slavery. Just as Andrew finds his identity by successfully negotiating transculturation, Bannon, too, is free to lead a new life carrying its graphic manifestation, albeit in a darker and more disturbing form.

What does Johnson have in mind when he posits these two characters together within this framework of liberation and enlightenment? Perhaps even more important, what does it mean that Bannon can achieve a sense of liberation after he has destroyed the lives of so many? This symbolic image allows Johnson to acknowledge the realistic aspects of transculturation, the tandem of violence and liberation inherent in its inner workings. The fact that both Andrew and Bannon construct their lives anew by the end of the novel, both marrying and leading domestic lives, suggests that both of these forces are ever at work not only within the historical moment of slavery but in its legacy. By having both Andrew and Bannon achieve a sense of liberation, we are forced to view transculturation through a dual lens, one that renders the phenomenon as both liberating and constraining in its diversity.

Charles Johnson’s examination of transculturation and Andrew’s quest for a liberating identity, however, remain not only unresolved but also mired in Eurocentric racial ideology. Although Andrew successfully escapes re-enslavement and is free to continue his life with his wife, Peggy Underhill, in order to do this he must continue to pass as white. He must relinquish a fundamental component of his transcultural identity. Although such a solution works for Andrew as a textual construct, the implications of this are problematic at best. Even as Johnson succeeds in liberating the form and function of the slave narrator, he raises even more complex questions regarding the nature of black identity in the wake of slavery and the dynamics of transculturation it produces in American culture. Oxherding Tale, in spite of itself, ends pessimistically. Rather than positing a subjectivity unconstrained by racial categories, Johnson’s textual solution falls back into a black-white binary that serves as one of the conceptual foundations of American slavery.
Johnson’s second re-formation of the slave narrative, *Middle Passage*, addresses the same complexities of transculturation (both cultural and textual) and reveals the same limitations as *Oxherding Tale*. In many ways, *Middle Passage* is an extension of the previous novel, reflecting Johnson’s interest in intertextuality and its impact on both individual and cultural identity. Although *Middle Passage* contains no overt metafictional intrusions, the numerous intertextual references, both implicit and explicit, allow Johnson to re-form the slave narrative as an allegory—one that brackets the text from narrative realism as much as other postmodern slave narratives.

Rather than symbolizing the processes of transculturation through individual characters in the novel, Johnson places two communities in opposition to each other. The *Republic*, an American slave ship, and the Allmuseri tribe, a group of Africans brought on board, represent opposing cultural archetypes of the Middle Passage, just as Andrew Hawkins and Horace Bannon represent the archetypes of the slave narrative. The *Republic* stands for the colonizing aspects of Western culture as a whole whereas the Allmuseri represent an idealized version of African culture, untainted by the influences of the West. By treating the slave vessel and the Allmuseri tribe as symbols, Johnson places two worldviews in opposition and examines the impact each has on the other. However, Johnson still concerns himself primarily with the nature of identity by filtering his narrative through the first-person perspective of a (former) slave narrator. Although a free man at the time of his experiences on the *Republic*, Rutherford Calhoun still represents the archetypal slave narrator who searches for his identity amidst a culture that defines and limits him. As a free black man, Rutherford is neither a member of the community of enslavers on board the *Republic* nor a part of the African tribal community they enslave. Much like Andrew Hawkins existed between house and field, Rutherford stands between Africa and America, ultimately witnessing the violent conflict between them from a marginal position. As both a character and a symbol in the text, Rutherford, by the end of the novel, represents the problematic and potentially liberating results of transculturation even out of its violent shards. Through him Johnson reconceptualizes the concept of a transcultural identity, wrought by the conflict of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade.

The *Republic*’s status as both a cultural symbol and a textual element is
evident immediately through its reference to the philosophical text by Plato. In *The Republic*, Socrates asserts that justice cannot be found in the individual until it has been found in the State. He conceptualizes a State in which citizens are divided into three classes: the guardians, the soldiers, and the workers. In order for political justice and stability to exist, each group must be confined to its proper social function. By invoking this intertextual reference, Johnson places his text and the *Republic* squarely in the Western tradition, encouraging us to interpret his novel as a treatise on the individual, the state, and social justice. As a slave vessel, the *Republic* functions as a makeshift State. With a captain (Ebenezer Falcon), a first mate (Peter Cringle), a crew, and a cargo of slaves as commodities, the *Republic* clearly operates under a hierarchical system. However, as the events of the novel progress, it becomes clear that the structural system under which the *Republic* functions is anything but stable or just.

