

**LOOK WHO'S LAUGHING: BLACK BUDDIES, BODIES, AND UNLAUGHTER IN  
THE NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE**

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Interracial, comical camaraderie propels Charles Johnson's 1982 *Oxherding Tale*. Some time around 1840, a drunken Jonathan Polkinghorne, master of the South Carolina Cripple Gate Plantation, sips whiskey alongside his most loyal house slave, George. The chums sit on the house's porch when Jonathan confesses that his wife Anna would "brain me like a milkstool" for going to bed with her smelling of spirits (Johnson 2). George admits his wife would feel equal disapproval in the slave quarters, so Jonathan suggests the two switch bedrooms (and consequentially, wives) for the evening. He explains that if they follow his plan then neither wife can be mad at her respective husband for coming to bed drunk. The men shake hands, and minutes later George is engaging Anna, who sleeps with a sleeping eye mask, in intercourse. After "gripping the headboard" and gleefully groaning, "Oh *gawd*, Jonathan," Anna realizes who her partner really is, letting fly a horrified shriek (6). Almost synchronously, a shrill cry comes from the slave quarters—Jonathan screams in fright while being chased off by George's enraged wife, Mattie. As the two men, naked and frenzied, pass each other at the house's entrance, Jonathan asks George, "Whose fat idea was this?" With countrified candor, George reminds his owner, "Suh, it was *you* who told *me*..." (7).

This carnivalesque opening scene bears an easy humor as it ruptures traditional dynamics between slave and master. Jonathan's role as a momentary trickster figure, duping his own slave in order to be sexually deviant with a woman in the slave quarters, moves this scene into the realm of absurdity. Mattie's dismissal of Jonathan evokes an unconventional if not pleasurable ending. However, beyond the levity of this neutering of master power is a series of alarming

constructs that move the scene into the realm of the tragicomic. The commoditization of both wives' bodies in this transaction is itself unnerving, and George's obsequiousness and participation in sexual depredation (not to mention infidelity) invokes a gamut of docile and violent black stereotypes.

This scene invites laughter, but has on its underside a highly charged, politicized humor, which makes for ambivalent responses. In "Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic," Henri Bergson suggests, "indifference is [laughter's] natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion" (Bergson 63). In this paper I contend that humorous contemporary representations of slavery challenge readers and viewers to mix their laughter with their emotions and their politics—to perhaps be overcome by laughter at the inversion of power dynamics, but also to suppress it in recognizing the heinous endurance of racialized "Othering." This general suppression of laughter has been theorized by Michael Billig as "unlaughter," a silence that wrests the political from the psychological by supplanting joy for "mute outrage" (Billig 194). In contemporary representations of slavery (hereafter referred to as neo-slave narratives) the outrage is clear: Salamishah Tillet suggests that a "democratic aesthetic" is eschewed in neo-slave narratives—that by reinvoking images of slavery, artists can illustrate the ways in which African Americans, despite bearing legal citizenship, have maintained a status of "civic estrangement" from America's civic myths and democratic imperatives as a whole (Tillet 6). In a similar vein, Glenda Carpio looks toward the very presence of humor in the fictions of slavery to "make clear both the distance and the layers of mediation through which we invoke slavery *and* the nearness of its legacy" (Carpio 213). Indeed, slavery's legacy is manifested in the exclusion of African Americans in politics. The humorists of interest here toy with stereotypes rooted in the justification of Triangle Trade slavery to show how these

misrepresentations have altered black identity formation, consequentially contributing to the complex enactment of civic estrangement. As I will argue, Johnson uses *Oxherding Tale* to dissect the potentially essentialist identity politics of Black Nationalism, and Paul Bogart's film *Skin Game* (1971) seeks to examine the self-commodification and interracial social relations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century freedman. Both texts use humor to scrutinize the history of African Americans' civic estrangement, pointing toward the complexities of both racialized division and black belonging. Each text also probes the fraught possibilities of coming together through interracial relationships often elided from traditional slave narratives. At times, humorous neo-slave narratives push biases, traditional representations of slavery, and hyperbole past the point of the comical. They tread the line of politically transformative and opprobriously offensive. They move us from empathy to discovery to horror. And in so doing, they open a unique space to re-envision the history that has led to race relations today.

