BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVES ON THE NOTION OF THE SELF IN THE WRITING OF CHARLES JOHNSON AND RUTH OZEKI

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Abstract

This thesis explores a selection of novels by Charles Johnson and Ruth Ozeki. It aims to examine how Johnson and Ozeki as ethnic American writers employ the Buddhist philosophies of non-Self, interdependence and interconnectedness to explore the meaning of self and identity in various aspects in their novels. By situating Johnson’s and Ozeki’s novels as part of Buddhist American writings that deal with the search for American self and identity, I contend that the explanation of the interdependent self proposed by Johnson and Ozeki is different from such concepts put forward by their predecessors. Instead of encouraging the attachment to some absolute discourse of self and identity, the concept of the interdependent self stresses the characteristic of being non-self. They suggest the understanding of a composite self is borne out of an individual’s ability to detach themselves from suffering or dukkha.

Based upon Buddhist ideas of the non-Self, interdependence, and interconnectedness, this thesis divides the analyses of the selected novels into two major parts. The first part explores Johnson’s Faith and the Good Thing (1974), Oxherding Tale (1982), Ozeki’s A Tale for the Time Being (2013), and The Face: A Time Code (2016). These novels show that individuals’ new understanding of their selves and identities lead to new perspectives on life and possibly liberates their imprisoned self from their past. In the second part, I investigate through Johnson’s Middle Passage (1990), Dreamer (1998), Ozeki’s My Year of Meats (1998), and All Over Creation (2002) to look into the interplay between individuals’ understanding of the non-self nature of beings and their potential to do good for others in wider society.

Through this research, I have found that Johnson’s novels present their protagonists as questers for selfhood and the meaning of life. They also negotiate their traumatic experience of American slavery, racism, and marginalization. Johnson’s protagonists philosophically go through the process of self-investigation before discerning that self and life are alike. They are transformative, unfixed, and dependent. This discovery destabilizes the concept of race and enables the protagonists to transcend dualistic views on race (the belief that one race is superior to another). Compared with Johnson’s novels, Ozeki’s novels present various experimental styles of narration to emphasize the protagonists’ self-examination in order to gain self-realization that their selves interrelate to the selves of others and interconnect with their environment. In analyzing both writers’ works, I argue that Johnson and Ozeki believe the Buddhist philosophy of the Self and the idea of interdependence offer an understanding of how living at the present moment instead of living in the past is meaningful to life, how a common humanity should be cherished over human differences, and how human beings should live in harmony with the environment.
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Introduction

From the post-World War II era onwards, a number of American writers have been interested in Buddhism and some have even integrated Buddhist ideas in their works. The prominent figures are, for example, J.D. Salinger, Jack Kerouac, Peter Matthiessen, Maxine Hong Kingston, Alice Walker, Rafe Martin, Charles Johnson, and Ruth Ozeki. Among these writers, Charles Johnson and Ruth Ozeki are active Buddhist followers who both have seriously studied Buddhist teachings and regularly put it into practice. They have taken advantage of their meditative experience by interweaving their Buddhist-influenced worldviews with their fictional works to explore matters of the self and identity.

As a result of their meditative experiences, Johnson and Ozeki seem to concur that an understanding of interdependence or the interconnectedness of beings, which is fundamental to the Buddhist explanation of the Self, will lead a person to gain wisdom regarding his/her self. In an interview, Johnson reveals that:

As a Buddhist who understands the experience of dependent origination which states that nothing arises independently, also known in Sanskrit as pratitya samutpada [itatics in original], and which Thich Nhat Hanh calls “inter-being,” I’m very sensitive to the interconnectedness of all life, how all things are interwoven, and you might say my oeuvre is on one level simply about revealing those threads that connect us all.¹

Here Johnson’s views correspond with those of Ozeki. She explains her perspective on the existence of all beings as follows: “I see them all as interrelated. I see them all as inseparable, a kind of interconnectedness […] Of course, this notion really comes from Buddhism.”² As evidenced by these quotations, Johnson and Ozeki stress the idea of interdependence or interconnectedness, as the nature of the Self. As a result, they employ it as an approach to propose how a person will be able to create inner peace for him/herself and for wider society.


². Eleanor Ty, “‘A Universe of Many Worlds’: An Interview with Ruth Ozeki. (Interview),” MELUS 38, no. 3 (2013): 162.
Focusing on the theme of interdependence, which at times is presented as the concepts of interconnectedness or interrelation, my thesis examines Johnson’s and Ozeki’s adaptation of the Buddhist philosophy of interdependence as a means to discern the Self and one’s self within a specifically American context. Based upon Buddhist philosophy, the ontological existence of the Self (atman) is explained with the Buddhist natural law of interdependence (It means the web of existence. When this exists, that exists. Then when this does not exist, that does not exist). The understandings of the Buddhist perspective of the Self and the law of interdependence are considered vitally important and fundamental if one wishes to attain nibbāna or the enlightenment, the state in which dukkha (the Pali term which is mostly, but not accurately, translated into “suffering”) ceases to be. However, this brief outline of Buddhist basic concepts is insufficient to establish an understanding of the key terms of Buddhist principles and ideas used throughout this dissertation.

In contextualizing the Buddhist philosophy in relation to literary writings, I will explore the establishment of Buddhism in the cultural and intellectual background of North America in the twentieth century and discuss the key terms which I will use throughout this work in the following sections. Then I will analyze eight selected novels of Johnson and Ozeki by dividing them into two major parts. Part One will deal with the writers’ proposed perspective on one’s personal self as benefitting from an understanding of the interdependent origination of things. Part Two will examine the contribution of a person’s insight into the concepts of interdependence or interconnectedness to the benefits of human society and environment more widely.

**Buddhism to the West: American Buddhist Literature in the Twentieth Century**

Because of cultural differences, many Western and Eastern people hold disparate perceptions of the self. Certainly, this point is recognized by scholars of

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3. In English texts concerning Buddhist philosophy, Buddhism’s nibbāna is translated as the “enlightenment” and the “awakening”, which is actually not completely accurate so scholars always give some explanation to clarify its meaning at the first time the term appears in a text. In Buddhism, it is a state in which a practitioner gains a spiritual insight into the natural law of interdependence as an origin of the existence of the Self, the understanding which is inseparably related to the state of nibbāna.
American Buddhism. In *American Buddhism as a Way of Life* (2010), Gary Storhoff and John Whalen-Bridge note that “[o]n the surface it would seem that the prevailing worldview of the United States is antithetical to a Buddhist vision of reality—with its emphasis on no-self (*anatman*), emptiness (*sunyata*), and dependent co-arising (*pratīyāsāmundhāpa*). This tension between Buddhist thought and an American culture emphasizing individualism and self-reliance has long been noted and debated.” Based upon this fact, I have found it is intriguing to investigate the perspective of the self in writings of Buddhist American writers. Before proceeding to discuss the Buddhist philosophy of the Self and other concepts, this section foregrounds a brief history of the development of Buddhism in North America as a background to understand Johnson’s and Ozeki’s perceptions of Buddhism as conveyed in their works.

According to Richard Hughes Seager, there are four practice communities in North America: Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, the Theravāda-inspired Insight Meditation Movement, and Sōka Gakkai International. Zen is the oldest community which dates back to the first arrival of a Rinzai Zen monk named Shaku Sōen in Chicago’s World Parliament of Religions in 1893 (Zen has three traditional sects that are Rinzai, Soto and Ōbaku). Zen Buddhism is a denomination of Buddhism which originally emerged in China around the sixth century. The word “Zen” was transliterated from a Chinese character “Channa” which means meditation, the word which translated from the Sanskrit term “dhyāna”. Zen is the composite of Mahayana Buddhism which was influenced by Confucianism and Daoism in China and then flourished in Japan. In the early twentieth century, Shaku Sōen’s colleagues, Sokei-an and Nyōgen Senzaki, first started to teach American laymen to practice Zen meditation, which was (and still is) called *zazen*. Since then Zen has become more popular, gaining influence upon American writers and poets in the mid-twentieth century.

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While Zen Buddhist ideas are generally acknowledged as influencing North American literature in the mid-twentieth century, notably in the work of the Beat writers and, later on, Robert M. Pirsig, who wrote *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (1974), America’s conversation with Buddhism can be traced to precede this period by over one hundred years.\(^7\) The history of Buddhism and its linkage with American literature began in the mid-nineteenth century, perhaps most notably in Edward E. Salisbury’s 1844 lecture on Buddhist history, given during the first meeting of the American Oriental Society, and in Henry David Thoreau’s translation of a French edition of a Buddhist sacred text, the Lotus Sutta.\(^8\) The Sutta, an influential scripture for both Zen Buddhism and other sects in Mahayana Buddhism, postulates that Buddhahood exists in all beings, and therefore nirvana is attainable for all beings.

Following the emergence of Buddhism in America, Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s philosophical essays—for instance, “Nature” (1836) and “The Over-Soul” and “Circles” (1841)—became the first American writing to embrace Buddhist ideas in their Transcendentalist writings.\(^9\) Emerson, for example, began to assimilate the Buddhist ideas of impermanence and suffering in his own Transcendental philosophy.\(^10\) This transcendentalist/Buddhist notion of interconnectedness is also fundamental to a wide swathe of American literature. Indeed, one only has to look at the writings of Walt Whitman, John Dos


Passos, Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, Toni Morrison and, more recently, in the work of postmodern writers such as Don DeLillo and Dave Eggers to see this.11

However, the perception of Buddhist interconnectedness, particularly in its manifestation in American literary writing, is the conjunction of many ideas. Initially, it stemmed from traditional interpretations of the Buddhist principle of interdependence as elucidated in Buddhist Pali literature, Tipitaka. This interpretation mainly concerns the world of impermanence, the cyclical nature of birth-life-death (samsara) and the moral law of karma (the consequences of human deeds).12 Subsequently, in America the traditional interpretation of interconnectedness intermingled with ideas pertaining to Buddhism derived from Americanized Zen and American Transcendentalism.13 After that, America’s transformed interpretation has become entwined with other schools of Mahayana Buddhism, European Rationalism, German and English Romanticism, and the notion of quantum mechanics.14

Indeed, in the twentieth century, the Buddhist concept of dependent co-arising (which postulates that an existence of one thing depends upon the existence of other things and vice versa) has been applied to ecological and political perspectives and became two dominant movements which link Buddhist metaphysics with ethics. The two movements are “Socially Engaged Buddhism” and “Deep Ecology.” Speaking in the context of the Vietnam War, Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen monk, applied the Buddhist perspective of interdependence to his explanation of why an individual should help alleviate the dukkha of others. His movement is known as Socially Engaged Buddhism, which stresses the ideal of nonviolence and loving-kindness for others as a primary principle. This movement is widely used to label similar movements led by, for

11. The examples of these writers’ work in which the idea of interconnectedness can be found are Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” (1855), John Dos Passos’s The U.S.A. Trilogy (1930/1932/1936), Gary Snyder’s Danger on Peaks: Poems (2004), Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” (1956), Toni Morrison’s Sula (1973), Don DeLillo’s Underworld (1997), and Dave Eggers’s The Circle (2013).


example, the Dalai Lama of Tibet, Maha Ghosananda of Cambodia, and Sulak Sivalak of Thailand. In the late twentieth century, the concept of Buddhist interconnectedness came to be associated with ecological perspectives and is considered as a branch of Socially Engaged Buddhism. This approach focuses on the interdependent relation between human beings and the environment. Joanna Macy, a Buddhist scholar and environmentalist, has proposed the concept of the “ecological self” in her book *World as Lover, World as Self* (1991). Related to this, the term “Deep Ecology” was coined by Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher, in 1973. Deep ecologist scholars, particularly Naes and David R. Loy, have perceived the Buddhist interconnectedness as the primary philosophy of the movement in emphasizing the reciprocal relation between human beings and the natural world.

As discussed above, the deep ecology movement intertwines the Buddhist perspective of interconnectedness in all beings with concerns about ecological crisis. Like other scholars who delve into the relation between an individual’s perception of the self and identity and social suffering, deep ecologists consider a focus upon the self as the root cause of the problems. Loy explains that “[a]t the heart of this [the ecological crisis], we are also beginning to realise, is the self.” He further points out the cause of the problems in relation to Buddhism is “dualistic thinking.” He explains that “[i]n order to understand Buddhist ethics, therefore, we must consider its foundation in the Buddhist understanding of the self—or, more precisely, the Buddhist deconstruction of the self, since the denial of self [as an autonomous entity] is essential to Buddhism and one of its most distinguishing features.” This idea corresponds with Macy’s perspective on the self. She describes the perception of the self which co-exists


with the non-human world as “the greening of the self.”

All these contemporary ideas regarding one’s self and ecology have been mainly developed from the Buddhist perspective of the self (and some part of it has been influenced by Transcendentalism). Related ideas like the interdependent nature of the self and the divisive nature of dualistic views also appear as outstanding ideas which are stressed in the writings of Johnson and Ozeki.

In *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (2008), David L. McMahan encapsulates the outstanding characteristics of Buddhism that have contributed to the new connotation of Buddhist interconnectedness within the Western context by noting that: “[t]he internalization of religion, the attribution of religious significance to the natural world, the emphasis on solitary contemplation of nature, and the view of such contemplation as a remedy for the excessive materialism of the modern world all served as essential ingredients in the interpretation of Buddhism in the West, particularly North America.”

McMahan further adduces that, in the mid-nineteenth century, Transcendentalist reverence for nature and belief, as encountered in personal spontaneous experience, paved the way for people in North America to embrace Buddhism. Having drawn upon various stances found in philosophy and religious studies regarding the transfigurations of Buddhism in relation to modernism, McMahan carries out an insightful exploration of the emergence of contemporary Buddhist interconnectedness. McMahan’s interpretations of both the traditional Buddhist principle of dependent co-arising and its transforming connotation of the interconnectedness pertinent to the interrelation between human beings and the natural world are directly relevant to Buddhist interconnectedness as found in more recent American writings, especially those of Charles Johnson and Ruth Ozeki.

From the mid-twentieth century onwards, Zen Buddhist principles became more directly evident in American writings. The work of the Beat Generation, for instance, the writings of Jack Kerouac, clearly attempts to search for spiritual liberation through an exploration of Buddhism. However, Kerouac’s interpretation of Buddhism is

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not that of the traditional Buddhist view derived from the Buddhist Pali canon but rests instead on the transfigured Buddhist ideas of life, the natural world, and the experimental effects of drugs on the human mind. He also tried to make sense of those ideas by integrating them with his old beliefs. This is evident in *Mexico City Blues* (1955), a work in which Kerouac tries to understand Buddhism by intertwining Buddhist thought with his Christian beliefs.22 More recently, topics pertaining to Buddhism in American writings have begun to be discussed in some detail. However, this has mostly occurred with reference to American nonfiction literary works and poetry. There are, however, a number of American writers and Buddhist American writers who engage with Buddhism yet whose work has not been examined such as Peter Matthiessen, Alice Walker, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Rafe Martin. It is in regard to these novelists—Charles Johnson and Ruth Ozeki—that I hope to offer a critical intervention in this field.

In Johnson’s and Ozeki’s writings, a distinctive difference from their predecessors’ writing is their consideration of the “I”. From a Buddhist point of view, what is called “I” or the self is constructed within one’s perception of the natural world. Thus the “I” or the self is merely an illusion and if one is attached to it, *dukkha* (suffering) arises. While predecessors’ writings looked for an answer to “who am I?”, which reflects their belief in the existence of an “I” and the self as an entire entity, Johnson and Ozeki replace that question with the question of “what is the self?” Through this primary question, both writers deploy their writings as a space to consider and offer alternative ways of approaching racial and ethnic problems, as well as social and ecological problems. In this thesis, I contest that Johnson and Ozeki suggest that an understanding of the interdependent nature of the Self brings about an individual’s potential worldview, which helps alleviate the suffering of African Americans and Japanese-Americans both at an individual and communal levels. This is because they view that the cause of that suffering is rooted in their attachment to the belief in a static and fixed self.

Charles Johnson

Charles Johnson was born in Evanston, Illinois, in 1948. He is acknowledged as a writer of Buddhist American literature.\(^{23}\) He was an essayist and cartoonist before he started to write fiction in 1972. He began to practice meditation at the age of fourteen in 1962 and has been interested in Buddhism since then.\(^ {24}\) Johnson has also studied Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, and the Vedas.\(^ {25}\) As a philosopher, he explores selfhood and identity as central themes in his writings, indeed he views the primary aim of fiction to deal with the themes of self and identity.

One of the reasons Johnson views the understanding of the self as the beginning step in freeing from suffering is found in his agreement with an American Zen Buddhist Claude AnShin Thomas, a Vietnam war veteran, that peace must be made within one’s self not “by a miscellaneous list of egoistic ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’.”\(^ {26}\) In an interview, he remarks that “Most people don’t take the issue further and begin to explore the question of what it means to be a self.”\(^ {27}\) Johnson’s scepticism toward the notion of the self started when he did his doctoral research, which was later published as *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970* (1988). The book presents Johnson’s philosophical exploration of African-American literature using a phenomenological

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approach. He simply explains that his research is the analysis about “what they say about the world, and what they don’t say” in relation to the “black experience.”