In the beginning of the novel, Rutherford stows away on board the vessel in order to escape an arranged marriage to Isadora Bailey, a woman who wants to “civilize” him. A thief, a wanderer, and a liar, Rutherford resembles a picaro as much as a traditional slave narrator, using his wits for survival like a trickster figure. Upon seeing the *Republic* for the first time, however, Rutherford is disturbed by its image:

I had an odd sensation, difficult to explain, that I'd boarded not a ship but a kind of fantastic, floating Black Maria, a wooden sepulcher whose timbers moaned with the memory of too many runs of black gold between the New World and the Old; moaned, I say again, because the ship—with its tiered compartments and galleys, like a crazy quilt-house built by a hundred carpenters, each with a different plan—felt conscious and disapprovingly aware of my presence. (21)

The physical product of a collective of carpenters and containing the memory of countless voyages along the Atlantic slave trade, the *Republic* seems to embody slavery itself. From the moment he finds himself on board, Rutherford realizes that his wits have brought him to the wrong place.

Once on board, the ship’s first mate, Peter Cringle, discovers Rutherford and puts him to work as the cook’s helper. Although all, from Captain Falcon to the crew, accept Rutherford’s presence, they never fully incorporate him into the community of the ship. From Rutherford’s vantage point, the *Republic* appears as an amalgam of disparate parts, containing men from different regions of the world and different social classes. Far from a
perfectly coherent or stable community, the Republic, as both a ship and as a representation of Western culture, threatens to literally and figuratively come apart:

The Republic was physically unstable. She was perpetually flying apart and re-forming during the voyage, falling to pieces beneath us. . . . Captain Falcon’s crew spent most of their time literally rebuilding the Republic as we crawled along the waves. In a word, she was, from stem to stern, a process. (35–36)

In spite of its instability, the crew is able to work together to keep the vessel from breaking apart. For the time, the ship and the crew are able to construct a community out of its disunity of parts.

As the captain of the vessel, Ebenezer Falcon rules much like a despot, representing and instilling a tenuous order for the ship and crew. Falcon’s worldview dominates the Republic and moves it toward the African shore where they will “obtain” slaves and African artifacts for the New World. Rutherford describes Falcon as a strong and able man despite his short, almost dwarflike stature. For Rutherford, he embodies “that special breed of empire builder, explorer, and imperialist that sculptors like to elongate . . . whose burning passion was the manifest destiny of the United States to Americanize the planet” (29–30). Falcon represents the cultural and textual symbol of the slave merchant. His presence in the text serves as the voice of the slave system as a whole. Guided by profit, Falcon ultimately seeks not only to enslave the Allmuseri tribe but also to pilfer its culture, even going so far as to steal their god. Like Bannon in Oxherding Tale and even Yankee Jack in Flight to Canada, Falcon consumes black culture as a way of Being.

When both the Allmuseri slaves who plot revolt and the mutinous faction of the crew who reject his authority challenge Falcon’s control over the Republic on each side, Rutherford is struck by the calmness of his demeanor. For Falcon, conflict defines being:

For a self to act, it must have somethin’ to act on. A nonself—some call this Nature—that resists thwarts the will, and vetoes the actor. May I proceed? Well suppose that nonself is another self? What then? As long as each sees a situation differently there will be slaughter and slavery and the subordination of one to another ’cause two notions of things never exist side by side as equals. . . . The reason—the irrefragable truth is each person in his heart believes his beliefs is best. Fact is, down deep no man’s democratic.
We’re closet anarchists, I’d wager. . . . Conflict . . . is what it means to be conscious. Dualism is a bloody structure of the mind. Subject and object, perceiver and perceived, self and other—these ancient twins are built into the mind like the stem-piece of a merchantman. (97–98)

Falcon reiterates the natural “truth” of the Cartesian split between mind and matter that forms the basis of Western reason. The result of this split, he insists, is the perpetual struggle between people and cultures. Rutherford, broken down by his own failure to resist either Falcon’s authority or the pull of the mutineers, can think of no response to counter Falcon’s view. He is trapped between conflicting worldviews and is unable to define himself apart from or even within them.