### **Refiguring Subjectivities Through a Form**

The neo-slave narrative form, which can be traced to Margaret Walker's 1966 *Jubilee*, is a contemporary rendering of past slave life and culture, often based on post-memory and faction, a portmanteau of fact and fiction. *Jubilee* and other prominent neo-slave narratives such as Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) work masterfully to recover the memory of antebellum slavery in the decades after the final members of the American slave generation passed away. The vitality of these novels comes in their ability to enfold myriad literary elements to destabilize and rewrite history (Rushdy 7). Realism, speculative fiction, and ghost stories are the respective imaginative implements of Walker, Butler, and Morrison. Destabilizing history is no small task. The neo-slave practitioners I examine here construct American counter-histories through a different rhetoric: humor.

*Oxherding Tale* and *Skin Game* utilize humor in the neo-slave genre as a vehicle for contemporary political intervention and sociohistorical insurrection. The humorists' art intervenes in discussions of race. They take on socially contentious ideas, counterposing Black Nationalist prescriptions for authentic, separatist black identity with the fraught possibility of interracial intimacy in the form of friendship and romance. Such an investigation is structured through the epoch of slavery and its legacy. Simultaneously, the art revolts against notions of one-dimensional emancipation represented in American history. The artists point to the duplicity of racial experience, and attempt to move readers and viewers away from reducing all black narratives to what Arlene Keizer calls an "Up From Slavery" trajectory by problematizing the "overvaluation of direct, armed slave resistance" (Keizer 9). Both *Oxherding Tale* and *Skin Game* exaggerate and upend racial stereotypes. They mask their fictions in foolery while keeping the fantasies "close enough to recognizable situations" to accentuate the "ludicrous quality of everyday racial practices" (Ferguson 213). In the neo-slave narrative, the complex comfort of humor's most familiar forms—catharsis, incongruity, and laughter—allow for subtle and powerful sociohistorical insurrection (Billig 104).

Neo-slave narratives, humorous or otherwise, are effective due to their functional contrast with traditional slave narratives. Traditional slave narratives (also called slave testimonials) were rhetorical appeals to the broad United States to abolish slavery. Veracity, or at least popularly perceived veracity, was paramount to the success and effect of the traditional slave narrative. Enduring and canonical slave narratives including Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) bear distinct markers of authentication by prominent abolitionists. *Incidents* is prefaced by abolitionist Lydia Marie Child, who reassures readers that "those who know [Jacobs] will not be

disposed to doubt her veracity, though some incidents in her story are more romantic than fiction” (Jacobs iv). For Douglass’s narrative, social reformer William Lloyd Garrison anticipates and assuages Christian readers’ concerns regarding Douglass’s firm acknowledgment of Southern religious hypocrisy when he notes, “there is a great difference between Christianity and religion at the south” (Douglass 52). Garrison insists, “the testimony of Mr. Douglass, on this point, is sustained by a cloud of witnesses, whose veracity is unimpeachable” (iii).

The traditional slave narrative fixates on verity while the neo-slave narrative is overtly dependent upon the writer’s imagination. Kant’s theory on laughter and incongruity moves that “in everything that is to excite a lively laugh there must be something absurd [...] Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (Kant I, I, 54). Neo-slave humorists pivot their comedy around the genre’s form by loosely following the plot points of the traditional slave narrative but departing from that narrative’s central tropes. Frances Smith Foster outlines the skeletal traditional narrative: it often includes a slave describing a descent from a state of innocence into a recognition of inferiority, a progressive dehumanization at the hands of a master, a subsequent growth of self-reliance and education, the acknowledgment of the hypocrisy of slavery, some sort of subversive resolve, and a conclusion with flight or redemption (Foster 85). Authors of the neo-slave narrative deviate from the tenets outlined by Foster to produce radically different renderings of slave interiority, and thus imagine less restrictive forms of agency within the black past.