In preparing the book, Johnson explored his predecessors’ works and the history of African-American writing before establishing his own stance on the work of African-American writers since 1970. His findings show that most African-American writers have thematised perennial problems about personal identity and their sense of alienation and therefore philosophical African-American fictions are limited. Only Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1945), and *The Outsider* (1953), and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) are considered by Johnson to be philosophical African-American fictions. However, Johnson believes that none of them have truly provided “a philosophically systematic body of black fiction.” He explains that such a body of black fiction has to “address some perennial problems of Western man, taking up questions of value, ethics, meaning, the good, the true, the beautiful, the self, epistemology [...]” Johnson believes that this is needed because the existing perspective on the self, looking at the self as “a fixed or static being,” is unlikely to contribute to spiritual freedom.

Elaborating further on the theme of the self, Johnson points out that African-American literature, which is based upon the belief in an existence of a static self, often sets African Americans in alternating positions of inferiority and superiority. He calls this phenomenon a “crisis of personal identity.” He notes that many African-American


naturalist novels and novels which are written to serve the expectations of a white sponsor and/or audience result in stereotypical characterizations of African American as victims. As such, Johnson thinks much African-American literature presents African Americans with “a zero image of themselves.” For him, a good source to scrutinize the question about the idea of self comes from eastern philosophy. Thus Johnson applies eastern philosophy, such as those of Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism to his novels to offer an alternative perspective to the self, especially the African-American self.

Johnson’s opinion on the self as a process has influenced the creation of his characters. He does not believe that African-American characters’ predicaments are caused solely by social forces. For Johnson, “[t]o endure and prosper, one needs the understanding that we alone, and not an abstraction called ‘social forces,’ determined by moment our individual destinies and our happiness.” He holds that the cause of the belief in naturalist idea is one’s understanding of the self. Based upon this belief, Johnson deconstructs the idea of the African-American character as a victim by creating African-American characters who are intellectual or well-educated questers in search of the meaning of life, characters who seek to know the nature of the self.

The intellectuality of Johnson’s characters is very significant; his work traces protagonists’ transformation from ignorance to knowledge. Linda Furgerson Selzer observes that Johnson regards intellectuality as the most ideal characteristic of the African American. Selzer notes about Johnson’s statistical survey of the number of African Americans who had obtained doctoral degrees in North American that:

Johnson himself has long been interested in investigating the complicated position of black intellectuals through fictional recreations of historical figures from the African American intellectual tradition (such as the Reverend Richard Allen, Adsalom Jones, Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King, Jr.); through


35. Johnson, 17.

the creation of characters who occupy the social positions of black intellectuals (university professors, ministers, lawyers); and through an analysis of the status of contemporary black intellectuals in his essays. Three of his four novels have as their protagonists exceptionally well educated black men; *Oxherding Tale, Middle Passage, and Dreamer.*

Based upon this information, Johnson’s interest is indicative of his belief in knowledge. He holds that African Americans need education and knowledge to free themselves from prevailing racial problems. This explains why Johnson wrote the stories in which his well-educated protagonists investigate “[…] the nature of the self, the I, and personal identity held in eastern thought,” as he notes in the introduction to *Oxherding Tale.*

In terms of his literary aesthetic, Johnson wishes his novels and short stories to be seen as philosophical fiction which can be called “moral fiction”. He explains that moral fiction here is “not moral in the sense that there are ideas or precepts that you preach at people; that is the opposite of moral fiction. Moral is the process of the work itself, the creative process […] . It is ultimately a “work of exploration, an intellectual adventure, and adventure of the spirit.” He explains that moral fiction has to make some change in its writer’s or reader’s understanding of life. This aspect of “moral fiction” becomes part of Johnson’s philosophical African-American writings. Indeed, Johnson has noted that he “wanted somehow to merge, in my own work, the black experience and about two thousand years’ worth of philosophical reflection.” This explains why he, as Rudolph P. Byrd observes, attempts to find his own literary tradition. Byrd explains in his analyses of Johnson’s four fictions—*Faith and the Good Thing, Oxherding Tale, Middle Passage,* and *Dreamer*—that “[t]he four novels that constitute the focus of this study are part of a literary tradition that Johnson terms


philosophical black fiction. [...] In these texts, Johnson defines philosophical black fiction as art that “interrogates experience” and, as a consequence, deepens our perpetual experiences.”

While Johnson retains Buddhist philosophical ideas as the primary framework for his literary creations, in the analyses of his selected novels some particular aspects or techniques such as a Hegelian dialectical method, fictionalizing history, and allusion, are commonly found. The protagonists of his novels are truth-seekers, questers of the meaning of the self and the meaning of life. Each of them always progresses from an ignorant to an awakened person. On their journeys, they learn from people with different beliefs which represent different philosophies concerning the self, for example, that of Karl Marx and David Hume. Their journeys and encounters speak to the accumulative experiences that form one’s present self, a self which is a transformative self caught in the flux and flow of time. However, although Johnson seems to underline the importance of the present moment through the concept of a present self, at the same time he gives importance to the African-American history of slavery and racism, noting how it contributes to the present self of African Americans. This can be seen in Oxherding Tale, Middle Passage, and Dreamer. All of these stress that life and one’s self is a process; to realize the nature of this process may be a way to racial reconciliation and freedom.

**Ruth Ozeki**

Ruth Ozeki, born in New Haven, Connecticut in 1956, is a Japanese-American writer. In 1985, Ozeki moved to New York City in order to work, subsequently beginning a film career as an art director before switching to television production and then to directing documentaries for Japanese television. In 2010, she became ordained as a Soto Zen Buddhist priest by Zoketsu Norman Fischer. A number of her documentaries have become extremely successful, for example “Body of Correspondence” (1994), which won the New Visions Award at the San Francisco International Film Festival in 1995, and “Halving the Bones” (1995), screened at the

Sundance Film Festival and the recipient of a number of awards (such as the International Documentary Association Distinguished Achievement Award and the Kodak Award for Creative Cinematography). Since 1998, Ruth Ozeki has published three acclaimed novels, a number of short stories and a variety of other writings, including *My Year of Meats* (1998), *All Over Creation* (2002), “A Vacation with Ghosts” (2004), “Ships in the Night” (2004), “The Death of the Last White Male” (2006), “The Anthropologists’ Kid” (2006), *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) and *The Face: A Time Code* (2016). Although Ozeki has written a relatively small number of works, her fiction has been well received, this being evidenced by the significant critical appraisal given to her first two novels and the success of her third novel.

42 In terms of the critical appraisal of her work, since 2001 Ozeki’s novels have been mainly read as being ecofeminist and environmentally conscious, seen particularly in her treatment of aspects of American national identity with specific regard to culture, gender and race. These interpretations have also postulated that the themes of gender and food production are key parts of her oeuvre: for instance, we have the adulteration of meat in *My Year of Meats* and the genetically-engineered potato seeds in *All Over Creation*. The most notable issues invoked throughout the novels pertain to problematic political aspects of contemporary American society. These issues concern the ways in which American identity and mythologies are viewed from abroad, post-industrial agriculture, the politics of race and sexuality, biracial identity,

43. *A Tale for the Time Being* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2013. It was a finalist for the National Book Critics’ Circle Award in 2014. It also won the Sunburst Award for Excellence in Canadian Literature of the Fantastic and the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature in 2014. For more detail, see “*A Tale for the Time Being*,” Ruth Ozeki’s Web World, accessed May 10, 2015.

transnationalism, and the consequences of technological advancement and capitalist expansion. Ozeki also devotes attention to some of the smaller scale aspects of human life such as the attempt to control life and one’s ability to accept failure or physical loss. These aspects link with spiritual problems for her protagonists. Such political issues drive all of the main characters in her first two novels to consider a wide variety of moral concerns and the associated responsibility of humans, with this being the primary philosophical theme in *A Tale for the Time Being*.

Some critics have explored the theme of interconnectedness in Ozeki’s novels. For example, in relation to *My Year of Meats*, Cheryl J. Fish links the adulteration of meat to the issue of environmental justice. Fish dedicates part of her discussion to stressing the importance of the links between food and human/animal life, arguing in the process that humans have a responsibility to recognize this connection. In doing so, she points out that:

[… this novel shows how [italics in original] the failure to make connections between consuming and desiring, whether it is the food we eat or the ethnic and racial images we exoticize, is dangerously naïve. Ozeki makes this connection by illuminating a direct and insidious relationship between meat production and environmental and public health issues, especially for women, children, persons of color, and the poor.45

Here, Fish suggests Ozeki demonstrates the relationship between morality and a variety of social issues to underscore the importance of recognizing the interconnection of meat, the film producers’ responsibility to consumers and a number of other aspects of human life as addressed in the novel. This corresponds with Alison Carruth’s opinion as to the notion of interconnectedness in Ozeki’s works. In focusing upon the narrative form of Ozeki’s novels, Carruth draws upon interpretations of interconnectedness as a potential point from which discussions can be opened up. She explains that “[w]hat these arguments about interconnectedness as a theme tend to neglect is the form of Ozeki’s fiction, [she remixes] discourses (slow food and pro-life in *All Over Creation*,

political tracts and TV scripts in *My Year of Meats*) to compound the moral upshot of the novels.\(^{46}\)

Although Carruth’s concentration on the narrative forms of the two novels is inherently different to Fish’s approach to reading the works, the fact that both mention related topics in their criticism reveals a shared opinion regarding the relation between the Buddhist interconnectedness and the moral concerns that permeate American society. More importantly, this shared opinion of Fish and Carruth constitutes the starting point from which I set out my stance as to the influence of the Buddhist principle of interconnection on Ozeki’s work. I argue that Ozeki not only links morality to ideas drawn from Buddhist interconnectedness, but that her work regards such moral problems as both the causes and effects of the spiritual crises of the individuals she portrays in her novels. In her first three novels, Ozeki persistently presents these moral problems as being the result of the failure of individuals to grasp the interconnection of all beings.

In stressing the importance of recognizing the interconnection of phenomena, especially between one’s self and other beings or one’s present experience and her past experience, Ozeki chooses to communicate through female characters that are either Japanese-American (like Jane in *My Year of Meats*, Yumi in *All Over Creation*, and Ruth in *The Face: A Time Code*), or Japanese (like Nao in *A Tale for the Time Being*). All of these characters are presented as being disoriented with regard to their national identity and the question of how they should live their lives. In presenting these characters’ lives, the three novels share four common aspects. Firstly, through the perspective of the focal character, each respective novel points out the problems of contemporary society and shows why, when thinking about these problems, each main character’s perception of her self is a cause of her own *dukkha* (suffering). Alongside these perspectives, disparate opinions concerning the main conflict of the narratives are articulated through a number of characters’ voices. In order to demonstrate how Ozeki weaves the theme of interconnectedness into the narratives of her novels, it is essential to consider the influence of the Buddhist principle of interconnectedness on the author’s

\(^{46}\) Carruth, “Postindustrial Pastoral: Ruth Ozeki and the New Muckrakers,” 121.
thoughts. It is only through this approach that one can see how Ozeki interprets the notion of interconnectedness differently in each of her works.

**Buddhist Key Concepts for the Discussion on the Self**

In the analyses of the selected novels, I will draw upon each of the three Buddhist key concepts which Shakyamuni Buddha postulates as approaches to one’s understanding of the Self and non-Self to explain some of the themes and ideas Johnson and Ozeki wish to address. From a Buddhist perspective, the ultimate aim of Buddhist practice is the cease of dukkha. This process of spiritual liberation starts when a person acknowledges dukkha, “the suffering or deep unsatisfactoriness that pervades human experience.” From this, it is important to identify what the root of dukkha is in order for a person to be able to uproot it. The Buddha indicated that the only way to undertake this uprooting is to look inwards to study the true nature of one’s self through the practising of insight meditation. And through this, one will one day become enlightened by the three fundamental Buddhist teachings: (i) the four “noble truths” (cattāri ariyasaccāni), (ii) the three common characteristics of existence (tilakkhana)—impermanence (anicca), suffering or unsatisfactoriness (dukkha) and emptiness (anattā), and (iii) interdependence (paṭiccasamuppāda) which focuses on the origination of samsara and is used to explain the nature of the Self. This Buddhist notion of interdependence is the principle from which the Buddhist concept of interrelatedness or interconnectedness is derived.

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48. See Emmanuel, 27-28. The four “noble truths” “are: (i) dukkha , “the painful,” encompassing the various forms of “pain,” gross or subtle, physical or mental, to which we are all subject, along with painful things that engender these; (ii) the origination (samudaya, i.e., cause) of dukkha , [for example] craving (taṇhā); (iii) the cessation (niruddha) of dukkha by the cessation of craving (this cessation being equivalent to nirvāṇa); and (iv) the Noble Eight-Factored Path (magga) that leads to this cessation. The DCP S [Dharma-cakkapavatana Sutta, the Lord Buddha’s first sermon] says that the first of the four is “to be fully understood”; the second is “to be abandoned”; the third is “to be personally experienced”; the fourth is “to be developed/cultivated” (bhāvitabba).”

Johnson and Ozeki selectively interweave these Buddhist concepts throughout their novels, emphasizing the concepts of interconnectedness and impermanence, to propose a way to alleviate the protagonists’ dukkha. In underlying the importance of interconnectedness, both writers always challenge dualism which is antithetical to interconnectedness. Transcending dualism is one objective of Zen Buddhism, the sect which has the greatest influence among Buddhists in North America. This dualism or dualistic views refer to the binary oppositions which are perceived by people who believe in the existence of the static fixed self. Those binary oppositions are, for example, subject and object, white and black, us and the other, or happiness and suffering. However, “transcending dualism” does not mean the negation of natural existence of two opposite things. It emphasizes one’s ability to penetrate the superficial differences to see the interdependence and interconnectedness of beings.

How is the understanding of the interconnection of things related to overcoming dualistic views and the elimination of dukkha? To fathom this point, an explanation of the relation between interconnectedness and the “Three Characteristics of Existence” is necessary. From a Buddhist perspective, Payutto explains that the co-existence of all sentient beings “does not simply mean gathering separate parts and putting them together to create a form.” Based on the Pali canon (Tripitaka), he points out that the realization of the interdependent existence of beings is directly related to the Buddha’s teaching of the “Three Characteristics of Existence”:

Actually, the statement that all things come into being from the conjoining of various elements is simply an expression to facilitate understanding at a basic level. In reality, all things exist in a constant flow or flux. [...] This flow continues to evolve or proceed in a way that seems to maintain a form or course because all of the component parts have a connected and interdependent causal relationship and

Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, uses the term “Dependent-Co-arising” alongside an explanation for this usage.

because each component has no essence of its own and is, therefore, in constant in [sic.] flux.51

In this explanation, the process of constant changes in the existence of all beings is highlighted. A compound self that exists because of its interconnection to other things tells us that the individual essence of the self never exists. This revelation of the concept of non-Self (some texts refer to this as selflessness or no-Self) attests that the belief in the existence of a real and static self, is misplaced. In addition, it is essential that six further Buddhist terms—dukkha, interconnectedness, the Self, and “right view”—be clarified.

**Dukkha**

In discussing the matter of the self, the Buddhist term dukkha, which results from a misunderstanding of the nature of the self as static, will be used throughout this thesis. This is to avoid miscommunication caused by the translation of the word into English. Regarding the translation of dukkha, most scholars concur that retaining the Buddhist term is most suitable, though some of them simply decide to translate it as “suffering” or “dissatisfaction”. However, it is well recognized among philosophers of Buddhism and eastern philosophy that dukkha has various shades of meaning and its meanings vary according to the contexts where dukkha is mentioned.

In Pali, when dukkha is mentioned, it refers to the feelings of dis-ease such as physical and mental pain, distress, fear, hopelessness, deep unsatisfactoriness, dissatisfaction, unfulfilled desires, etc. Also, Payutto explains the general meaning of dukkha very clearly: “[d]ukkha is the result of dealing with things in an ignorant manner, resisting the natural process, and letting yourself become a slave to this cycle. In short, all of this can be attributed to clinging and attachment.”52 The Buddha once elucidated the causes of dukkha as follows:

[i] birth [i.e., being born] is painful, aging is painful, illness is painful, death is painful; [ii] sorrow, lamentation, (physical) pain, unhappiness and distress are painful; [iii] union with what is disliked is painful;

51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., 73.
Another meaning of dukkha when it is mentioned as part of the three common characteristics of existence (tilakkhana) refers to the state of being impermanent and subject to changes which come from the interdependent nature of being.\footnote{Phra Prayudh Payutto, “What Is the Nature of Existence?: The Three Characteristics of Existence (Tilakkhana), The Three Natural Characteristics of All Things,” 62.}

**Interconnectedness**

According to what we have already discussed above about the origin and development of the concept of “interconnectedness,” in Chapter One and Two, I will apply the term in its traditional sense, which is originated from the Buddhist principle of dependent co-arising (some texts refer to this principle as the “dependent origination”), and its related terms “interdependence” and “interrelatedness” to explain the interplay between Buddhist ideas and themes of the novels. In the second part of this thesis, I will look at “interconnectedness” as derived from accumulated conceptual influences in the analysis of the novels. Compared with its traditional meaning, this contemporary meaning of interconnectedness underlines the interrelation between the existence of an individual and those of others in society and between human beings and the natural world.