In many ways the Allmuseri represent both the antithesis of Falcon’s dualist philosophy and the cultural embodiment of Johnson’s concept of transcultural identity. As Ashraf Rushdy points out, the Allmuseri provide, for all the American characters in Johnson’s novels, “an ideal of intersubjective relations” that pose a solution to the dilemma of being caught between Africa and Europe (376). In other words, for Rutherford specifically, the Allmuseri represent a particular way of Being that will allow him to locate his identity. Upon his first encounter with the tribe, Rutherford sees them as an ancient people who reach back to the origins of humanity:

You felt they had run the full gamut of civilized choices, or played through every political or social possibility and now had nowhere to go. . . . Physically, they seemed a synthesis of several tribes, as if longevity in this land had made them a biological repository of Egyptian and sub-Saharan eccentricities or—in the Hegelian equation—a clan distilled from everything that came earlier. Put another way, they might have been the Ur-tribe of humanity itself. (61)

The Allmuseri are the physical and cultural embodiment of the palimpsest—a text of humanity that contains the traces of all the cultures with which they have come into contact. In essence, as a people, they accomplish in their physical being that which Falcon and the Republic try to achieve by raiding Africa of its cultural artifacts.

A part of Rutherford wishes he could join the tribe and take part in their cultural traditions. He realizes, however, almost as much as the white crew of the Republic, that the distance between his cultural identity and theirs is vast. In fact, to the Allmuseri, the Europeans on the Republic (and even to a certain extent Rutherford himself) are barbarians:
They saw us as savages. In their mythology Europeans had once been members of their tribe—rulers, even, for a time—but fell into what was for these people the blackest of sins. The failure to experience the unity of Being everywhere was the Allmuseri vision of Hell. And that was where we lived: purgatory. That was where we were taking them—into the madness of multiplicity—and the thought of it drove them wild. (65)

Johnson posits the Allmuseri as the ancient Ideal in the novel, and like most Ideals, they falter when confronted by the conflicted world of the Real. The dehumanizing atrocities of the Middle Passage, of being stripped of their homes and community, inevitably takes its toll on the Allmuseri who survive most of the voyage. In fact, because the Allmuseri’s ontology is one that incorporates the cultural identities of those they encounter, it renders them even more susceptible to the conflicts inherent in the worldview that Falcon and the *Republic* represent. Witnessing the ways the Middle Passage subtly changed Ngonyama, one of the Allmuseri, Rutherford realizes that their culture was, much like the *Republic*, a process:

Stupidly, I had seen their lives and culture as timeless product, a finished thing, pure essence or Parmenidean meaning I envied and wanted to embrace, when the truth was that they were process and Heraclitean change, like any men, not fixed but evolving. . . . Ngonyama and, maybe all the Africans, I realized, were not wholly Allmuseri anymore. We changed them. I suspected even he did not recognize the quiet revisions in his voice after he learned English as it was spoken by the crew, or how the vision hidden in their speech was deflecting or redirecting his own way of seeing. (124)

Johnson suggests that even in the subtle changes of words and speech, the process of transculturation works upon the Allmuseri. In this instance,
transculturation is the product of the violent and exploitative forces of slavery. It is the manifestation of power being exerted by one culture over another. Even when the Allmuseri successfully rise up and revolt against Captain Falcon and his crew, they cannot reverse the effects of transculturation. In fact, as Rutherford notes, even in the very act of resistance and victory, the Allmuseri have taken in Falcon’s worldview, becoming part of the conflict that comes out of multiplicity (140).

Rutherford, more a witness than an active participant in the Allmuseri revolt on the Republic, documents the events in the ship’s log. And yet, even he cannot avoid the effects of transculturation that come as a result of his interactions with both the American crew of the Republic and the African tribe. In fact, his state of liminality, caught between two cultures neither of which he is a part, allows each world to act upon him with equal force. Whereas Rutherford had experienced a sense of marginality and displacement before his life on the Republic, he begins to accept a more liberating sense of transculturation as he learned it from the Allmuseri. As the survivors of the revolt drift at sea, Rutherford reflects on his state of being:

I peered deep into memory and called forth all that had ever given me solace, scraps and rags of language too, for in myself I found nothing I could rightly call Rutherford Calhoun, only pieces and fragments of all the people who had touched me, all the places I had seen, all the homes I had broken into. The ’I’ that I was, was a mosaic of many countries, a patchwork of others and objects stretching backward to perhaps the beginning of time. (162–63)

Although this loss of self in the mosaic of other cultures comes at a time when Rutherford clings to life, it represents a pathway to a liberated and transcultural identity.