*Oxherding Tale*’s protagonist, Andrew Hawkins has a particularly unique agency, for he is George and Anna’s light-skinned child, a living reminder of the outrageous wife swap. Andrew navigates the Antebellum South to earn money and purchase his girlfriend and slave family’s freedom from the Cripplegate plantation. His pursuit of freedom and happiness, which

features a motley crew of irreverent characters, is aptly described by Philip Page as “a symposium of the self and the Other” (Page 125). Andrew’s own peculiar narrative is comprised of encounters with characters like Flo Hatfield, the hedonistic sovereign of the Leviathan plantation, who exudes a din of “noisy eroticism” (Johnson 44). A vacationing Karl Marx makes a cameo, admitting, “everything I’ve written has been for a woman—is one way to view Socialism, no” (20)? Andrew’s interactions with these characters creates an imbroglio of philosophy, subjectivity, and race. Andrew seeks Others so he can finally locate his own sense of self. He navigates the art of being a freeman by examining other characters, and the one who bears the final answer is the most comically peculiar of the entire cast: the slave hunter and Soulcatcher, Horace Bannon.

Bannon is a crucial character because he fills a voice often elided in the traditional slave narrative. In *Incidents*, Jacobs spends an unfathomable seven years hiding in her grandmother’s garret, a space that is three or four feet high and about nine feet long (Yellin 9). She cannot leave knowing “the patrols and slave-hunters conferring together” would be “rejoiced” to catch her (Jacobs 71). Jacobs cannot incorporate the slave catcher’s voice in her story, both because of the narrative’s first-person perspective and because of the necessary distance between slave and slave catcher. But in *Oxherding Tale*, Andrew’s ability to pass as white allows him to speak with Bannon. Johnson imbues Bannon with a voice that represents a contemporarily allegorical perspective on runaway slaves. Bannon’s flawless record of catching runaways comes from his understanding that “yo mind has to soak up his mind. His heart. [...] you become a Negro by lettin’ yoself see what he sees, feel what he feels, want what he wants” (Johnson 68).

As Andrew and his sagacious African Allmuseri companion, Reb, travel North, Bannon remains in quiet pursuit. When Andrew settles in a northern town to pass as a white

schoolteacher, Reb chancily continues toward Chicago. At the apex of the novel, Bannon comes to Andrew bearing a single dismembered finger with Reb's tribal ring on it. Rather than announce his most recent murder, as Andrew anticipates with stinging tears, Bannon instead announces his own retirement. He reveals,

—yo friend, as Ah was sayin', didn't have no place inside him fo' me to settle. He wasn't positioned nowhere. [...] Befo', afterwards, and in between didn't mean nothin' to him. He had no home. No permanent home. He didn't care 'bout merit or evil. What Ah'm sayin' [...] is that Ah couldn't entirely become the nigguh because you got to have somethin' dead or static already inside you—an image of yoself—fo' a real slave catcher to latch onto. [...] Ah always said Ah'd quit if Ah come across a Negro Ah couldn't catch. (174)

Bannon's explication of his failure is layered in context. In terms of the novel's plot, his explanation can prompt cathartic laughter because it relieves the tension that Andrew's greatest confidant has been murdered, and signifies an end to Bannon's killing streak. In terms of the novel's satire, the entire ironic construct is quite humorous—Bannon thrives on killing runaway slaves, and even takes on the traits of black dialect in spite of his “mongrel appearance” and his eyes, “one teal blue, one green” (68). Andrew narrates the irony as a “feeling that Bannon was in masquerade, a slave who, for reasons too fantastic to guess, hunted slaves” (68). The circumstance of Bannon's failing, though, creates space for attention to his allegory. Bannon operates as a humorous construct, initially. He code switches and speaks with assured confidence about his knowledge of the slave mind. Johnson humorously confounds the idea of an insightful slave catcher with that of the race fetishist. In shrouding Bannon's subjectivity with this incongruous humor, Johnson underwrites the fact that he is a villain—the constant source of

anxiety for Andrew and Reb. When Bannon appears with Reb's ring (which Reb pawned during his flight—Bannon is not in actual possession of his finger) all attention is taken away from his power. Bannon's dialect and mien are no longer laughable—his homicidal occupation is no longer attached to nameless figures, it is the object of attention in a moment of utter unlaughter. Seizing the moment of Bannon's retirement, Johnson uses the silence of unlaughter to showcase how the Soulcatcher, in his own existence, exemplifies appropriated culture. His success as a slave hunter hinges on his ability to be an offstage minstrel figure. In lieu of temporary burnt-cork or greasepaint to cover his face, his body permanently morphs with each victim consumed. His appropriation is ultimately emblemized by an outlandish supernatural "flesh tapestry of a thousand individualities no longer static" on his chest and back, an animated tattoo mosaic of lost black lives (175).