A hybrid interpretation of interconnectedness has resulted from the eclectic Western concept of modern Buddhism. McMahan suggests that this contemporary interpretation of Buddhist interconnectedness “[...] conveys a sense of celebration of this interwoven world, of intimacy and oneness with the great, interconnected living fabric of life, and an expansion of the sense of selfhood into it.”\footnote{McMahan, “A Brief History of Interdependence,” 151.} This interpretation enhances the sense of attachment to the world, this being in direct opposition to the traditional interpretation of Buddhism. In addition, this notion constitutes a full

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articulation of the contemporary meaning of Buddhist interconnectedness that encompasses the significance of life being “fully engaged in the world”.\textsuperscript{56} Such interpretations have emerged in response to problems and questions of modernity (for instance, war, ecological degradation, technological advancement and spiritual bankruptcy).\textsuperscript{57}

**The Self**

In Buddhism, the Self is referred to as the state of a being which has no intrinsic self (non-self). Phra Prayudh Payutto delineates that “Buddhadhamma looks at things in terms of integrated factors. There is no real self (or essence) in all things. When all of the elements composing one’s being are divided and separated, no self remains. […] Therefore, when we say that something exists, we must understand that it exists in terms of a combination of various elements.”\textsuperscript{58} Thus, to differentiate the Self as a generic term and self (without “the”) which refers to one’s self, I will use the “Self” (\textit{Pāli: attā}) with a capital “s” to refer to the state of being in the broadest sense and use “self” with lower case to refer to individual selves. This means that when using the “Self” with upper case, it includes all states of being such as attachments, memories, and a person’s self. On the other hand, when I mention “self”, I refer to particular individuals, for instance, Johnson’s self and Ozeki’s self, or a character’s self.\textsuperscript{59} Therefore, the “Self” is a general term used to refer to the state of existence that includes the self, the personal self, the personal identity or self-identity.

Thus the relation between the Self and other terms is that the “Self” is used in the broadest sense as referring to either mental or physical states of things, for example,

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 170–71.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 152.


\textsuperscript{59} However, there is another meaning of the self which differs from the conventional usage. Shakyamuni Buddha postulates that the self (or what a person perceived as the self) arises as the compound of five aggregations or khandhas which means heaps, collections, or groupings. The five aggregates are form (or matter or body), sensations which are received from form, perceptions, mental activity or formations, and consciousness.
feelings, attachments, memories, people, creatures, while the term “self,” the personal self, the personal identity or self-identity are merely coextensive, but they are not the same thing. In this thesis, the personal self refers to an individual’s attributes which are perceived only by himself or herself. Personal identity is a subset of the personal self. It is the version of the self which is perceived by a third person. The personal self is an abstract being which will be clearly identified by an individual only through his/her sense of the self when he/she has to identify his/her self to the public. A person’s sense of self is that which is generated from an individual’s experiences in life. Thus it is always ready to change whenever a person gains new experience.

“Right View”

The term “right view” used in this thesis does not refer to “right” which is opposite to “wrong” in general terms. It is a term transliterated from Pali sammādiṭṭhi: samma means “right” or “correct” and diṭṭhi means “view”. Though the word “right” seems to be the most appropriate word for samma, it easily misleads people. In the context of this thesis, I intend to use this translation to refer to a person’s understanding of the “Four Noble Truths” and of the existence of all beings which emerge under the law of dependent co-arising, also recognized as the notion of interconnectedness by a western readership. In the Buddhist doctrine, what is defined as “right view” is the view that leads a person to the cessation of dukkha. On the other hand, what is defined as “wrong view”, micchādiṭṭhi, in a Buddhist perspective is whatever view, particularly the illusory perception of a static self as an entire entity and dualistic ideas of selfhood and phenomena, which leads a person to dukkha. In some Buddhist texts, these two terms are mentioned as proper and improper understandings of reality. For instance, Grant A. Olson translated Payutto’s explanation of sammādiṭṭhi that it is “[a] proper understanding of dependent origination,” an understanding of the natural law of the interdependent existence of all beings.60

As a consequence of the Buddha’s discovery, Buddhism considers a person’s view as the great influence on human’s decisions and actions, therefore, the most

important thing a person who wishes to attain the state of enlightenment must gain is the “right view”. The essential Buddhist teaching regarding the attainment of the “right view” deals with a person’s awakening to the “Four Noble Truths,” the phrase is literally translated from *ariyasacca*. The “Four Noble Truths” begins with the detailed elucidation about what *dukkha* is, then it uncovers the causes of *dukkha* before affirming that the way to extinguish *dukkha* does exist and, finally, provide the practical way to attain the state of spiritual liberation for real practitioners. However, in the literary context, the fact that Buddhism originally emphasizes that the state of enlightenment, having the “right view” and liberating oneself from *dukkha*, is achieved only through one’s direct experience is a challenge for the Buddhist writers. In an interview, Johnson shared his experience with John Whalen-Bridge that “[i]n my twenty-three years of sitting, I’m convinced this [all the knowledge constitutes the “right view”] can only be achieved, in part or whole, through meditation.” With that emphasis, Johnson and Ozeki seem to realize that what novels, which rely on language, can do is to merely serve as “the finger pointing to the moon,” so they consider their novels as devices to creatively present the “way” (Dharma) to spiritual liberation.

**Structure and Objectives**

In order to investigate why Johnson and Ozeki hold that a Buddhist perspective of the Self is a potential worldview that can alleviate suffering of ethnic Americans at both individual scale and wider scale which is caused by their attachment to the belief in a static and fixed self, I have divided this thesis into two major parts and each part includes two chapters. Part One focuses on the novels in which Johnson and Ozeki

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61. See the full explanation about Buddhist terminology regarding the “Four Noble Truths” in Harvey, “Dukkha, Non-Self, and The Teaching on the Four ‘Noble Truths,’” 26–29.


63. The Zen saying “the finger pointing to the moon” means that all the teachings and philosophy are essential for a person to intellectually understand the way to attain the enlightenment. As a device like a person’s finger pointing to the moon, a person needs to study the teachings and philosophy, but then let go of them. In spiritually attaining the state of enlightenment, a person has to practice the Zen way until gaining a direct experience of it. For details, see Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism: First Series* (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 19.
present the interplay between the presentation of Buddhist philosophy of the Self and the protagonists’ understandings of their selves at a metaphysical level. Part Two stresses the positive ramifications of an individual’s understanding of the Self and interconnectedness, which are illustrated in the relation between the characters and others or between the characters and environment. Corresponding with the focus of each part, I have selected Johnson’s and Ozeki’s novels as exemplars.

Chapter One investigates how the idea of the Self and one’s individual self which are presented in Oxherding Tale (1982) and A Tale for the Time Being (2013) contribute to the protagonists’ discovery of the importance of the “now”. In this chapter, I concentrate on searches for the ontological meanings of the self which Johnson and Ozeki present through the protagonists’ selves. The Buddhist concept employed to analyze the novels in this chapter is the concept of the “right view”, which a person derives from an understanding of the natural law of the interdependent self. Because of the discrepancy of the characters’ contexts, my discussions of the two novels intend to point out why the novels present the question about the self as the primary step to untangle an individual’s dukkha. In Chapter Two, the discussion aims to scrutinize Johnson’s and Ozeki’s treatment of a Buddhist understanding of the transformative and interdependent nature of the Self in Johnson’s Faith and the Good Thing (1974) and Ozeki’s The Face: A Time Code (2016). I apply the Buddhist principle of the “three common characteristics of existence” to discuss why Johnson and Ozeki propose that an understanding of the Self is significant to a person’s pursuit of his or her personal self and identity in the context of African American and Japanese American fiction.

In correspondence with the emphasis of Part Two, which highlights the relation between humans’ actions and other beings, Chapter Three looks into the presentation of the Buddhist concept of interrelatedness and interconnectedness in Middle Passage (1990) and Dreamer (1998). The analysis focuses on Johnson’s demonstration of how the appreciation of interconnectedness cultivates a human being’s compassion for others. In the analysis of Middle Passage, my discussion foregrounds why Johnson offers the understanding of the Self as a first step in the process of identity negotiation and of one’s transformation into a selfless person, and as the key to spiritual liberation from dualistic views on race. Then, in the section two of Chapter Three, this
idea of selflessness in *Middle Passage* will be further examined in relation to *Dreamer* which features the events before the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. to look into how Johnson illustrates the web of brotherhood between African American people. Johnson also focuses upon the sacrificial King, his compassion, and agapic love for others, qualities which are essential in creating the integrated society which King called a “beloved community.” Finally, Chapter Four will explore effects of an understanding of interconnectedness and interrelatedness upon human’s ecological concerns which are presented in *My Year of Meats* (1998) and *All Over Creation* (2002). Each chapter aims to examine what Johnson’s and Ozeki’s Buddhist-influenced writings contribute to Buddhist American literature of the late twentieth century onwards.
Part One
Chapter One
Dispelling Delusions of the Self and Identity

This chapter explores the ontological meaning of the self and identity presented in Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013). As I wish to attest that Johnson and Ozeki want to offer a perspective of the self which transcends the binary view on race, I will focus on Johnson’s and Ozeki’s application of Buddhist concepts of non-self and interconnectedness as approaches to explain the common nature of the self which is implicit in all human beings. Although these two novels are set in different periods—*Oxherding Tale* in the antebellum era, *A Tale for the Time Being* in contemporary America after the 2011 Tsunami in Japan—the two writers perceive that an understanding of the nature of the Self (atta) is a fundamental worldview that will make a person know how he or she will live their life as a person liberated from dukkha. Johnson and Ozeki generate extensive investigations into issues regarding the Self from the protagonists’ perplexity about what their real “selves” are. Johnson and Ozeki combine worldly-life problems in the narratives with fundamental Buddhist teachings, all of which are encompassed by the principle of interdependence.

The plots of both novels start with a quest for physical freedom which then transforms into a quest for spiritual liberation. At the beginning of the novels both Andrew Hawkins, the protagonist of *Oxherding Tale*, and Nao, the protagonist of *A Tale for the Time Being*, set off on their quests for material goals. Simultaneously, they are also in search of their racial and personal identity. The main characters who embark upon the life journeys with a “wrong view” (micchādiṭṭhi) transform into awakened persons with a “right view” (sammādiṭṭhi) regarding the nature of the self. Initially, Andrew believes that to obtain a document of manumission from his owner is the only way to gain freedom so money is what he needs. Similarly, Nao, thinking that her physical existence is meaningless, believes that committing suicide is the only way for her to achieve absolute freedom. Misunderstandings about freedom for Andrew and Nao gradually change after they develop their understanding about the natural law of interdependence. They realize that if they want “real” freedom or the state of permanent
peace, they must unchain themselves from within and must be a source of peace themselves, not solely by means of changing any physical conditions in their lives.¹

In discussing this, I will focus on the integration of the notion of non-self which is explained by the Buddhist concepts of interdependence and interconnectedness within the temporal and the philosophical dimensions of both Oxherding Tale and A Tale for the Time Being. In terms of the temporal dimension, Johnson and Ozeki interweave the thread of interconnected relations among characters of different generations. These threads of relations are deployed as the ground for the reader to further explore the philosophical discussions in the novels. In terms of the contents, the novels associate the exploration of diverse interpretations of each individual’s self with issues about racial and personal identity illustrated through Andrew’s and Nao’s lives. The utilization of fictional work as a medium to convey philosophical ideas on the self can make such complicated discussions on the philosophy of the Self more concise and accessible. The novels bring the relation between philosophy and human life into focus.

In facilitating the recognition of the interdependence of beings, Johnson and Ozeki treat the Buddhist idea of dukkha as a link to their discussion of the nature of the Self. In exploring how ideas about dukkha or suffering are associated with the notion of the self and interdependence and interconnectedness, Phra Prayudh Payutto² explicates:

Buddhadhamma [the Buddha’s teachings recorded in the Pali canon] teaches us to react to dukkha with a knowledge of what constitutes dukkha; this means knowing your own problems, not for the purpose of dukkha but for the purpose of correctly responding to dukkha and eliminating it. […] In yet another sense, the principles for action in the Noble Truths teach that whatever is problematical must be first studied, known, and clearly understood before you begin to solve that problem.³

¹ This idea can be found, both implicitly or explicitly, at times in the Buddhist writings, for example, the Pali canon and those of Thich Nhat Hanh; Tenzin Gyatso, the present Dali Lama. Charles R. Johnson is also the one who mentioned this in his interviews.

² Phra Prayudh Payutto is a Thai monk-scholar who was granted the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education.

This comprehensive explanation points out that, from the Buddhist view, acquiring the knowledge of dukkha constitutes both the first and the final steps to the state of “enlightenment,” which is indirectly referred to by Andrew in Oxherding Tale as tranquillity or “real” freedom, and by Nao in A Tale for the Time Being as happiness. Moreover, as I have mentioned, this Buddhist perspective illuminates how Buddhist philosophy is strongly related to real life. Through Oxherding Tale and A Tale for the Time Being, Johnson and Ozeki imply that dukkha is an unavoidable characteristic of life by initiating the protagonists’ internal pain as the main conflict: Andrew’s and Nao’s disorientation about their selves. As we will see in the analyses of the novels, Andrew’s conflicting identity and Nao’s misconception of life are designated as the primary problems needing to be solved because, as it is stated in the quotation, “a knowledge of what constitutes dukkha” is essential. Without the knowledge of the cause of a problem, the problem becomes merely an impasse. Instead of continuing the search for identity and the meaning of life from the beginning, the novels bring the reader back to an enquiry into the epistemology of the self and identity.

In Oxherding Tale, Johnson synthesizes the Buddhist theory about the self and identity through the discussion of the epistemological definition of one’s self and identity. Indeed, the question about identity is a reiterated topic he discusses through the body of his fictional works:

“What is individual identity?” is a central question for me. I personally don’t believe in the existence of the ego. I think it’s a theoretical construct. There’s no empirical verification for it at all. And if there is such a thing as identity, I don’t think that it’s fixed or static; it’s a process. I think it’s dominated by change and transformation, more so than by static qualities. It is many identities over the course of a lifetime.4

From a Buddhist perspective, this quotation shows that Johnson leads readers of Oxherding Tale to question whether the search for the static, fixed self or identity is pointless. The novel suggests that what is called the essence of identity never exists, the only thing that exists is what arises and gradually fades away in each moment, and it is the process depending on conditioned factors. To Johnson, this logic associates with the

issue concerning African Americans’ identity in the novels, as he remarks in *Being and Race* (1988) that most African-American novels tend to be obsessed with the quest for selfhood or identity and “image control.”\(^5\) Perhaps, he regards this sign as a source of African-American suffering in the post-emancipation era. In his attempt to break such illusory notions of self and identity and with hope to see Americans look beyond races, Johnson believes that it is necessary for a person “to find revolutionary answers to questions about racial and personal identity with the life-world if one is willing to see differently.”\(^6\) He spent five years writing *Oxherding Tale*, the novel where the experience of every character in the novel is transferred to be part of the process of Andrew’s evolution.

With regard to the conceptions of the self and identity, Johnson seems to slightly adjust the metaphysical Buddhist perception of the Self in order to make it fit with the issue of racial identity in the African American context. Instead of solely focusing on the idea about the “true” Self (*anattatā*, the non-self), Johnson applies this Buddhist idea to the issue of racial reconciliation. William R. Nash succinctly points out that “Andrew, by contrast, learns from passing to be both [the black and the white man], to reconcile the fragments of his heritage in a manner that makes the question of race less decisive and less significant.”\(^7\) Through this, Nash looks at the application of the idea about the interconnected self in *Oxherding Tale* in a racial context. His indication of the “less decisive and less significant” question of race in the novel tells us that, along with the metaphysical perspective on the Self, Johnson utilizes the idea about the interconnected self to point out that the reconciliation between black and white people are possible if racism is overcome. However, the suggested perspective on the racial self and identity is not only used to subvert the deep-rooted notion of the enduring substantial self; Johnson further links the idea of the interconnected self with the Buddhist idea of the non-Self.