Perhaps the moment that most represents Rutherford’s liberated sense of self comes when he is chosen to feed the Allmuseri god Captain Falcon has stolen and keeps in a cage on the lower decks. Like an ancient oracle, the god reveals itself to Rutherford in the form of his deceased father who had abandoned him as a boy. The Allmuseri god, like Soulcatcher, contains the voices of the multitude of people and cultures it has experienced. Rutherford’s father appears as both one and many:

But even in death [my father] seemed to be doing something, or perhaps should I say he squeezed out one final cry wherethrough I heard a cross wind of sounds just below his breathing. A thousand soft undervoices that
jumped my jangling sense from his last, weakly syllabled wind to a mosaic of voices within voices, each one immanent in the other, none his but all strangely his, the result being that as the loathsome creature, this deity from the dim beginnings of the black past, folded my father back into the broader, shifting field—as waves vanish into water—his breathing blurred in a dissolution of sounds and I could only feel that identity was imagined; I had to listen harder to isolate him from the We that swelled each particle and pore of him, as if the (black) self was the greatest of all fictions; and then I could not find him at all. He seemed everywhere, his presence, and that of countless others, in me as well as the chamber which had suddenly changed. Suddenly I knew the god’s name: Rutherford. (170)

A true symbol of transculturation and intersubjectivity, the Allmuseri god reflects multiplicity in harmony in a way that the Republic could never create. Rutherford, as a result of hearing the multitude, views his sense of self differently, learning to accept the many cultures that make up his identity: “The voyage had irreversibly changed my seeing, made of me a cultural mongrel, and transformed the world into a fleeting shadow play I felt no need to posses or dominate, only appreciate in the ever extended present” (187).

Johnson ends Middle Passage in a similar fashion as Oxherding Tale: in domestic bliss. One of only a handful of survivors of the Republic, Rutherford is rescued by an American ship. With his new sense of a liberated and transcultural identity, he eventually marries Isadora Bailey and adopts an orphaned Allmuseri child named Baleka. In essence, Rutherford has achieved the “householder” identity much like his counterpart, Andrew Hawkins. For both characters, the difficult process of finding a liberated transcultural self amidst the violent and power-laden forces of transculturation results in a sense of integration on both a personal and a cultural level.

Charles Johnson’s re-formation of the slave narrative and his interrogation into the nature of transculturation allow him to construct a seemingly optimistic conception of a post-slavery identity for his protagonists. But he leaves us with an incomplete picture. Rutherford has survived the Middle Passage and relinquished a life of petty crimes, but he also suffers the loss of the Allmuseri tribe who perished with the destruction of the Republic. As a result, he is unable to sexually consummate his union with Isadora. Johnson ends the novel with Rutherford and Isadora proclaiming a sexless and platonic love for one another. In Oxherding Tale, Andrew has successfully escaped re-enslavement by the Soulcatcher and is free to con-
continue his life with his wife, Peggy Underhill. However, in order to do this, Andrew must continue to pass as white, thus relinquishing a fundamental component of his transcultural identity. The fact that Johnson leaves his characters content but not fully resolved suggests that transculturation and the struggles for a post-slavery identity is still a work-in-process. In many ways, other postmodern slave narratives end with a similar ambivalence. In both *Kindred* and *Beloved*, the protagonists still suffer the residual effects of slavery that complicate their lives. We are uncertain if Dana Franklin's marriage will survive its confrontation with the past. We can only hope that Sethe will stop contemplating colors and resist a fate like Baby Suggs by leaving her sick bed. In fact, many of the original slave narratives also leave us with a similar open-endedness regarding the prospects of a post-slavery identity in a country that still supports such a system. However, Andrew and Rutherford's contentment at the end of their narratives suggests an acceptance of their limited identities. This seems at odds with Johnson's ideological project. The possibility of a post-slavery identity that goes beyond the racial divide of black and white lies, as we will see, in an even greater re-formation of the slave narrative and a more radical rejection of realism.