Bannon teeters on black caricature and black negation. If he is caricature, he is a hypervisceral race fetishist, killing slaves in order to become more enmeshed in the literal souls of black folk. If he demonstrates black negation, it is because runaways who become free in spite of his efforts do not have a "dead or static" image on which he can capitalize: they don't allow themselves to become interpolated into essentialist notions of black identity. Bannon's career provocatively suggests that a runaway slave cannot be a freeman if the runaway is too resentful of the past, too fearful of the moment, or idealistically overzealous about the future. These tenets are transmutable from *Oxherding Tale* to Black Nationalist discussions of race in America during the 1970s, the same decade when Johnson penned most of the novel. Johnson operated as a peripheral figure to the Black Arts Movement, and he uses Bannon as a voice to respond to the movement's more central figures, like Maulana Karenga, who, in his essay "Black Cultural Nationalism," suggested, "Black art must expose the enemy, praise the people, and support the

revolution” (Asante 23). By using the neo-slave form, Johnson unites Black Nationalism with the essence of its antagonism, slavery, in order to illuminate his concern with the movement. In a sense, Bannon’s explanation suggests that to mark all black art with the resentment, fear, or capacious promise of black futures forever marks the race with the slave memory over which black nationalists intended to triumph. Bannon demonstrates that blackness, however empowering its intended representation may be, becomes so predictable that “runaways,” or African Americans set between slavery and the pursuit of full, active citizenship, can actually be appropriated. Bannon, though, performs blackness through his dialect, his mien, and his day-to-day agenda. At moments, it can be difficult to trace whether he fetishizes blackness or loathes it. By emulating his victims, Bannon caricatures the essentialist problematics of an identity centered on monolithic notions of blackness, which is Johnson’s largest problem with Black Nationalism. Interestingly, Bannon does not discuss the tracking of any female slave, showing the limitations of his soul catching. His embodiment of the runaway does not suggest the incorporation of female runaways, which underwrites the black woman’s identity formation. This is not a surprising omission given some criticism regarding Black Nationalism as masculinist in rhetoric (Alexander-Floyd 175). In spite of this loose end, Johnson deftly draws our attention to a rich critique of Black Nationalism in the story’s climax, and in a moment of contemplative unlaughter.

The humorous neo-slave aesthetic’s political utility is not constrained to writing alone. Paul Bogart’s *Skin Game* constitutes a filmic sociohistorical insurrection. The film’s setting in the 1857 American West immediately sets it apart from the generally Southern-oriented slave narrative. *Skin Game* works uniquely as a revisionist Western: a Western that questions or changes typical conventions of Western cinema. An enduring example of the revisionist Western

is John Wayne's *The Searchers* (1956). It is only fitting that a Western highlighting Northern and Western slavery in the 1850s came to mainstream production in the 1960s and '70s. *Skin Game*, released in 1971, was produced in a tender moment after Stanley Kramer's socially pointed *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) and before the production of Blaxploitation Westerns such as Jack Arnold's *Boss Nigger* (1975). Bearing a compromise between Kramer's sentimental film and the winnowed levity of Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* (1974), *Skin Game* renders slavery through an oft-elided perspective—the freedman's perspective of black commodification (Watkins 329).

*Skin Game* uses the idiom of “honor among thieves” to bind its core characters and transcend racial idioms. The film chronicles Quincy, a white swindler played by James Garner, who sells his black friend Jason, played by Lou Gossett, to white plantation owners in 1857. Quincy then breaks his friend free and the duo skip towns with the money, sharing the loot and laughs between towns with names that refer to America's peculiar institution: Dirty Shame, Sour Grapes, and Second Best (*Skin Game*).

*Skin Game* is an interracial “buddy film,” which Brett Carroll prescribes as having an “African-American character [who] is typically the sidekick to the white hero and isolated from the African-American community. He thus offers his skills and bravery for the preservation of mainstream (white) cultural values” (Carroll 12). Michael Rogin spotlights the political ramifications in Carroll's definition, suggesting buddy films position the interracial double as “the split self, the white in blackface” (Rogin 419). Under Rogin's construct, the black buddy is exploited to reaffirm the white friend's power. *Skin Game* resists employing Jason as the interracial double to Quincy, despite Quincy's best efforts. Interestingly, Jason resists becoming

an interracial double by himself reacting to the unlaughter in the pair's constant interracial signifyin(g).