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In line with *Oxherding Tale*, Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being* implicitly presents the Buddhist concept of the three characteristics of existence through Nao’s experience and ideas pertaining to the concept of self. Whereas Andrew is characterized as a mixed race African American with a conflicting identity in the antebellum period in *Oxherding Tale*, Ozeki positions Nao as a disoriented Japanese teenage girl who grows up in America before moving back to her homeland. At the beginning of the narrative, Nao is portrayed as a suicidal girl. Living with her guilty suicidal father, it seems she absorbs her father’s negative energy and becomes desperate about life. Her desperation is presented as the result of the fact that she lacks adequate understanding of the principle of interconnectedness. Throughout the narrative of *A Tale for the Time Being*, we are pushed to question and think about the meaning of life in relation to questions about the nature of self and identity. These main questions are examined through the incidents in which Nao writes a diary to discern the epistemological meaning of the existence of her self and of her personal identity. In the process of growing up, the most important objective of Nao’s quest for the self and identity is to find a reason why life is worth living. Ozeki designates that search for the selfhood to open the discussion about the nature of life and about how to live one's life.

Emphasizing the way to the cessation of *dukkha*, Johnson and Ozeki points out that desires and attachments are the causes of *dukkha* through their works. They underline the possible detrimental nature of desires and attachments in order to propose that compassion and loving-kindness, translated from *karunā* and *metta*, are a potential factor to bring about spiritual happiness or peace. They demonstrate this by means of entangling the main conflicts of the novels with the second Truth in the “Four Noble Truths.” That Truth addresses the knowledge of the attachments to three kinds of desires that cause an individual’s *dukkha*. The three cravings are (1) desire for self-pleasure: to fulfil “the needs of the five senses,” (2) desire for self-existence: to have “a condition of life that can provide everything you wish,” and (3) desire for non-existence: “wanting yourself to pass away, disappear, or separate from the things or conditions of life that are undesirable.” In the two novels, not only do Johnson and Ozeki present the characters’ desires and attachments as causes of *dukkha*, they also

indicate that the characters’ dukkha originate from dualistic or binary views which are rooted in their beliefs in the static and fixed self.

In the following analyses of Oxherding Tale and A Tale for the Time Being, I will divide the discussion into two sections and both sections foreground the integration of the Buddhist concept of “right view” as an antidote to the characters’ transcending dukkha. Concerning Oxherding Tale, the discussion will begin with the demonstration of Johnson’s idea about the misconception of the self which is perceived as the origin of dukkha. Then I will deal with the dangers of dualistic views which Johnson illustrates in the novel. Finally, the discussion will explicate what Johnson proposes as necessary to a person’s transcending dualistic views on race (judging people by race, for instance, as either black and the white, as inferior and superior, as slave and the master). In the second section, the analysis of A Tale for the Time Being will develop out of discussion of the metaphysical nature of the self in Oxherding Tale to a concentration on the Buddhist concept of interconnectedness which Ozeki offers as a fundamental perspective of life in contemporary society. I will begin the analysis with Ozeki’s indication of the pitfalls of an anthropocentric perspective of people in contemporary society and her stance about how one can cope with them. As a second step, I will look into the concept of interconnectedness which Ozeki employs to illustrate the path towards the “right view” on the interconnected self. This emphasizes the importance of the “now” (a present moment) in living one’s life. Finally, the discussion will end with a demonstration of how Ozeki presents the concept of “non-singular self.” Overall, it is my contention that both writers wish to underline the non-self nature of the self and identity and offer Buddhist-inspired ideas of how a person can liberate oneself from dukkha which is deep-rooted in the belief in the static and fixed self.

The Journey of a Slave to Spiritual Liberation in Oxherding Tale

To demonstrate the exploration of the notion of self by applying the Buddhist philosophy of the Self, Charles Johnson wrote Oxherding Tale (1982), a neo-slave narrative, as an alternative way to look at race. In the introduction to Oxherding Tale, Johnson directly addresses the ontological and epistemological interrogations of the self, particularly the illusion of the static self, as the key idea in the novel. This is evidenced by a myriad of questions concerning the self he mentioned in interviews, for example, “What is the self? The white self? The black self? Aren’t these, after all,
simply constructs or fictions—a Buddhist would say delusions—that only increase ignorance (avijjā) and suffering in the world?"9 He considers the way an individual perceives one’s own self as a source of racial problems and this is consistent in his later novels. Here, his stance, which is based upon Buddhist perspectives of the Self, suggests that the idea of the static self, for example, the white self, is a constructed concept. These enquiries became the impetus for him to dedicate five years to writing Oxherding Tale, his detailed investigation into the true nature of the Self.

In response to his enquiries about the racial self, Johnson states clearly in the introduction to Oxherding Tale that the main theme of this novel is the idea of the interconnection of people across generations in a singular self, regardless of races and genders: “I asked myself during the book’s unfoldment, isn’t all of human history—the effort of all men and women, East and West, to make sense of the world—our inheritance?”10 This confession reveals the great influence of the Buddhist principle of interconnectedness on Oxherding Tale. Johnson, a philosopher and a writer, makes it his responsibility to contribute his knowledge and stimulate readers to question and to think critically about the matters of life and the world. He believes that a new perspective is needed to figure out an unsolved problem. He notes that “[f]iction should open us up to possibilities. It should clarify for us. It should change our perception.”11 Johnson calls fiction with this characteristic “moral fiction,” a term used by his writing mentor John Gardner.12 Thus, undoubtedly, Johnson wrote this novel as his “platform book,” a space to offer a systematically philosophical discussion on the illusory sense of the self. Subsequently, Oxherding Tale is a demanding novel, containing all the issues he discusses extensively in his later writings.13


12. John Gardner is an American writer and university professor whose best-known work is Grendel. Johnson respects and regards him as his writing coach and his good friend. Johnson began writing under his guidance when he was working on Oxherding Tale.

As well as emphasizing content, Johnson is especially interested in form and characterisation to convey the idea of interconnectedness in beings. Through *Oxherding Tale*, he engages in critical discussions on topics regarding the racial self and identity with his predecessors. He reveals that “[t]he form, in fact, that provided the basis for the black novel and tradition of autobiography that stretches from Reconstruction to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Manchild in the Promised Land*. […] Yet I was indebted, […], to an older form, the Puritan narrative […] and that form, […], had ancestral roots stretching back as far as Augustine’s *Confessions.*”

Therefore, it is not surprising that critics have found that *Oxherding Tale* can be read, for example, as a parody of both Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) and James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). In addition to this, we can see that the novel is full of allusions to both eastern and western thought, such as Taoism, Hinduism, Transcendentalism, David Hume, Karl Marx. Among these influences, I consider the Buddhist philosophy of the Self most dominant as it is explicitly alluded to in the novel’s title.

Apparently, the writer adapted the novel’s title from “Ten Oxherding Pictures,” the well-known Zen metaphorical pictures for the search for the “true self.” The “Oxherding Pictures,” which are adapted from Maha-Gopalakṣa Sutta, a part of Majjhima Nikaya in *Tipitaka*, originally comprise of only five pictures. Later, they were elaborated and more pictures were added. The “Ten Oxherding Pictures” illustrate a meditator’s stages of spiritual training towards the cessation of dukkha, a stage at which the meditator achieves the purification of mind, the stage which is translated as “enlightenment.” The ox-herder is the metaphor for a Mind-seeker. He takes a


spiritual journey to search for the Mind-ox which appears in the fourth picture as the black ox and in the fifth picture as the white ox. Parallel to the ox-herder’s journey, Andrew Hawkins, the protagonist in Oxherding Tale, undertakes his journey to search for his “inner identity” as the black slave in the first half of the narrative and as the white free man in the second half. In the “Oxherding Pictures,” after the ox-herder gains more experience of the nature of the Mind-ox, he realizes the fact that the nature of both the Mind-ox and his self are the same. At that moment, the ox-herder realizes that, in actuality, there is neither his self nor the ox’s self. Thus in the eighth picture appears the emptiness. Similarly, for the protagonist of Oxherding Tale, after he has had direct experience of life from contemplating the nature of both black and white identity, along with the notion of the self, he gains a new perspective on life. In the last two pictures, we see the ox-herder becomes harmonious with nature without the trace of the ox. This idea which emerges from the last picture matches with the end of the narrative, where the protagonist overcomes divisive ideas about race and eventually discovers the way to bring racial reconciliation to his life.

17. In the following parts, I will use the word “identity” with its first letter capitalized to refer to “inner identity.” In the second half of the novel, Andrew Hawkins, a half African and half white American man, decides to pass as a white named William Harris. Nevertheless, Johnson seems to show that Andrew’s inner identity stays intact and he is still in search of his self.

The concept of the “true self” pertaining to the “Ten Oxherding Pictures” is a common term used in Zen Buddhist doctrinal and philosophical texts. The “true self” in the Buddhist context is completely opposite to the contemporary concept of the true self. At present, it seems that when people think of the spiritual quest for one’s true self, that true self refers to a separate entity whose nature remains static and permanent. Holding such a concept of the true self, people define it as identity and search for it, hoping to take control over this putative inner self. Contrary to this contemporary concept, Buddhist philosophy proposes that such a concept of the true self is illusory and is a deep cause of suffering. Shakyamuni Buddha postulated that because of the dependent co-arising of the Self as a being, the Self is empty. We can say that searching for the controllable, static, and permanent self which never exists causes only

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20. As is common practice in texts on Buddhist philosophy, I will signify the self which connotes the concept of interdependence, impermanence, and transition by its own nature with the “Self.”
With insight into this fact, the Buddha, in aiming to point the way to spiritual liberation from dukkha, demonstrates that an understanding of the dependent, transitory and impermanent nature of the Self is crucial. Similarly, as we can see in the “Ten Oxherding Pictures,” this attainment of the “true self” is the objective of the man’s journey. The topic of the “true self” is not different from the concept of Self as mentioned above. Bret W. Davis delineates the definition of the Zen “true self”: “[t]he true self is thus a “non-self” (Skt anātman; Jp. muga) that awakens to its “formlessness” (Jp. musō), its “self-nature which is no-nature (Jp. jishōsunawachi mushō) […]” At this point, we can see that, regardless of their denominations, the understanding of the “true nature” of one’s self is considered most significant for Buddhist practitioners. This is because it leads a person to the condition of the mind called equanimity (uppekhā). The equanimity which constitutes peace of mind arises when a person detaches from the notion of binary opposites and from the notion of wholeness (two ideas which are often referred to in Buddhist philosophical texts as dualism and non-dualism).

In addition, we also need to have a clear understanding of the notion of the interconnectedness which Johnson applies to the notion of self. According to Shakyamuni Buddha’s teaching in Tripitaka, the Pali canon, the Buddhist ontology of the Self emphasizes the principle of interconnectedness which is based upon the theory of “dependent co-arising.” The theory explains that the existence of a being, either when it arises or falls apart, depends on its causal factors; the Buddha expounded about the profound and complicated interrelation of the existence of beings that “when this exists, then this exists. Because this arises, this also arises (imasmiṁ sati idam hoti imassappādā uppajjati). When this ceases to exist, this also ceases to exist (imasmiṁ sati idam na hoti). Because this ceases to exist, this also ceases to exist. (imassa nirodhā idam nirujjhati)” This general exposition of the Buddhist principle of

21. For the detailed explanation of Self, see Harvey, “Dukkha, Non-Self, and The Teaching on the Four ‘Noble Truths,’” 34.


“dependent co-arising” underlines that embracing the flow and flux of change as a process of the natural condition of existence is paramount. Thus, the Buddhist principle of interconnectedness here does not focus merely on the physical interconnection among people. Rather, it underlines the interconnectedness of all beings which naturally comes from their interdependent relationship. However, this principle is profound, difficult, and complicated. In order to make the concept more perceptible, Johnson discusses it through a protagonist’s perspective of his self in Oxherding Tale.

In an attempt to contribute an alternative perspective to the quest for selfhood in African American fiction, Johnson proposes a systematic philosophical discussion of the Buddhist perspective on the existence of the Self in Oxherding Tale. Johnson suggests the philosophical discussion of the notion of the Self is important because he considers it the fundamental step to bring about racial reconciliation, which he demonstrates through Andrew’s concept of household life. That philosophical discussion includes four main issues: (i) a discussion of the concept of the “true nature” of the Self; (ii) a demonstration of the problematic aspects of European perspectives on the Self as a static being, which brings about all feelings of dukkha; (iii) pointing out that the real origin of dukkha which is presented in the feelings of dissatisfaction is deep-rooted in one’s mind; and (iv) sequentially illuminating how the understanding of the principle of interconnectedness in relation to the Self contributes to spiritual freedom.

All of these correspond with Shakyamuni Buddha’s teaching that because the origin of dukkha is within the human mind, to cease dukkha a person must begin with the mind. As I have discussed, therefore, in this chapter, I will argue that Johnson tries to make a link between physical slavery and spiritual slavery in this novel. In order to propose a way to liberate people from spiritual slavery, Johnson goes against labelling — “this, that, those” (according to races or genders)—but focuses upon “essence” 24.
(humanity and human minds). Then he moves to look at this in relation to race. He sought to dispel the linguistic and social markers of race to focus upon the essence of the Self and to look at that Self as a being in harmony and in an interdependent relationship with others.

The Spiritual Journey of the African American Man

Set in the antebellum period (1843 to 1861) in South Carolina, Oxherding Tale is the narrative of the physical and spiritual journey of Andrew Hawkins, who was born in 1843 in the Cripplegate household. This novel is narrated through the lens of Andrew’s scepticism regarding the uncomfortable relation between his self and his real/true identity. In terms of narrative point of view, although Oxherding Tale is mainly presented by the centenarian Andrew, this neo-slave narrative appears to be alternatively infused with the perspectives of both young Andrew and the older, more sophisticated narrator. In presenting the ideas about the delusions and the “true nature” of the Self, Johnson adapts the Hegelian dialectical method to the discussions between Andrew and other characters. He explains that “the structure of my novels tends to be Hegelian; I feel most comfortable (in the novel form) setting antimonies—visions of the world, each with their truths—at war against each other, then tracing the process of this conflict as it plays itself out.”

Also, in terms of content, the writer depicts Andrew’s quest for his self as an allegory parallel to the journey of the ox-herder in the “Oxherding Pictures.” Like the ox-herder looking for the Mind-ox, Andrew’s desire for freedom from slavery brings him to spiritual liberation from an attachment to the notion of race.

Basically, Johnson highlights ideas regarding the formation of a personal self and identity through Andrew’s experiences of his self-exploration. This idea about the formation of identity is evident in Andrew’s reflection upon his life towards the end of the novel that:

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 [...].

As seen here, Andrew appreciates his predecessors’ life experiences. Andrew takes the “many Ways” he has learned as part of what has come to constitute his present self. That is why he thinks that the experience he has learned from others in his life are “none better than another.” For him, experiential life lessons are essential steps to discover the “way” to spiritually liberate himself (and others) from racial predicaments.

Based upon this idea, the novel is divided into two main parts. In “Part One,” the novel begins with the narrative of Andrew’s life as a slave and finishes when he becomes a fugitive, searching for freedom in a place where nobody knows him. This part invokes the questionable meaning of the “freedom” which Andrew has held. In “Part Two,” Andrew passes the racial boundary to become William Harris, a well-educated white man. While living his new life in Spartanburg as a free man, Andrew cannot feel at peace and this urges him to be suspicious as to what the “true nature” of his self is. His suspicion gives rise to the idea that the spiritual enslavement which emerges from the illusion of the static self can be as painful as the physical enslavement he endures.

In relation to this point pertaining to the two kinds of enslavement, Oxherding Tale addresses the issue of spiritual slavery as an unperceived slavery which is overlooked in much African American fiction. This is implied through the narrator’s account of the past that: “[y]ou are wondering, I imagine, about differences in the White and Black worlds. Well, here is the first: this feeling in both that the past is threatening; in the Black World a threat because there is no history worth mentioning […]; and in the White World the past is also a threat, but here because, in many cases, the triumphs of predecessors are suffocating, a legend to live up to, or to reject (with a good deal of guilt) […].” Through this, Johnson points out through the narrator the equally painful memories both the African American and the white people have endured throughout the history of the United States. Here, a spiritual slavery affects both black and white people. The legacy of slavery haunts both, albeit in different ways. Based on this idea,


27. Ibid., 132.
Johnson employs *Oxherding Tale* as a device to invite the reader to delve into the root cause of spiritual slavery, which originates from a belief in the static self. In the final section of the novel, the novel communicates through Andrew’s transformed perspective. Andrew’s new perspective reveals that an understanding of the principle of interconnectedness and the nature of self will result in an individual’s compassion or *metta*, the positive quality of the human mind that will bring about racial reconciliation.