Jason and Quincy's relationship is fraught with interracial tension from the beginning of the film. *Skin Game's* first scene follows a successful heist in a small town, and finds Quincy and Jason resting under a tree before moving on to their next heist. While laughing so hard he snorts and coughs, Jason manages to say, "That was a whole lot of 'Marser, marser, marser' to go through for four hundred dollars" (*Skin Game*). Quincy claims Jason looks like he's only worth four hundred, but Jason asks why he went for double then in two other cities, refuting, "I'm the same fella every time, so it must be the way you're making the pitch." Realizing his weaker hand in this friendly fire session, Quincy points Jason toward the unshakeable difference between them by proposing, "Very next place we go to we'll switch places and you'll sell me." The scene's lightheartedness becomes heavy, and the two men prepare for the rest of their journey, blank faced. While the two have a clearly convivial camaraderie, they cannot adopt a genuinely empathetic view of one another for most of the film. Jason does manage to get the upper hand on Quincy in another exchange when Quincy refuses to stop as they head into an untapped town. Jason hops off of the mule he rides and snidely says, "I tell you what, you go on in to town, and if I'm not there in a little while you just start the sale without me" (*Skin Game*). Jason's pointed proposal points toward the men's fiscal reliance on one another as dictated by their performative slave and master dialectic. The two men ride on in silence. But even in between performances, Quincy struggles to identify the ways in which his privilege surpasses that of his black friend. Jason struggles to identify with unfree blacks, and the men's irresolute issues with identification lead to an interracial signifyin(g).

Both men's roles as lifelong con-men position them well to signify, as they are occupational liars. Even in navigating their reasonably authentic relationship, demarcated by racial difference, they signify on each other because "words cannot be trusted, [...] even the most literal utterance allows room for interpretation" (Gates 16). The partners in crime depend upon one another, as do two people enacting the tradition of signifyin(g). Their engagement with this black form of vocalization unbinds Rogin's "white in blackface" trope, instead positioning Quincy in a distinctly black narrative tradition. The friends' discursive repartee points to the inextricable shades of difference in their black and white freedom. The humorous elements of signifyin(g) are pushed from clever exchanges to unfunny claims to privilege. Quincy attempts to marginalize Jason with his barbs, but then accesses a sense of self-seeing through their interaction. Jason does not ventriloquize Quincy's sense of self, but instead leverages their coded humor to reaffirm his own autonomy. In this sense, the black tradition allows Jason to use Quincy as a foil, but not a split self, to understand the complexities of his role as a black freedman. Jason does his most identitarian work during the unfunny intrusions of Quincy's privilege in their signifyin(g).

In spite of Jason's intellectual prowess, he has a jaded perspective on race for the first part of the film. His firsthand exposure to true slavery keeps him uneasy, as evinced in a scene in which Jason and Quincy watch a group of slaves in coffles led down a dirt road. Jason tells Quincy he would like to stop their ruse soon. Quincy agrees, promising the game will cease after one more sale in the next town. When they move on to their next target, they stay at the only available hotel, which forbids slaves from sleeping indoors. Instead, Jason must stay in a livery stable. While in the stable, Quincy happens upon a young, attractive slave woman, Naomi, played by Brenda Sykes. In a peculiar scene, Jason finds himself immediately struck by Naomi's

beauty. She reveals that she is to be sold in the next day's slave auction, and Quincy explains that being up for sale is not so bad, and begins to brag about his expertise in "the field of being bought and sold" (*Skin Game*). Interestingly, Jason chooses to maintain his posture as a slave, and his tactic of underplaying the slave market illustrates how little he sees the institution playing a role in his own subjectivity.

When Naomi reveals why she is up for sale, she demonstrates another alternative for black and white interaction. She explains that, "Young massa and me growed up together. Used to climb trees together. Used to play games together. We even used to get ourselves scrubbed in the same tub together." Naomi's master is recently married, and his new wife has demanded Naomi be sold. In a proceeding scene Quincy buys Naomi with Jason's money, and Naomi's remorseful master hands him her papers while stuttering, "She—she likes molasses and sweet potatoes" (*Skin Game*). The implied interaction between Naomi, her master, and Jason provides a notably progressive triangulation of affection. Jason and Naomi become lovers the first night they meet, and she states that she was never romantically involved with her benevolent master. The question of the authentic interracial relationship undergirds Naomi's relationship with her master as well—her unique position of naiveté conjures similarities to George's relation to Jonathan Polkinghorne's sexually devious motives in *Oxherding Tale's* Cripplegate Incident. Bogart's film leaves open the narrative of contented slaves, and provides an ambiguous counterpoint to traditional narratives of black female slaves and their white masters. In contrast to the buddy dynamic between Jason and Quincy, Naomi's interracial relationship demonstrates its intricacies without signifyin(g) pretenses or comical relief. She explicitly emblemizes a particularly underwritten subjectivity from traditional slave narratives: the content slave with an outrightly benevolent master. While this may well be a viable subjectivity, Naomi's role

engenders a static political role. As *Skin Game*'s only vocal black female, she carries a domestic docility that restrains some of the film's progressive work. For all of the film's political work advanced by laughter and counterpointed unlaughter, the stiff gender roles of women are treated with a forthright seriousness.

### **Laughing 'til We Can't: Unlaughter's Echo**

Johnson and Bogart's texts prompt laughter while pointing out the stark inequities and prejudices that link the slave moment with the 1960s and '70s. One of the broader incongruities underpinning the entirety of *Oxherding Tale* is the disruption of the slave narrative as a narrative of spectacular black suffering. I use the word "spectacular" in the vein of Saidiya Hartman in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. Hartman emphasizes the literal spectacle of black suffering as represented in the "routinized violence of slavery," both through gruesome, macabre scenes in classical slave narratives and also the "mundane and quotidian" signs of repression woven into white leisure, such as the theatricality of the slave coffle and auction block (Hartman 17). White reader's potential pleasure in witnessing black enjoyment and black suffering in the nineteenth century is based around projections on to Othered bodies. In terms of violence, voyeurs (especially those trying to empathize with the slaves) could identify with the enslaved, but did so "at the risk of fixing and naturalizing the condition of pained embodiment" (20). Hartman suggests that this "naturalizing" reverses the intent of empathy, and "increases the difficulty of beholding black suffering" (20). The voyeur's attempt to impossibly imagine the slave's pain confirms a "spectral character of suffering" that pleurably reifies the voyeur's position as not enslaved (Hartman 20). Johnson plays on scenes of subjection and the grotesque to invoke unlaughter by exaggerating racialized forms of female suffering, to uncertain effect.

Two scenes of suffering female bodies bookend *Oxherding Tale*. The first highlights Anna Polkinghorne's literal disintegration as she reflects on her sexual encounter with George. The second scene of suffering highlights Minty, the slave Andrew works to free throughout the novel, dying due to an illness acquired from her poor living conditions at various plantations. The scenes have the potential to serve as ironic foils—Anna's death poking fun at the hyper-virtuous mistress of the traditional slave narrative, and Minty's death showcasing the more routinized abasement of the female slave's body. However, the political effect of these vignettes' humor is dampened by Johnson's use of the female body as a target for hyperbolic bludgeoning. His satire transgresses the useful murkiness of unlaughter into a general commoditization of the female body. Johnson's hyperbole centers on the vulnerability of the female's capacity to reproduce racial progeny and property, and simply flattens female corporeality into unfiltered abjection.

The joking begins when Anna falls ill after her tacit admittance to enjoying sex with George. Although Jonathan gives up on loving Anna after her resentment ceases to lift, he still takes care of her during her sickness. As the narrator reports, "duty replaced his desire" for Anna (Johnson 14). Anna's virtue has been violated, and she can no longer maintain the plantation mistress trope of looking askance at the sexual improprieties of her environment. Completely downcast because of her shame over miscegenation, her sickness progresses over five years, and Anna's eyes become "burnt-out" as she "cough[s] blood into her brass thunderpot, crepidations like the dry induviae of brittle leaves in the folds of her nightgown" (Johnson 14). This graphic rendering of Anna's bodily dissolution plays with the humor of incongruity. She is so ashamed of her evening with George that she becomes physically sick with shame, a reaction that counters the more expected response that George would be reprimanded or possibly even executed for his