Andrew’s life journey begins with a household conflict caused by Jonathan Polkinghorne’s plan to swap his wife, Anna Polkinghorne, with his slave George’s wife, a slave who is her husband’s drinking buddy for a night. As a consequence of that incident, both the Polkinghorne families and the Hawkinses live their lives in an atmosphere filled with bitter hostility. After giving birth to Andrew, Anna Polkinghorne abandons any duty of care to him. However, instead of presenting this relationship in a completely negative sense, Johnson uses the relationship to highlight the interconnectedness of all lives. The hostility in the Cripplegate household becomes a psychological bondage tying all the lives of the family members together. Andrew’s childhood experiences with his family prepare him to be a skeptical person who can see complicated layers of conflict. This point is reflected in the way Andrew describes the ongoing silent conflict in his household as follows:

[...] for twenty years whenever George or Jonathan entered the same room as Mattie, my stepmother found something to do elsewhere. She never forgave George, who never forgave Jonathan, who blamed Anna for letting things go too far, and she demanded a divorce but settled, finally, on living in a separate wing of the house.28

Arguably, the drunken and foolish actions of the two men have caused the conflicts. However, as implied in the quotation, what is more powerful than the actual conflict is the anger of the families. This is evidenced by the second sentence which highlights the chain of anger: Mattie’s anger toward George, George’s anger toward Jonathan, and Jonathan’s anger toward Anna. As a result, Andrew is the one who is most affected by all the adults’ anger. Moreover, Andrew’s emphasis on the duration of time, starting with the phrase “for twenty years” and the twice-mentioned word “never” in relation to the cessation of hostility marks the perpetual effect of anger in the household. These are

28. Ibid., 7.
indicative of the characters’ attachments to the past which continuously reproduce anger, a feeling of uneasiness, an aspect of dukkha. As a result of the interrelation, it is this anger that has tortured everyone in the household for twenty years and at the same time this suggests the interrelations between the family members. Therefore, it is true to say that the initial cause of the hostility in the family comes from the physical conflict, but from a Buddhist perspective the root causes of their dukkha is their attachment to the past (holding the past as a static entity) which continuously revives the conflict and re-inflicts the pain. All of these have been embedded in Andrew’s sentiments since his childhood and become a foundation for him to look beyond the matter of race when contemplating the notion of the self.

In search of the Ox: The True Nature of Self and Identity

As mentioned above, the discussion of the self begins with inquiries about the delusions of the self. Oxherding Tale illustrates how the delusion of the Self entails dukkha, feelings of dis-ease such as distress, fear, hopelessness, dissatisfaction, physical and mental pain and unfulfilled desires. Johnson exemplifies this complicated subject through a discussion on the association between the physical and spiritual death. Andrew and Dr Hiram Groll, the veterinarian in Leviathan, converse about identity and individuality which fundamentally stem from the notion of self. Hiram says that “[t]he cause of death for these black men […] is invariably […]. I am speaking […] of the belief in personal identity, the notion of what we are is somehow distinct from other things when this entity, this lie, this ancient stupidity has no foundation in scientific fact.”29 Here Hiram’s opinion suggests two significant implications about (i) the “death” and (ii) the “cause of the death.”

The “death of the black men” in this conversation has both literal and metaphorical meanings: physical and spiritual death. In relation to the physical death, Johnson puts the implication of the spiritual death of slaves through Hiram’s confession about what he always writes on the certificate for the dead bodies of slaves in Leviathan. Hiram tells Andrew that he writes “No life-assurance,” and further explains: “It’s an idea I’ve been working on for some time, […]. Not a year ago, I sprang the idea

29. Ibid., 58.
on that boy predecessor in the house, Patrick, but he refused to think about his future. He thought he was secure, you see, [...]. It was the loss of life-assurance. Oh, I’ve seen it happen before! Some strapping, able-bodied, young man strong as a bull decides there’s no future for him [italics in original], and keels over.”30 As hinted here, the former slaves he has known cling to their static selves, thinking the static self permanent. The italic “him” which Hiram refers to emphasizes the delusion of the static self which a young man might cleave to. As Hiram describes his experience of the changes in many men’s lives, he points to how the self of each person is flowing and changing in the fluid nature of time. The slaves clinging to their static selves, which are represented through their attachment to a glorious moment of their lives, fail to fathom the impermanence of their selves. When those moments fade away, they see no point in living their lives and give up their lives. As a result, their failure to grasp the idea of the impermanent Self become the root cause of their spiritual death—hopelessness and their desire for self-annihilation.31 At this point, Johnson deploys the meaning of death to indicate the importance of an insight into the true nature of the self, both in terms of the personal self (the “I”) and the Self (attā).

After demonstrating the negative consequence of an individual’s misconception of the self, Johnson investigates the question of what the true self is. The narrative engages us in a conversation about personal identity and individuality. In response to Hiram’s opinion as to why the permanent personal self constitutes the cause of death, Andrew objects that “[c]ivilization is founded on this belief [the belief in a personal identity]. There must be absolute presuppositions, bedrock ideas—superstitions, if you like—or everything built upon these ideas collapses.”32 Andrew’s opinion contains contrary messages in itself. At one level, Andrew’s assertion that the existence of a civilization (certainly this also includes an individual’s belief in the existence of one’s separate self) must be maintained because of people’s needs to rely

30. Ibid., 57.

31. According to the second Truth in the doctrine of the “Four Noble Truths” (Pali ariyassaṭṭha-sacca), the Buddha postulates that the cause of dukkha are the three cravings or trṣṇā (Pali tanhā): “cravings for sense-pleasures,” “for self-existence,” and “for non-existence or self-annihilation.” For the detail, see Payutto, “What Is the Life Process?,” 122.

32. Johnson, Oxherding Tale, 58.
on their personal beliefs, or any other beliefs (even if acknowledged as delusional) are true. However, when he admits that even the belief has to be built up from “a superstition,” this suggests that, to Andrew, personal identity is a delusion. Because he realizes that it is a foundation of civilization, he cynically supposes that to sustain civilization people may have to maintain a belief in personal identity. All of these signify that Andrew recognizes the possibility of the belief’s falsity.

The above conversation between Andrew and Hiram occurs after Andrew has learned from different kinds of selves — “the racial self, the noetic self, the sensing self, and the spiritual self” which are represented by Flo Hatfield, George, and Ezekiel William Sykes-Withers respectively.33 That aspect of him makes him a good representation of the belief in the static self. In the above conversation between Andrew and Hiram about “death,” the close association between one’s mind and body is introduced for the first time in the novel and it suggests two challenging conditions: (i) to adhere to old beliefs in the notion of the self/identity which never offer a real solution to cease people’s suffering, or (ii) to be prepared to face a fact about the self, here presented as identity, of which existence depends on its interrelation with other beings.

As this issue about the real nature of the self is complicated and requires each individual’s experience, particularly meditative experience, to contemplate, Johnson continuously engages us in conversations between Andrew and Hiram. Hiram asks Andrew: “[…] suppose individuality is a fact. What do you feel just now?”34 He sets a question for Andrew to prove the existence of “individuality” through Andrew’s own experiential sensations in the present moment. He draws Andrew’s mindful attention to each sense. Hiram goes on: “Foxglove on the wind? The solidity of stone beneath us? The bark at our backs? Now […] is it reasonable to say that since these sensations appear, there must be a separate entity that perceives them? We do not have a sensation of solidity; we are the sensation, Andrew.”35 To follow Hiram’s spontaneous experiment, an individual will find that each sense must be conscious through the


34. Johnson, Oxherding Tale, 147.

35. Ibid., 147.
senses of his/her nose, feet, and back respectively. It is impossible to be fully conscious of every sense all at once. Based upon the above quotation, the important message conveyed through Hiram is that “we do not have a sensation of solidity; we are the sensation, Andrew.”

To elaborate, it is worth examining the dialogue between Andrew and Hiram about the spontaneous experiment on Andrew’s consciousness. The experiment depicts Andrew’s response while Hiram urges him to sense each thing which is referred to as the “mind-object” in Buddhist texts. Hiram persuades Andrew to prove his stance with Andrew’s own experience. Each of Hiram’s assertions invoke that an individual cannot be mindfully conscious of all sensations at once, but one by one. Therefore, when the veterinarian says, “[w]e do not have a sensation of solidity; we are the sensation” it connotes that “we” do not exist. To explain, the sense that “we” exists emerges only as an accumulated sense of each passed sense which, in actuality, immediately disperses one after another in each moment. That is why Hiram explains that the state of being conscious of each sense is the state of real being, and that is why one cannot say “we” can act as the subject, a fixed/static being. On the contrary, we actually “are” the sensation, the “verb” which keeps changing in the flow of time.

This same point about identity, as a representation of the self, is elaborated further through Flo’s memories. Hiram speaks to Andrew after many of Flo’s slaves, who used to serve as her butlers, pass away: “[…] the remains of Flo’s butler are but a handful of conflicting memories about the man?” Through this statement, Hiram invites Andrew to contemplate the notion of the “true” self which is directly associated with the notion of identity they are discussing earlier. If individuality does exist and its existence can be perceived separately from the existence of other beings and without any connection, the question is why the remains of all butlers do not exist by themselves. Instead, they depend upon the potential of Flo’s memory. The explanation about Flo’s memory invokes the idea that the existence of corporeality is not the only

36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
source of the existence of a self. Yet, perceiving the existence of an individual’s self is possible only if it is perceived through one’s mind.  

To Johnson, coming to terms with the Buddhist “right” view \textit{(samma\-di\-\textithi)} on the impermanent nature of one’s self is the key to spiritual liberation from \textit{dukkha} caused by racism. Regarding this point, Gary Storhoff states that: “[f]or Johnson, the only way to liberate oneself from essentialism is to accept the illusory nature of the race and rejoice in its emptiness.”\textsuperscript{39} Though Storhoff makes the right claim here, the “emptiness” in this statement can be easily misunderstood. The “emptiness” in this Buddhist context does not mean nothingness. Contrary to nothingness, the “emptiness” here refers to the interdependent condition of a being. Because the existence of the self is impossible without the existence of other beings, the emptiness of the self refers to emptiness of a separate self. Regarding this notion of emptiness, Storhoff notes that “[…] no one thing has its own unique identity; no one thing becomes what it is because of its essential nature or its will, its own self-determining desire for actualization. Each thing depends utterly on an infinitely complex network of correlated and interdependent entities […].”\textsuperscript{40}

\textbf{The Man and the Transforming Ox: Perceiving Spiritual Enslavement}

As a crucial step on the way to racial reconciliation, after the discussion on the falsity of the notion of the static self, Johnson demonstrates the consequences of the belief in the static self through the “death of soul.” This concept, as presented in \textit{Oxherding Tale}, implicitly constitutes the result of spiritual enslavement which African Americans in the contemporary era have endured, a kind of slavery which is as pernicious as the physical one. Throughout the narrative, Johnson highlights the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{38} With regard to the existence of Self, it is extensively discussed in the Pali canon through the doctrine of the five \textit{skandhas}, mostly translated into “Five Aggregates of Existence” or the “Five Bundles.” The doctrine postulates that the existence of Self is resulted from the composition of the five aggregates: corporeality; feeling or sensation; perception, mental formations, predispositions, or volitional activities; and consciousness. Note that the translations of these five words are varied in texts. To understand their real meanings, it is necessary to study the commentary and explanation of each word.
  \item \textsuperscript{40} Storhoff, 21.
\end{itemize}
negative effects of the misconception of the self through a number of the characters such as George, Mattie, Anna, Ezekiel. Two characters whose reflection upon their feelings clearly reveals Johnson’s idea of spiritual enslavement are Flo and Minty.

To facilitate understanding of the influence of the human mind over the body, Johnson addresses the topic of the “death of soul” by forcing the reader to reconsider the meaning of “freedom.” According to the Buddhist philosophy about happiness or *sukha,* “freedom—there is no attachment or slavery” and “wisdom—there is knowledge and understanding according to the truth”—are the qualities leading to happiness.41 The “truth” here refers to the principle of dependent co-arising, which explains the “true” nature of the Self. Before we examine why Johnson suggests the similarity between Flo and Minty as slaves to their cravings—cravings for self-pleasures and for self-annihilation respectively—it is necessary to comprehend the two different kinds of *sukha:* one is the happiness commonly understood as *sukha,* the other one is the happiness which actually is the peace of mind.42 The two kinds of *sukha* are as follows:

> [t]he first kind of *sukha* depends on external causes, such as material goods and thoughts, for fulfilling various wants. The mind that is caught up in this kind of *sukha* is a mind that is grasping struggling, and agitated; secondly, this type of *sukha* is accompanying by attachments, narrowness, greed, and getting caught up in yourself. [...] The second kind of *sukha* is a happiness that does not depend on external causes to fulfil desires. This *sukha* is a mental condition that allows the mind to be itself—with nothing disturbing it.43

If we consider the characters’ state of mind from this perspective on *sukha,* we will see that *Oxherding Tale* does not focus on the brutality of American slavery. Rather, the narrative underlines the spiritual slavery inflicted by the characters’ attachments to their cravings as explicated in *Buddhadharma* that the “thoughts and behaviors depend[ing]...
on external causes, [...] become the slaves [emphasis added] of various external factors." In the following paragraphs, the concept of spiritual enslavement will be demonstrated through Flo’s self and Minty’s self.

Though it is obvious that the positions of the two characters—the master and the slave—are absolutely disparate, Johnson points out the similar conditions of their inner selves to justify that enslavement originally begins in the human mind. To illustrate this, Flo is presented as the slave to sensual desires, while Minty is presented as a slave to her desire for self-annihilation which manifests through her rotting body. Flo Hatfield’s insatiable desires are employed to reveal the kind of dukkha appearing in disguising forms of pleasures. As Byrd identifies, Flo’s self is depicted as the sensing self. First appearing in the chapter entitled “In the service of the senses,” Flo is the lady who positions herself as the center of Leviathan. She states that: “Leviathan belonged to my late husband Henry. […] I am Leviathan’s sovereign, its soul. All others are, in a manner of speaking, the joints, tendons, nerves, and tissues that sustain the soul.” Here, the quotation shows that Hatfield apparently separates herself from the others in Leviathan. The way she elevates the importance of her self by comparing it with the soul of a human is ironic. She overlooks the fact that every physical part and human soul is equally important for the existence of a person. It is true that the soul is most important for a human being but, in terms of the existence of a being, the soul is a separate entity. The implication of spiritual enslavement is highlighted through the representation of Flo as a materialist obsessed with sexual and sensual materials, for instance her addiction to opium.

Critics have usually interpreted Flo as a selfish woman thinking of her “self” as at the centre of everything. She is analogously compared with the slavery depicted in Thomas Hobbes’s Leviathan (1651), with Kamala in Hermann Hesse’s Siddhartha (1922), and with pretas, referring to greedy ghosts which have “insatiable thirst and

44. Ibid., 70.

45. For the symbolic and philosophical interpretations of the characterization of Flo Hatfield and her power in Leviathan in the racial context, see Byrd, “Oxherding Tale: Slavery and the Wheel of Desire,” 61-101.

46. Johnson, Oxherding Tale, 38.
hunger.” In my view, these interpretations also suggest, in terms of a metaphysical perspective, that Johnson invokes the discussion about the definition of both physical and spiritual slavery and the ideas about cravings and delusions through the presentation of this character. To me, describing Flo simply as “a slave to Matter,” as Johnson indicates in an interview, is most appropriate. Regarding Flo as a “slave to Matter,” Johnson explains that this character is “a tragic creature lost—as a Buddhist—in samsara [the circle of birth and death; also referring to the circle of dukkha and sukha].” She is designated as both a representative of a person holding the notion of the static self and as a personification of lust, raga, a kind of defilement seducing people so they are entrapped in samsara.

Johnson seems to illustrate spiritual enslavement in Flo through Andrew’s transforming perception of Flo. At first, he admires Flo’s superficial beauty and her knowledge of lustful matters. As a young man first learning about sex and how to fulfil his cravings, he thinks that: “[w]hoever is wise, and will observe these things, will see that this woman had no equal on earth, that only a fool would not open himself to her [...]” Like an insect trapped in the web of lust and cravings, inexperienced Andrew is lured by Flo’s physical beauty and wealth. He even judges people from their choices to perceive Flo as wise or foolish, even though he never contemplates what true happiness (sukha) is. Despite his sentiment about her loneliness, he thinks that Flo’s life is enviable. For example, he tells us, “Yet, despite Flo Hatfield’s noisy eroticism, or because of it, she was lonely.” Perhaps, because of his inexperience, Andrew is absorbed in the physical and sensual happiness offered by Flo. Thus, at this stage of life, he believes that such a way of life is true happiness. However, his false belief finally ceases after he unconsciously punches Flo on the nose in one night and,


49. Johnson, Oxherding Tale, 46.

50. Ibid., 44.
consequently, Flo loses all passion for him, sending him away to the Yellowdog Mine to work as a slave.

To indicate unperceived suffering, Johnson manifests Flo’s spiritual enslavement through the depiction of Flo’s illusory self by associating it with the idea about the “death of soul.” In presenting this signifying image, Johnson puts this topic through the perception of Reb, who represents Taoist ideology about the self. He brings up Flo’s spiritual death when speaking through Andrew: “Flo Hatfield been dead, oh, for goin’ on fifteen years now, Freshmeat. [...] I am buildin’ caskets before you was born, so can’t nobody tell me I doan know a dead person when I sees one. She had heart failure. She died in her sleep.”51 This remark reflects the ambiguous meaning of Flo’s long-time death implies that the beauty and liveliness Andrew admires are illusions.