hypersexuality. Anna's abjection and overreaction equates miscegenation with a terminal disease. Gesturing toward Anna's enmity, the narrator describes a "fragile mass of living jelly," no more of a wife to Jonathan than "a stump of firewood" (14). The notion of "living jelly" plays on her corpulence and suggests the idea of putrefication. Choice images like "fragile jelly" and "firewood" in the context of this scene show Johnson's riskiness with diction. These concrete images deeply mock the proverbial matron of the plantation. In drawing a contrast with Minty, though, Johnson exacerbates this language even further, oversaturating the incongruity of the women's experiences. Johnson anticipates Hartman's suggestion of white, nineteenth century readers' fascination with "the exposure of the violated body" and pairs this normative expectation of the slave narrative reader with the concerns of miscegenation which pervaded the nation at the novel's inception, but he does not stop (Hartman 15).

After being purchased by the racially passing Andrew on a trading block, Minty suffers from the effects of untreated pellagra. In a show of true excess, Johnson describes how Minty's pellagra reduces the kindhearted woman to a literal disintegration. "Sugar in water," the narrator describes, "Form into formlessness. Her left leg had separated from her knee, floated away like that of a paper doll left in the rain [...] She had bitten off her middle finger" (Johnson 166). "Sugar in water" carries similar incongruity to death that "fragile jelly" does. Johnson deploys an onslaught of graphic images to describe her suffering, detailing her eyelids that "quivered, showing white surfaces gone gray. Milky pupils large as dimes" and "cracked lips sucked back against her gums" until she finally dies (Johnson 167). A "gush of black vomit" indicates the moment "[t]he Devil came and sat on Minty, his weight pressing open the valve to her bladder and bowels" (Johnson 167). This disturbing scene revolves around Andrew watching the woman he would have married—in fact, the very reason he is passing literally dissolves into a mess from

slavery. As he learned at the coffle, Minty's time moving from household to household undervalued and undernourished has reduced her to a dying state.

Minty's dilapidation is based in a more serious and probable context of slave suffering, but the actual act of Minty dying is strangely rendered. The language and imagery are at once graphic and tonally incongruous. Aside from Minty's entire process of dying as being like sugar in water, the childlike image of a paper doll losing its knee seems to bear more lightness than the literal loss of a knee ought to. Ultimately, in spite of their reductive use of female bodies, Minty's death and Anna's sicknesses can be read as ironic foils—Anna suffers as an abject figure of embarrassment while Minty suffers at the hands of her slave owners. While the two women both face inequities in the novel, Johnson probes their dichotomous positions as relationally funny. However, the gross exaggeration of Anna's sickness pales in comparison of severity and logical rationale to Minty's death, and certainly prompts a consideration of their contrasting situations.

While Johnson ironizes the corporeal in the figures of Bannon, Anna and Minty, black vocalization becomes the object of unlaughter in *Skin Game*. Jason slips in and out of a stereotypical slave dialect and a refined New Jersey diction, depending on if he's posing as a slave or not. This code switching serves as a common trope for laughter throughout the first half of the film. While in Kansas, Jason and Quincy find that Jason "passing" as a slave must stay in a barn overnight. After a night in the barn, Quincy, joined by Ginger, a redheaded, blue-eyed thief with whom he's smitten, enters the barn while Jason's back is turned. Quincy offers Jason breakfast, and Jason sardonically begins "Ah ha! Don't tell me that aside from providing a breathtaking panorama of a horse's ass that this fine ol' establishment also provides offering him br—" He breaks off when he turns around and notices Ginger, then howls, "—LAWDEEEE

Marse Quincy! Dey ain't noobody treats his po' black folks betta den he does. Yessuh. Brought dese biscuits all de way down heah so a body don't starve. Mm mm mm. Now that sho' is a powerful big heart, and dat's de truth" (*Skin Game*). Quincy waves off Jason's act, and explains that Ginger knows about their scheme. Ginger, though, implores Jason not to stop the thick code switching, for he is "very good at it." While Jason's exaggerated slave dialect serves as a humorous schtick begat by minstrel memory in the film, he later becomes separated from Quincy and is legitimately sold to the malicious Harry Calloway's (Andrew Duggan) plantation with no escape in sight.