In comparison to Flo’s spiritual condition, Minty is no different. Minty’s confession about the fatal disease which causes her body to decay is another good example of the issue regarding “the death of soul.” In the last chapter of the novel, Andrew, passing as a white educated man named William Harris, spends his married life with Peggy Undercliff. During this time, he constantly contemplates the issue of racial identity until he receives news from Horace about the death of his parents and about Minty, his former lover. Through the story of this character, Johnson conveys a Buddhist view that the cause of dukkha comes from a person’s mind. Regarding this, Johnson quotes the statement of Candace Robb, his Buddhist friend who is a writer, saying that “[p]ain is something that comes in life, but suffering is optional.”52 With this Buddhist perception of dukkha, Johnson proposes this idea by emphatically demonstrating the interconnection between the mind and the body through Hiram’s discussion with Andrew and Minty’s condition. During Andrew’s conversation with Hiram about causes of people’s diseases and death, Hiram says that the cause of death “cannot be empirically measured […] we know it through its symptoms.”53 Through this, Hiram underlines the unobservable cause of suffering within the human mind.

51. Ibid., 48.
52. Johnson, “Reading the Eightfold Path,” 128.
53. Johnson, Oxherding Tale, 58.
This idea is stressed again when Andrew, as William Harris, hears news about Minty’s whereabouts. To rescue Minty from the slave trader, Andrew decides to sacrifice everything he has. Andrew pledges an amount of money from Peggy’s father to help Minty. He realizes some changes in his self. His romantic memories of Minty’s beauty and his passionate love for her transform to compassion after finding that Minty is suffering from progressive pellagra disease and going to die. She tells him:

I need a doctor. People with what I got—pellagra—just rot away, unless they get treatment. [...] And no one knows what causes it. It’s like something you do to yourself, make a space for it inside, like, a year ago, when they sold me to Colonel Woofter [...] I stop caring. I hated being alive that much.\textsuperscript{54}

Symbolically, Minty’s message pertains to perennial conflicts caused by binarism of race. Minty’s remark that she “need[s] a doctor” and the “treatment” of the disease suggests two steps for a person to carry out in order to treat the “disease:” (i) to identify what the “disease” (connoting the “dis-ease” of \textit{dukkha}) is in order to discover the way to cure it, and (ii) to discover how to cease the cause of the disease, as this is the next sequential step. The way she describes how the scaly skin sores, a major symptom of pellagra, are “like something \textit{you do to yourself} [emphasis added], make a space for it \textit{inside} [emphasis added]” insinuates the mind-body-connection, a person’s mind as the cause of her “dis-ease.” This metaphorical meaning indicates that the kind of \textit{dukkha} which Minty has is generated inside her mind. These underlined messages about the delusions of the belief in the fixed self as it is reflected through the characterization of Flo and the inability to perceive the non-self nature of the life and the self as it is presented through Minty’s and Hiram’s voices provokes the question of what the “true” self is.

In order to clarify the nature of the self, Johnson designs Horace Bannon to show how attachment to binaries can be dangerous. In the novel, Horace is normally referred to as the “Soulcatcher” and is represented as unstable in appearance. The clue to disclose Horace’s symbolic role lies within Andrew’s description of Horace’s appearance when they first meet:

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 158.
The Soulcatcher’s voice […] was black. […] Yet, this was the same man, […] that I’d seen months earlier […]—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 […] 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, a slash; here curly hair coarsely textured like my father’s; here heavily 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.55

Evidently, Horace’s physical identity is vague to Andrew. In one sense, Andrew’s description of Horace, who has “the deltoid nose of a Wazimba,” “a ‘snotcup’ […] cut deeply above his lip”, and “curly hair,” implies that the message is communicated particularly for African American people. In the other sense, Johnson invokes through Horace’s personified character of people’s perceptions of the self and their minds that the self is only a constructed concept. This uncertainty appears when Andrew notes that: “I could not shake the feeling that Bannon was in masquerade.” The word “masquerade” here directly conveys that Horace has no “real self” but is transformable. Moreover, when Andrew explains that Horace is “a slave who, for reasons too fantastic to guess, hunted slaves,” it suggests that Horace is actually not the one who can control himself or who can choose to hunt or not to hunt but, as the metaphorical character for cravings, it becomes his responsibility to bring about dukkha to people who have the attachments to the belief in the static black self.

In an attempt to identify the “treatment” for the “dis-ease” caused by illusory nature of the static black self and identity, which intrinsically suggests a belief in the white self, Johnson conveys the implied message about the “true nature” of one’s self through Horace’s ability to read the slaves’ minds. When Horace first meets Andrew, he reveals his trick to capture the victims that “[y]ou become a Negro by lettin’ yoself see what he sees, feel what he feels, want what he wants.”56 In one sense, this statement suggests that Horace personifies the minds of his victims who believe in the existence of the static self. In another sense, this trick also tells us that a “Negro,” implicitly

55. Ibid., 67–68.
56. Ibid., 115.
referred to the African American people, unknowingly invites the “Soulcatcher” to chase after them by themselves. To be exact, this message in Horace’s revelation of this trick conveys that if you think you are a slave, then you are the slave. Being black or being white are solely the illusion one creates from their misperception of the Self.

**Forgetting the Self and the Ox: The Formless Self and Liberation**

In order to signify the final step of the protagonist’s spiritual journey, Johnson titles the last chapter of the novel “Moksha,” meaning an enlightenment. Hinduism and Buddhism refer to “enlightenment” as the state of liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Because of their different perceptions of the self, the explanation about the way to attain “enlightenment” for Hinduism and Buddhism are different. According to Hinduism, “Moksha” means the state of enlightenment, becoming oneness with Brahma. Hinduism believes that the “Real” static self exists. Thus, for Hinduism, to attain the state of enlightenment, an individual has to search for the “Real” static self. In contrast to Hindu belief in the “Real” self, Shakyamuni Buddha postulates that there is no “Real” static self. If we have to identify that a self does exist, Buddhist philosophy proffers that such a self is “the Self,” whose nature is transitory and changeable. That Self arises and falls apart according to the natural condition of causality as postulated in the principle of “dependent co-arising.” As such, Buddhism emphasizes that only when a person gains an insight into this, he/she is spiritually free from all kinds of attachments and cravings. Consequently, with the freedom from the attachments and cravings, a person will attain a state of equanimity which constitutes true happiness, the peace of mind. Johnson seems to apply both Hindu and Buddhist concepts of enlightenment in presenting Andrew’s changing perception of the “true nature” of his self in “Moksha.”

In correspondence with the state of enlightenment, the main discussion on the nature of the self is portrayed through Andrew’s transformed perspective on the self and his identity. In the last scene in which Andrew encounters the Soulcatcher after Minty’s death, Andrew describes his vision of Horace’s body:

Fluid, a crazyquilt of other’s features, the Soulcatcher’s face, his fingers on my shoulder, beat with the pulsethrob of countless bondsmen in his bloodstream, women and children murdered with pistols knives tramped by his warhorse strangled whipped suffocated lynched beheaded burned to death starved stoned bombed thrown from
heights pushed into machinery drowned clubbed impaled killed by flame tortured. Could only I see this? These others on Bannon’s eyes, exposed in the ironic tilt of his head, flashed to me in the halting, slow way he spoke, were invisible to Peggy and Gerald Undercliff.\(^{57}\)

The depiction of the cruelty of American slavery in this quotation signifies Andrew’s new perception of his personal self in relation to his perception of racial self in general. This quotation suggests that Johnson’s “Soul-catcher” is the personification of African Americans’ dukkha. Johnson expresses his perception of what has enslaved his people through Andrew’s new perception. Here Andrew’s question of “Could only I see this?” is the key idea. As a skeptical person, what he can “see” here results from his “new” perspective on the existence of his own self. The emphasis on “I” suggests Andrew’s holistic view on the cause of African Americans’ dukkha. Here Johnson depicts that African American slaves in the history and Andrew’s ancestry across generations emerge in Horace’s body through Andrew’s perception of the Soulcatcher. The “countless bondsmen” who are the victims of the “soul-catcher” are indicative of Andrew’s awareness of the binary implicit in race which has caused the countless lives of African Americans’ suffering, the understanding which Andrew has gained from what he has learned throughout his life.

Johnson externalizes his idea of the binary views on race as the root cause of spiritual enslavement through the Soulcatcher’s revelation of what makes him stop hunting slaves and this idea is related to the idea of non-self. In “Moksha,” Horace, known as the Soulcatcher, reveals that Reb’s feeling of equanimity brings him tranquillity or the peace of mind by saying that “[…] yo friend [Reb], as Ah was sayin’, didn’t have no place inside him fo’ me to settle. He wasn’t positioned nowhere.”\(^{58}\) Following this, Horace continues to say: “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.”\(^{59}\) This statement conveys that Reb cannot be chained or enslaved with whatever happens in the past, the future, or the present. He achieves spiritual liberation from bondage, attaining the state of being empty of a permanent static self.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 169.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 174.

\(^{59}\) Ibid.
The reason Reb cannot be enslaved is further explained by the Soulcatcher to Andrew: “[…] 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.”60 Here, the implication is that with the illusion of the static self in place, a person possesses “something” for the Soulcatcher (which is presented as Johnson’s perception of dukkha as a being) to cling to. Conversely, without the image/illusion of one’s static self in mind, Horace fails to seize the mind of a “nigger.” This logic suggests that when Horace says “[…] Ah couldn’t entirely become the nigguh,” it is to communicate that an individual’s sentiment of being black or white is an illusion shaped by his/her perception of the world. As such, this message accentuates that Johnson wishes to propose that the ideas of being a white or a black American are merely delusions, constructed from the misperception of a static self.

**The Man Returning to the Town: The Racial Reconciliation**

Though Johnson dedicates most of Oxherding Tale to pointing out the false view on the static self and to establishing an understanding of the nature of the self, he does not forget to indicate the virtue of understanding the self in relation to ethical actions. As a result of his apprehension of the “true” nature of the self, Andrew becomes a selfless person, as is evident in his determination to help Minty. With regard to the non-self, Andrew’s perception of the conditioned origination of his present self reveals his ongoing spiritual aspiration to attain “moksha.” Indeed, the revelation of Andrew’s transforming perspective is manifested before it is fully expressed in “Moksha.” In the conversation between Andrew and Peggy, his wife who is presented as an understanding and compassionate white American woman, Andrew explains the reason why and how he feels grateful to Minty and, with that feeling, he is willing to dedicate everything, even to unveil his true (physical) identity as a fugitive slave, to help Minty from slavery:

I am indebted to her, […] the way I am indebted to you, and your father, and Reb, and to my father, whom I shall probably never see again, though I would give anything for him to know and love you—I know [italics in original] that cannot be!—but there are duties I must

60. Ibid.
discharge, if I am ever to be free [...]. We are born, even slaves, into such richness, and if I cannot somehow repay them, my predecessors and that girl outside [Minty], then I am unworthy of any happiness whatsoever, here with you, or anywhere.61

Here Andrew’s perception of his self illuminates his awareness of the interrelation between his existence and that of other people within his present self. With Andrew’s realization of his interconnected self, compassion (metta) arises. He considers helping others because he realizes that the existence of their Selves are part of his present self.

Moreover, Andrew’s apprehension of the concept of non-self (because a self is a composite being) is also reflected when he says, “[w]e are born, even slaves, into such richness,” it specifically suggests that Andrew sees both himself and other African Americans’ selves as beings which are conditioned by the existence of others causal factors. The word “richness,” which is emphasized here, invokes that, for Johnson, to be aware that “we were born” in a world packed with a wide diversity of things and the intermingling of races in one’s ancestry is what an individual has to embrace as part of his/her existence. With interconnected causal factors, beings are differentiated and labelled into categories in order that it is easy for people to recognize them and so linguistic labels are merely signs, not the essence. However, in this context, the differentiation is not there for discrimination at all. This establishment of such an awareness of interdependence among beings justifies that an individual’s “real” self does not exist and that if there is no static and fixed self, nothing is there to be hurt by or to be enslaved to.

As a result of his comprehension of the self, Andrew views the interconnectedness in his self and others and takes it as his duties to help others. This is evident when he is telling Peggy about his duties as a human: “there are duties [emphasis added] I must discharge.” Andrew’s determination to perform an altruistic act for Minty liberates him from his former dukkha which was generated from his attachment to dualistic view of race. The novel shows that, without the belief in a separate self, all kinds of fear disappear from Andrew’s mind. Concerning this point, Andrew expresses that “[w]ith no self-induced racial paranoia as an excuse for being irresponsible, I turned and Wife [Peggy] turned—to the business of Minty’s

61. Ibid., 161.
recovery." Here, the invocation of the peace of his mind not only stresses the positive consequence of an insight into the knowledge of the “true nature” of the self, it also underscores that the cause of one’s fear, a “self-induced” racial paranoia” is caused by one’s own belief in the static self. To Andrew, who now clings to neither a black nor a white identity, forgetting his self and focusing on helping Minty are the priority. At this point, his fear, which was generated from delusions of racial separatism is overcome.

With such wisdom, being Andrew or William is no longer important. He now discerns the interconnection of all lives across temporal dimensions. This is symbolically implied at the end of the novel through Andrew’s realization of the existence of his self:

I lost his [Bannon’s] figure in this field of energy, where the profound mystery of the One and the Many [italics mine] gave me back my father again and again, his love, in every being from grubworms to giant sumacs, for those too were my father and, in the final face I saw in the Soulcatcher, …I was my father’s father, and he my child. [italics mine] 63

In correspondence with the interpretation of Horace as a symbol of the feelings of “disease” which are produced by delusions of a fixed self, Andrew’s apprehension of his interconnected self, which is the result of the collaboration of his past experiences is described as “the profound mystery of the One and the Many.” Through this description, Andrew’s acknowledgement of his self exemplifies the general Buddhist notion of the Self in relation to the Buddhist notion of Non-Self and emptiness presented in this novel. Because he realizes that the existence of his present self, referred to as “the One,” is the consequential being of the existence of his predecessors, referred to by “the Many,” Andrew realizes that his real/fixed self never existed. However, we have to bear in mind that the word “one” and “many” are used only as the two labels to facilitate the communication of the idea about the principle of interconnectedness. Otherwise, these two words can become another trap to capture us to attach to the idea of oneness or wholeness. In other words, what is considered his

62. Ibid., 162.
63. Ibid., 175.
present self is actually just the collaboration of all beings, the gathering of innumerable causal constituents, explained in Buddhist texts as the condition of “suchness,” tathātā. In Andrew’s view, this perception of the emptiness of a separate self brings about the realization of the importance of the existence of other beings. Hence, for Andrew, the perceived existence of his self is articulated as a koan-like statement, a Zen riddle, that “I was my father’s father, and he my child,” an analogous statement to mirror the interconnectedness of all lives.

On the last page of the novel, Andrew’s koan-like expression discloses the liberation of his mind. The journey of Andrew the slave has ended when he grasps the real meaning of freedom. As a spiritually free man, Andrew the black slave and William the white free man become one, the selfless man. The physical identity manifested through his skin color can no longer enslave him. Johnson employs Andrew’s transformed perception of the self to show how a perspective of the self is fundamentally significant for a person to perceive life. Through the skeptical perspective of Andrew, Oxherding Tale shows how spiritual slavery, in the form of dukkha, arises as a result of the belief in the fixed self and identity. Through the lives of other characters, Oxherding Tale exemplifies that when people stick to the belief in the existence of the enduring permanent self, they suffer because of being enslaved by cravings. In contrast, the anxiety or suffering which arises from the attachments to the fixed self do not happen to those people who gain an insight into the notion of the interconnected self. These ideas are subtle and complicated, so Johnson believes that it is necessary for him to offer a philosophical discussion on the self. As such, the associations between the falsity of the static self, the consequence of the static self, the nature of the self, and the ethical practice as the result of the understanding of the “true” self are carefully demonstrated. Johnson adopts both western and eastern philosophy and ideologies to delineate each point in Oxherding Tale.

The question of what the self is as investigated in Oxherding Tale is not considered to be the utmost knowledge for the pursuit of one’s self and identity pertaining to slavery and racism. Ruth Ozeki’s A Tale for the Time Being shows that this same question is worth probing into in the context of the globalized community of

64. Davis, “Forms of Emptiness in Zen,” 243.
the present era. The following section centres on an understanding of the self as an interconnected composite self. Ozeki considers this Buddhist “right view” as a means for a person to gain a new worldview which will lead him or her to other possible solutions to life’s difficulties. As presented in Oxherding Tale, the discussion on A Tale for the Time Being will show that, from a Buddhist perspective, a misplaced belief in a static and fixed self is the origin of humans’ dukkha regardless of time. The failure to grapple with the interconnection between humans and other beings renders an impasse when one encounters life difficulties. These messages are conveyed through Ozeki’s novel and pinpoint the reason as to why probing into the ontological question about the Self is needed.