Jason's agency in code switching moves from humorous to devastating in his first interaction with his new slave master. Stressing his volubility and congeniality, Jason tries to rationalize his way out of slavery by explaining that his sale to Calloway is a "grievous injustice" and that how he arrived in such a "wretched condition is a story as vile and sordid as any you might imagine." As Jason continues his loquacious plea, Calloway responds with incredulity and seeming awe, saying, "That's the goddamndest thing I ever heard." Jason offers to reimburse Calloway for his purchase plus interest in exchange for his freedom. Ignoring the offer, Calloway reiterates, "The goddamndest thing I ever heard—" but this time he continues, "I never heard a nigger talk like that." As Jason begins to explain his origins from New Jersey, Calloway caustically interrupts, proclaiming, "If I ever hear it again I'm going to blow your black ass off. Understand me, boy?" Jason's code switch kicks in with prompt abjection, "Yassuh boss, shooooo do." Despite Jason's acquiescence, Calloway has him flogged fifty times.

During this moment of terror, Jason's accent loses its comic effect. Until Jason's exchange with Calloway, his ability to code switch ironically serves as one of his most useful abilities. In prior interactions between the performative Jason and white characters, tension is

derived from the possibility that one of his dupes will see through Jason's performance. The tension amasses until resolution occurs and Jason comes away safely with his buyers' money. Until Calloway, laughter as cathartic release is inevitable, as the protagonist stays safe and continues to pull the wool over the eyes of plantation owners and other racists. But once Jason exposes his authentic voice and the ruse is exposed to Calloway, the biting reality of their racial dynamic is brought to the fore. Calloway is an unapologetic bigot who can, ironically, only see Jason's proper dialect as a performance. The reality of prejudice supersedes Jason's agency as a passing slave, and his powerless, faux-dialect becomes pitiable. This is the moment of unlaughter. For the first time, a white person on screen refuses to acknowledge Jason the freedman's personhood, signified by his true accent, and his immobilization forces Jason to succumb to a slave status to which he was not born.

In recognizing the delimiting effect of Jason's skin color on his role as the lionized protagonist, laughter at his performance subsides. The Calloway scene demonstrates how the empathetic repression of laughter operates well within the realm of the neo-slave aesthetic. Due to Jason's position from the opening scenes as both protagonist and a black freedman, the narrative arc of the film is oriented around his experience. As a result, Jason's interaction with his network defines his agency, and also garners a sense of social relations for a freedman in 1857. Jason is comfortable with Quincy, comfortable with Ginger once she joins their fold of mischief, and talks often of New Jersey—a state where he is free to pursue his whims. Jason's interactions with the white slaveowners preceding Calloway come through as purely performative and thus, an inauthentic mode. In a sense, his authenticity and personhood is defined by his gregarious yet constantly analytical frame of mind. It is Jason who constantly reminds Quincy of their unequitable roles in society, from the film's start to the film's end, and

an moment of unlaughter that even occurs for Jason shifts his own way of seeing his performance. Now in a safe locale, Quincy asserts he and Jason are, “like enough to be brothers.” Quincy’s final words of the film come when he rebuts, “Except for one little thing, one small little difference. And because of that, I can be bought and sold like a horse, and you can do the buying and the selling” (Skin Game). For the first and only time in the film, Jason claims his disadvantage and illuminates his Otherness.

Jason’s sense of identity and the textured revelations Andrew gains about black social mobility underscore manifold possibilities for black subjectivities during the slave moment. Many of the possibilities and limitations for mobility are centered on stereotypes in requisite characters like the obsequious Uncle Tom or the carnal Mandingo, who bear trace appearances in these revisionist scenes. But the literal embodiment of such tropes through corporeal manipulation and black vocalization show how these stereotypical subjectivities can be both subverted and reinforced. These neo-slave humorists reveal the insurgent potential in re-envisioning the role of the black body and the amplification of the black voice in history. Unlaughter demonstrates that when stereotypes are upended, stretched, and reapplied to other races, they can be de-essentialized. Ultimately, neo-slave humor locates and magnifies the antiquated roots of sentiments that sustain racial civic estrangement today. Through this identification, the neo-slave narrative does insurrectionist work, reimagining and at times re-enfranchising black bodies and black voices.

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