The Most Precious Moment is “Now” in A Tale for the Time Being

In A Tale for the Time Being (2013), Ozeki raises contemporary society’s problems such as racism, cybercrime, and violence. To investigate these problems, Ozeki views the spiritual crises of people in a given society as the root cause of such problems. In order to propose a way to grapple with these matters, Ozeki employs a philosophical discussion relating to time and the existence of the self in relation to the Buddhist principle of interconnectedness. That discussion is illustrated through the communications of Nao, as the producer of a diary, and Ruth, as the reader of Nao’s diary. The relationship between the writer and the reader invokes Ozeki’s interpretation of the Buddhist interconnectedness, particularly in regard to the notion of the Self.

Moreover, in attempting to propose a potential remedy for the spiritual crises many people are facing in contemporary society, Ozeki’s work posits that understanding the concept of the Self, which is regarded by Buddhism as the “right view” (Pali sammā-diṭṭhi, Skt sanyag-dristhi), is perhaps one way in which all beings can be liberated from existing dissatisfaction or dukkha.65 Through this approach to the purpose of A Tale for the Time Being, I will demonstrate (i) how Ozeki employs the

65. Harvey, “The Conditioned Co-Arising of Mental and Bodily Processes within Life and Between Lives,” 62. Focusing on the attainment of the liberation from dukkha, “Right view” in Buddhism refers to not “seeing the experienced world as existing here and now in a solid, essential way” but “a flow of constantly arising and passing away processes”.

Buddhist notion of interconnectedness, as explicated through the interrelation of the existence of beings which derives from the Buddhist notion of the Self, and (ii) how she applies the ideas about the interconnection among beings to propose the potential solutions to problems caused by the moral decay in the modern world.

*A Tale for the Time Being* consists of two narrative strands: the narrative of Nao Yasutani’s life, as recorded in her unfinished diary, and the narrative of Ruth, the reader of Nao’s diary. The narrative style of this novel, particularly in its alternation between the perspectives of Nao and Ruth, illustrates the sharp contrast between a character who perceives the interconnection of all beings and another who does not. While Nao is presented as a person who cannot perceive the interconnection of all beings and is obsessed with death, Ruth, the reader of Nao’s diary, is unknowingly addressed by Nao with the general pronoun “you”, representing the reader who is roused to query and respond to Nao’s questions.

**Here and Now: Turning one’s Focus Inward to the Source of the Mind**

Through the deployment of the Buddhist notion of the Self as an explanation of the principle of interdependence, the novel allows Ozeki to question both what is happening in contemporary society and also how the spiritual crises of the contemporary world can be dealt with. In regard to the illustration of the spiritual problems of the contemporary world, the novel raises questions as to how one is to live one’s life in the materialistic societies of capitalist America and Japan. With regard to the image of American adults, Nao notes that:

Honestly, I haven’t met very many adults in my life who I could call really grown up, but maybe that’s because I lived in California, where all my friends’ parents seemed really immature. They were all in therapy, and always going to personal growth seminars and human potential retreats, and they’d come back with these crazy new theories and diets and vitamins and visualizations and rituals and relationship skills that they tried to inflict on their kids in order to build their self-esteem.66

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The portrayal of American adults here suggests that American materialism might be a cause of their spiritual hollowness. Nao’s assertion is that many American people believe that they need to seek their own value of life and self-esteem from outside sources rather than looking deeply inward and building up the maturity within their children’s minds. Through this identified immaturity, Nao’s suspicion questions the nature of maturity, what being “grown up” means. This idea about looking for the answer about life from the outside world is intermittently implied through conversations between Ruth and Oliver, her husband, throughout the novel. For example, when Ruth becomes frustrated at not being able to find a particular piece of information about Nao from the Internet, she says that “[i]t’s like the harder I look, the more stuff slips away.”67 After discussing their work, Oliver concludes that “[w]ell, maybe that’s the wrong way to put it, but I’m just thinking that if everything you’re looking for disappears, maybe you should stop looking. Maybe you should focus on what’s tangible in the here and now.”68 This idea corresponds to a prominent notion of Zen Buddhism, that which emphasizes the study of one’s own self by looking deeply inward instead of looking for the answer to the questions concerning their “selves” from the outside world.

Apart from proffering the Buddhist notion of the inward eye through Oliver, Ozeki concentrates on the theme of spiritual crisis by designating the suicidal characters, Nao and her father, as the main characters, figures that are in search of the meaning of their selves and their life. Ozeki uses this novel to suggest the overarching question as to what constitutes the meaning of life, then suggests a perception through which the spiritual problem can be grappled with. Aside from the demonstration of the characters’ spiritual problems, the novel also draws attention to “the question of life” and the perceptions that result from the life lesson that Nao learns from the way Jiko, her great-grandmother, lived. Nao, when contemplating the meaning of life upon Jiko’s death, notes: “But then something else occurred to me, that maybe her failure didn’t matter, because at least she’d been true to her impossible dream until the very end.”69

67. Ibid., 230.
68. Ibid., 232.
69. Ibid., 365.
Here, the implication is that it does not matter if you succeed in what you want to do. Instead, importance must be given to whether you have been true to yourself until the end of your life. Implicit in this idea is the invocation of the contemporary world’s spiritual crises, whereby people ask about the meaning of life yet fail to fathom it. As such, we may say that Nao’s writing of her diary is equivalent to the search for the “true” meaning of her self.

**In Search of Lost Time: The Journey to Find the “True Self”**

The next point to be explored here is Ozeki’s interpretation of the Buddhist notion of interconnectedness in *A Tale for the Time Being*, an interpretation that is demonstrated as a potential solution through which one can live their life in contemporary society where modern-day spiritual crises prevail. The novel offers two forms of interconnection: the interconnection found in the relationships between characters across time and space, and through the communication held between Nao and Ruth. Firstly, the web of interconnection is illustrated not only through the relationship between Nao and Ruth, but also through other characters from different times and places. This depiction of the characters’ relationships corresponds with the contemporary interpretation of Buddhist interconnection, primarily in the sense that a person’s actions inevitably affect others.

The illustration of that physical web begins with Nao, who resides in Japan prior to the 2011 Tōhoku Tsunami, and Ruth, a Japanese American middle-aged writer living in Canada sometime after 2011. They are drawn together through their shared experience of Nao’s diary. Moreover, Ozeki deploys the motif of time, and through this, demonstrates a clear web of interconnection, by introducing all of the novel’s characters as “time beings” whose lives eventually become intertwined. Not only does the title, *A Tale for the Time Being*, refer to the characters within the book, it also pertains to the reader him/herself as a “time being,” along with its other connotation of time—for the moment and in the meantime—which highlights the importance of time. The motif of time at one level refers to “lost time” but also represents a series of time-related images that draw together characters from across history, geographical space and generations. Ozeki presents the notion of “lost time” in order to focus on the interrelation between the very nature of time and the existence of beings. We first encounter lost time through
a reference to Proust. Here, Nao begins her diary by mentioning that the book uses the cover of Marcel Proust’s À la recherche du temps perdu (1913). She remarks that:

Weird, right? I mean, there I was, sitting in a French maid café in Akiba, thinking about lost time, and old Marcel Proust was sitting in France a hundred years ago, writing a whole book about the exact same subject.70

Here Nao observes the shared enquiry regarding the concept of lost time between herself and Proust and, in the process, suggests a common dissatisfaction that transcends both time and space. Nao goes on to note that she likes how the person who made that diary cut out the contents of the book and replaced it with blank paper. With this action of cutting and replacing, the “search for the lost time” (Proust’s text) has itself been lost and is symbolically waiting for someone to undertake the mission again. Despite this being the only mention of Proust’s work in the novel, it illuminates the theme of trans-temporal and trans-spatial interconnection.

The significance of time is further underlined through the connotations of Nao’s name and her inner conflict about time, death and life. Through her name, Nao is a physical manifestation of immaterial time, with this being evident through her observation pertaining to the relation between time and the existence of beings. Nao’s diary conveys her sense of time, particularly it being fluid and illusory, with this being most evident in an expository sentence of the novel: “[A] time being is someone who lives in time, and that means you, and me, and every one of us who is, or was, or ever will be […].”71 As this initial statement holds that nothing and nobody exists independently outside the realm of time, the strong influence of time on life must be recognized. This then becomes the overarching question of life for Nao. Nao believes that if time and/or life (as a time-being) are real, then they should be both concrete and solid. She articulates her growing disorientation by stating that:

*Then* is the opposite of *now*. So saying *now* obliterates its meaning, turning it into exactly what it isn’t. […] So then I’d start making it shorter […] *now, ow, oh, o* […] until it was just a bunch of little grunting sounds. […] It was hopeless, like trying to hold a snowflake

70. Ibid., 23.
71. Ibid., 3.
on your tongue or a soap bubble between your fingertips. Catching it destroys it, and I felt like I was disappearing, too.\textsuperscript{72}

This quotation indicates that Nao wants to capture each moment of time in order for her to feel that each moment is real. However, by seeing each moment as a separated part, she cannot see the interrelated sequences flowing in time. Thus, her desire to revive those already-gone moments causes her to feel like her own self is “disappearing.” And after this exact craving for the past moment arises dukkha arises. Also, this results in her missing her most precious moments—those that are in the “now.” It is this that is suggested by her name. Furthermore, her view on seeing each moment as a separable entity is the reason why she feels that Nao in the past and the Nao of the present are totally separate and different.

To conclude this point, the above quotation implies two views on the nature of time and beings. On the one hand, each moment of time can be interpreted as meaningless because, to Nao, its nature is impermanent—it arises then disappears. On the other hand, if the way Nao tries articulating the word now as “now, ow, oh, o” is viewed as a sign, this demonstrates the interdependent existence of all beings. Without the other letters of the word “now,” Nao cannot articulate a meaningful word. Analogously, this means that without the existence of other beings, the existence of one being is impossible. As such, through a Buddhist perspective, Nao’s inability to see the interconnection of beings is regarded as the “wrong view.” It seems that Nao holding that there is no static existence of a being is a step towards other characters’ understanding of the existence of sentient beings.

However, it is unfortunate that she misunderstands that the existence of everything is meaningless, or is equivalent to nothingness. All of these are also the “wrong view.” As the result of this, the main conflict of A Tale for the Time Being arises. This conflict is an interplay between the Buddhist concepts of interdependence and emptiness, concepts that explain the emptiness of beings as deriving from being empty of one’s own self. Rather than perceiving a self as the separate entity, this interplaying of the two concepts is used to assert that a self can exist only with the aggregation of one’s self interconnected and interrelated with the selves of other beings.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 99.
which arises in the same manner in a complicated network. And, conversely, without
the existence of a single thing, other things cannot exist, as it is postulated in the
Buddhist principle of “dependent co-arising.” It is this main thrust which is presented
through the Buddhist idea of studying one’s Self.

The novel approaches the idea of studying one’s self as a time being by
invoking observations and explorations as to the existence of the writer and the reader.
This topic is clarified in a conversation between Oliver and Ruth regarding the
influence of the slippage of time in relation to Nao’s writing. Oliver reminds Ruth
that, in regard to the mutual existence of them as the readers and Ruth as the writer:
“[…] it’s not her life that’s at risk […] It calls our existence into question, too, don’t
you think? […] If she stops writing to us, then maybe we stop being, too.”73 This
conversation indicates that the existence of the writer and the reader are,
simultaneously, mutually dependent. The condition of non-self of the existence of the
writer and reader lies in their individual existence. Only when their existence is
perceived simultaneously do their selves exist. As such, their existence depends upon
each other. This concept is extensively elaborated upon in the Avatâmsaka Sutta, an
important scripture within Mahayana Buddhism. The scripture directly relates to the
Buddhist concept of emptiness and explains that every being lacks an intrinsic existence
of self because “everything is without permanent or independent substantiality” and
“everything exists in a web of interconnectedness with all other things.”74

In the Tangled Web of the Interconnected Self: Looking for the Essence

Although the significance of perceiving interconnection is emphasized, this is
not to promote a sense of world-affirming wonder. On the contrary, Ozeki attempts to
show the interconnection of all beings by employing the Buddhist concept of
emptiness/non-self which is explained by the Buddhist principle of interconnectedness.
This is to point out why attachment to either the separate entity as a self or to the idea of
wholeness can cause a person to be trapped in the binary oppositions of sadness and
happiness. Moreover, the significance of an individual’s “right view” is also presented

73. Ibid., 344.
hand-in-hand with other Buddhist concepts, primarily as Buddhism stresses the importance of this “right view.” As we know, when one’s view of the world changes, the object of that person’s mind changes accordingly. This corresponds with Zen Buddhism, a school of Buddhism that places great importance on the practice of meditation to grasp the true nature of one’s mind and on obtaining direct spiritual experience.\textsuperscript{75} In \textit{A Tale for the Time Being}, Ozeki underlines this point by drawing attention to representational reality and by introducing Dōgen’s doctrines on time, beings and the self. Ozeki demonstrates the disorientations of Nao and Ruth in regard to their perceptions of the past, presented as their respective representational realities. This is in order to point out one of the important causes of human dissatisfaction or anxiety, the two exemplary characteristics of \textit{dukkha}. And it is the philosophical discussion regarding this issue which I view as the second form of interconnection presented through this novel.

Initially, Ozeki highlights the unreliability of the so-called realities to be found in a world of signs. She undermines the importance of reality and its associated concepts by presenting it as merely the world of signs under the law of causality. From a Buddhist perspective, it is only in the immediate moment of an event happening that a person can directly experience it. Thus, whatever is recounted of the event after that real moment, the actual reality has passed and all that remains is a reality presented through a person’s particular perspective. One example of this point is shown in regard to the respective American and Japanese viewpoints towards the history of World War II. Nao perceives the situation as follows:

And here’s a funny thing. Americans always call it World War II, but a lot of Japanese call it the Greater East Asian War, and actually the two countries have totally different versions of who started it and what happened. Most Americans think it was all Japan’s fault […] But a lot of Japanese believe that America started it by making all these unreasonable sanctions against Japan […] [and] forced Japan to go to war in self-defense.\textsuperscript{76}

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\textsuperscript{75} Ronald S. Green, “East Asian Buddhism,” in \textit{Blackwell Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy}, 123.

\textsuperscript{76} Ozeki, \textit{A Tale for the Time Being}, 178–79.
Here, the two different sets of thoughts regarding the war illustrate that once an event has happened, the subsequent recollections depend upon the observers’ perception and milieu. These two perspectives can exist at the same time; they represent two realities. What seems to be the crucial issue here is the subjective experience of that reality. Although it seems that this point has been reiterated in a number of modern and contemporary novels, Ozeki approaches this notion in this novel through a Buddhist perspective, that which considers our world as merely consisting of signs. From a Buddhist standpoint, nothing in this world of signs is worth attaching to, with any subsequent attachment itself being the cause of dukkha. Thus, I view the above quotation as suggesting a question as to whether destructive sentiments or feelings that originate from this unreliable reality are worth attaching to.\(^{77}\) This example underlines that, in a world of signs, what can make a person become aware of this unreliability of the reality is a comprehension of the interdependent nature of the self.

Additionally, Ozeki strengthens this point as to the uncertainty of these multiple realities by pointing to the disparate life stories contained in Haruki Yatsutani#1’s letters, those discovered by Nao and Ruth. Haruki#1’s stories are presented through two sets of letters written to his mother, Jiko. The first set of letters detail a story he made up to deceive the military, whereas the second set are letters in which he confesses his true feelings. The first bunch of letters later comes to belong to Nao while Ruth accidently discovers the second set. Both Nao and Ruth believe that the letters they possess are authentic and react differently towards the “facts” they are presented with. Nao says to her suicidal father, “…Your uncle Haruki Number One was brave. He didn’t want to fight in a war but when the time came, he faced his fate. He was […] a true Japanese warrior […] He was not a coward […] You should really be more like him!”\(^{78}\) Here, it is clear that Nao regards Haruki#1 as an inspirational hero, with the contents of his letters inspiring her to see the value of life. This stimulates Nao to convince her father to either live or die in the same way.

\(^{77}\) The reality is “unreliable” because it has multiple versions, so it seems unreliable/unstable and even unknowable.

\(^{78}\) Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 264.
However, Ozeki contrasts the ramifications of the letters on Nao and her father with Ruth’s reaction. This achieves a destabilizing of human perception towards the importance of so-called reality, and even the possibility of accessing reality. Despite the stories being those of a dead man, the representational realities of his life (which refer to his life that is represented in the letters and interpreted by the readers) influence other people’s lives for at least two further generations, the lives of Nao and her father prior to 2011 and Ruth at the present time. To be exact, the idea about the relation between the representational reality and one’s perception of life is accentuated when a different story about Haruki#1 is disclosed to Ruth. It demonstrates that, to uproot dukkha, whatever the past event which constitutes so-called reality is not as important as an individual’s now. In his last letter, Haruki writes something different to the letters Nao possesses, “I have always believed that this war is wrong. [...] I am determined to do my utmost to steer my plane away from my target and into the sea.”79 The story about Haruki#1 turns out to be the opposite to what Nao knows. Ruth, as the representative of the reader, is worried and wonders what would Nao’s response be if she knew this reality: “Nao doesn’t know this yet. She still thinks her great-uncle flew his plane into enemy’s battleship. She thinks he died a war hero, carrying out his mission. She doesn’t know he scuttled it. How can this be?”80 With these concerns, Ruth lets her anxiety and restlessness dominate the moment before expressing her regret. Ruth’s concerns regarding the accurate reality of Haruki#1 and about Nao’s reaction suggest a question about what an individual should regard as the most important thing—one’s regret or worry about the past, which one cannot undo, anticipation about the future, which has not happened yet, or our actions at the present moment.

In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ozeki incorporates this concept of representational reality, as presented in relation to time, alongside her explication as to the notion of interconnectedness. To clarify this Buddhist philosophical idea, she employs Dōgen’s doctrines on time, beings, and Self as a basis for the proffered philosophical observation regarding the association between Buddhist interconnection and the Buddhist concept of impermanence and emptiness/non-self. Dōgen’s doctrines

79. Ibid., 328.
80. Ibid., 389.
on the study of one’s self are first mentioned by Nao, then by Nao’s father and subsequently by Haruki#1, Jiko’s dead son.\textsuperscript{81} Haruki#1 quotes Dōgen’s doctrine by writing in a letter that: “[t]o study the Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all the myriad things.”\textsuperscript{82} Through this, Haruki#1 seeks to achieve the ultimate liberation of the mind while also living in the unsatisfactory environment of a Japanese internment camp during World War II, or, to put it differently, while it is impossible to accomplish the material \textit{sukha}. This, of course, corresponds with the overarching theme of the novel—how to live one’s life in an unacceptable society. Haruki#1’s statement suggests that if one wants to forget one’s self, one has to realize the interconnection of all beings in the flow of time. The three invocations of Dōgen stimulate Ruth, as Nao’s reader, to question, think and struggle towards the ramifications of the doctrine in relation to the existence of beings.

According to Buddhist teachings, the importance of an individual’s “right view” on the “true nature” of the Self constitutes a major factor in leading a person to freedom of mind. As Zen Buddhism claims that the Buddha transmitted his teachings “from mind to mind”, the liberation of one’s mind must occur through a process of looking inwards, this being the practice of \textit{zazen} (seated meditation).\textsuperscript{83} Furthermore, this process must be undertaken until one can see the true nature of things.\textsuperscript{84} Here, being mindful at each present moment is considered to be the heart of Zen, with practising being held as the only method of achieving Zen’s goal. This becomes a challenge for Ozeki who has to convey insights into the Buddhist principles by means of language.

In response to the challenge of demonstrating what is supposed to be a meditative experience through language, Nao is given two roles—as a questioner and as a person who voices the advantages of \textit{zazen}. As a questioner, she stimulates her reader

\textsuperscript{81} Norman Waddell and Masao Abe, \textit{Heart of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō} (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), ix-xi. Dōgen (1200-1258) was the founder of Sōtō Zen in Japan. Dōgen Kigen’s \textit{Shōbōgenzō} is positioned as one of the primary philosophical tenets of Zen. His \textit{Shōbōgenzō} represents a collection of religious discourses of Zen teachings and practice.

\textsuperscript{82} Ozeki, \textit{A Tale for the Time Being}, 323.

\textsuperscript{83} Green, “East Asian Buddhism,” 123.

\textsuperscript{84} Shibayama, \textit{A Flower Does Not Talk: Zen Essays}, 49.
to question and think. Indeed, when Nao asks “I don’t know why I keep asking you questions. […] even if you did answer, how would I know? But maybe that doesn’t matter,” she confirms the notion that the communication between Nao and her reader pertains to the thought-provoking quality of her questions rather than the plausibility of the reader’s answers. Aside from being a questioner, Nao, as a character whose role is designed to assert the advantages of practising zazen, absorbs ideas regarding Buddhist thought and practice from her great-grandmother, Jiko. Nao refers to her ability to practice zazen as a “superpower”, stressing her realization of its beneficial effects throughout the story. For Nao, this is tied with her not feeling a sense of belonging to Japan as her home, “[z]azen is a home that you can’t ever lose, and I keep doing it because I like that feeling […]” This implies that a home in one’s heart can replace one’s sense of spiritual hollowness, and it also accentuates the idea that spiritual sukha is far more meaningful than material sukha. Through Nao’s perspective, Ozeki not only conveys the traditional values of practising zazen but also contributes to this a new secular interpretation through Nao’s voice. In the last part of her diary, Nao narrates that:

He [Nao’s father] […] spends all his time programming, which really is his superpower. I mean, there are lots of superheroes with different superpowers. […] My dad seems to have found his superpower, and maybe I’ve started to find mine, too, which is writing to you.

In this quotation, Nao expands her interpretation as to what constitutes a “superpower” by pointing to this as being whatever an individual finds when looking deeply into his or her own abilities. The idea that “[…] there are lots of superheroes with different superpowers. […]”, as offered through Nao’s voice, attests to the fact that the focus of A Tale for the Time Being is not the temporal aspects of life but the spiritual ones. It is this concept of a “superpower” which is the evidence of Ozeki’s interpretation and adjustment of the Buddhist concept of enlightenment to make it suitable for the thematic context of the novel. All of the dissatisfaction, disappointment, and suffering

85. Ozeki, A Tale for the Time Being, 175.
86. Ibid., 182.
87. Ibid., 389.
encountered by the characters in *A Tale for the Time Being*, especially Nao, are forms of *dukkha*. Here, Ozeki, in underscoring the spiritual side of one’s life, proposes that no matter what problems in life an individual encounters, he/she has the potential to discover a way to free him/herself from *dukkha* should they look inward and find their own ability.

**Only at This Present Moment That Life is Matter**

With its emphasis on the spiritual aspects of life, the novel provides an exploration as to the nature of one’s own Self. Furthermore, through the concept of the Buddhist notion of interconnection, constituted as part of the Buddhist teachings about the “right view”, *A Tale for the Time Being* offers an answer to the question of what is the most important moment in regard to the past, the present, and the future. Through the communication between the two main characters, a possible way to alleviate one’s *dukkha* as proposed in *A Tale for the Time Being* centers on one’s ability to grasp the true nature of one’s self. In association with this, the importance of “now” as the heart of *zazen* is foregrounded, particularly through the characters of Nao, Jiko, Ruth and Oliver. One example of this comes at the end of the novel and is seen in Ruth’s contemplation of Dōgen’s doctrine:

 [...] *To study the Way is to study the self* [italics in Original]. [...] From what Ruth could tell, zazen seemed like a kind of moment-to-moment observation of the self that apparently led to enlightenment. [...]  

*To study the self is to forget the self* [italics in original]. Maybe if you sat enough zazen, your sense of being a solid, singular self would dissolve and you could forget about it.  

Here, Ruth logically reflects upon the doctrine and notes the importance of each moment in which a person looks deeply into one’s self. To her, the moment a person’s “sense of being a solid, singular self” disappears is the moment that that person will forget that his/her separate entity or self. As a consequence, that kind of Self will dissolve when he/she acknowledges the fluidity of the interconnected Self in moment

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88. Ibid., 398.
after moment. This point is quite complicated so it is worth looking at the Zen Buddhist explanation about the notion of Self.

Zen, which regards awakening as its ultimate goal, explains that to understand what the awakening means for Zen, a practitioner has to grasp the notion of “emptiness.” An insight into emptiness depends on an individual’s ability to penetrate the meaning of the Buddhist teaching which states that “[…] the true self is selfless […].” and it is “[…] not only [selfless] in the sense of compassionate, but also in the sense of empty of a determinate and substantial ego. The true Self is thus a “non-self”.”89 In corresponding with this explanation, “to study the Way” and “to study the self” is the same thing. The “moment-to-moment observation of the self” as stated in the quotation not only directly relates to one’s capability of realizing the “true nature” of the Self in each moment which is interrelational and which finally is perceived as one’s Self, that phrase in the quotation also highlights the significance of “now.” The significance of “now” is underlined throughout the novel, with this also being emphasized in Jiko’s deathbed statement. Here, addressing Nao and her father, Jiko declares: “To live. For now. For the time being.”90 Jiko’s final statement to the suicidal characters argues that they should live mindfully for now, stop living in regret over their pasts and should neglect anticipating the future. With Jiko’s statement, Ozeki conveys the value of the present moment as a key statement of the novel. Throughout the work, she provides explications of Buddhist teachings, all of which reiterate the significance of the present moment.

Thus, the notion of the non-singular self and the significance of “now” are inextricably tied with the Buddhist notion of interconnectedness, the novel’s main concept. Those notions also encompass the core concepts of the Self/non-Self. When Ruth dreams of a nun who looks like Jiko, the nun recites a message conveying Buddhist notions of dualism and non-dualism:

“Sometimes up…”
........................................
“Sometimes down…”


90. Ozeki, A Tale for the Time Being, 362.
Up down, same thing. And also different, too….
When up looks up, up is down.
When down looks down, down is up.
Not-one, not-two. Not different.

Now do you see? 91

This quotation recalls the Buddhist notions of dualism/non-dualism and the Self/non-Self through its emphasis on the interrelation between “up” and “down.” Indeed, the meaning of these sentences can be explained literally. “When up looks up, up is down” can be read as asserting that when “up” looks at something in the higher position, the position of that “up” is at the lower position and we can say that “up” is down. The meaning of “[w]hen down looks down, down is up” can be elaborated upon in the same relational way. Consequently, “up” and “down” are the same thing. When “up” changes its position, “up” is “down” and “down” is “up.” It is just a matter of transition. This is beyond dualistic or non-dualistic concepts as the entire process of this transition must be accepted as it is. This is analogous to the nature of time (which also constitutes a time being) as it alternates between arising and disappearing moments.

To conclude, “up” and “down” are the same thing while also being different. These phrases, as received by Nao, are repeated again and again through Jiko’s teachings. Through this, Ozeki cements her implications as to the notion of interconnectedness, especially in it encompassing the Buddhist notions of the self and non-self. This is in order for the reader to see that a life, as a time being, always transforms in the fluidity of time. Through this, the novel proposes that if a person grasps this interconnection of all beings, he/she will realize that every present moment is the most precious moment and that, as such, one should mindfully live his/her life in this moment. And when he/she realizes the presence of every single thing is as significant as one another, he/she may live their life with compassion or metta for other beings.

As I have discussed above, we can see that A Tale for the Time Being demonstrates that time, as viewed by people, is an aggregation of each moment that

91. Ibid., 39.
arises and disappears continuously. This flow of continuity is established until it seems that beings existing in time are solid. This conclusion is reached despite the fact that time is slippery and beings are relatively transient. From this, “now” is the utmost moment and individuals can really live and make the most of it. I argue that the notion of interconnectedness as manifested in the novel is employed to present practical solutions to the ills of contemporaneity, illustrated through the spiritual conflicts of all the characters in the novel. In terms of the influence of Zen Buddhism, Ozeki deploys the Buddhist notion of interconnectedness, alongside other Buddhist concepts, to emphasize the significance of an individual’s proper perception of the world by means of language. Through this, she offers ways to live. She also emphasizes that living one’s life in the contemporary world requires recognition of the present moment. This is because each moment is interrelated with others, with “now” being the most precious moment of all. Ultimately, the novel implies this in its title—*A Tale for the Time Being*—the work thus being a narration for the present moment.

At this point, the discussions in this chapter show Johnson’s and Ozeki’s emphases on the “right view” of the Self which refers to the understanding of the interdependent nature of existence. Viewing this idea as the basis of a “correct” understanding of one’s self, both writers explain that each present moment in one’s life is the most precious time because it is, in other words, an accumulative moment of the past and will be a part of the future. By elaborating upon the relation between time and one’s self, Ozeki’s message in *A Tale for the Time Being* helps clarify the nature of one’s self that it is like time. The present self, as a time being, is most important because it arises then disperses and repeats this circle endlessly in the current of time. Because of this process, the perception of the self as presented in the two novels of this chapter is perceived as a being which has a non-self nature. As seen in Andrew Hawkins’s and Nao’s enlightenment at the end of the stories, Johnson and Ozeki underline that this perception of non-self is beneficial in helping a person liberate one’s self from the suffering caused by their dualistic views which are generated from the misunderstanding of a static and fixed self. In the next chapter, this thesis will move to look into the contribution of the Buddhist philosophy of the Self to a search for the meaning of life in *Faith and the Good Thing* (1974) and identity negotiation in *The Face: A Time Code* (2016).
Chapter Two

A Buddhist View of the Personal Self

Having discussed Charles Johnson’s and Ruth Ozeki’s idea of the transformable and unfixed self, which is derived from the Buddhist notion of non-self, in the previous chapter, this chapter investigates how both writers apply that Buddhist idea of the self to approach the issue of personal identity based on race in *Faith and the Good Thing* (1974) and *The Face: A Time Code* (2016). By incorporating the Buddhist principle of the three common characteristics of existence (*tilakkhaṇa*) into the illustration of the protagonists’ perceptions of their realities, Johnson and Ozeki emphasize shared ideas about the certainty of uncertainty which is revealed through the presentation of the unfixed self. Despite presenting different settings and deploying different techniques, both novels suggest that an attachment to the idea of a fixed permanent self and identity blinds a person to the true nature of being, and, as a result, such a belief hinders him or her in finding inner peace or seeing an alternative way in life.

In correspondence with the concept of the interdependent nature of the Self as discussed in Chapter One, I suggest that a person’s sense of self has the same nature as the Self. Anthony Elliott, a sociologist whose research focuses on the self, notes that the sense of self, which indicates an individual’s identity and personal self is contingent and cannot independently exist. By drawing from philosophical, sociological, and phenomenological ideas about the self, Elliott delineates that “[i]n forging a sense of self, individuals routinely draw from social influences, and maintain their sense of self through cultural reasons.”¹ With this view of the interdependent existence of the self, I propose that personal identity, which is sometimes referred to as self-identity in western philosophy, is based on a person’s sense of self. Moreover, the term “personal identity” can be referred to as an “individual identity” when it is used to identify a person’s differences from other people in a society or a group. Thus, to put it simply, personal self, personal identity, self-identity, and individual identity are initially equivalent. To

define what these identities are depends on an individual’s sense of self, which contributes to what people intersubjectively label as the self.2

The idea about the interdependent nature of existence as discussed above has been discussed differently within other disciplines or schools of thought as well. Nevertheless, it is rare to find disciplines that directly demonstrate the significant interrelation between ontological views of the self and an individual’s happiness or inner peace, except for Buddhist philosophy. In Buddhism, Shakyamuni Buddha directly stresses the interrelation between the understanding of one’s own self and the attainment of ultimate peace. He emphasized that dukkha can be ceased, which also means an individual can be liberated from bondage in the secular world, when a person has a spiritual insight into the interdependent nature of existence. Theoretically speaking, this is because such an understanding will enable a person to see why detachment from the belief in the static self is significant and how that detachment contributes to the liberation from dukkha, which is at the heart of Buddhist teaching.3

Furthermore, these two understandings about the cessation of dukkha and the benefit of understanding the Self will enable a person to realize how he or she should react to whatever occurs in life. To demonstrate this idea, the Buddha delineates the existence of the Self through the principle of interdependent origination—that a being or the Self exists or ceases to exist because of its causal factors, and these factors themselves also exist because of their own countless causal constituents. Through this principle, he concludes that the Self as a being has three common characteristics—impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkhatā), and non-self (anattā).4 This principle is

2. The word “intersubjectively” is an adverb of the term “intersubjectivity” which refers to an agreement among a group of people on a given set of meanings or definitions of something or a situation. Regarding this term, Charles Johnson once explained in an interview in 1987 and again in 1993 that when a person describes something or a situation, which actually can be interpreted in many ways, that description is still subjective. Then if that description is accepted as true by other people who are looking at the same matter, it becomes intersubjective meaning or definition of the thing or situation. See O’Connell, “Charles Johnson (1987),” 27; Little, “An Interview with Charles Johnson (1993),” 102.

3. It must be noted that this is a theoretical approach to explain the notion because, in fact, Buddhism stresses that the only way to attain the state of enlightenment or nirvana (nibāna) is through a practitioner’s practice of mindfulness according to the Satipatṭhāna Sutta (the Discourse on the Establishing of Mindfulness) and the Mahāsatipatṭhāna Sutta (the Great Discourse on the Establishing of Mindfulness). These two Sutta can be found in the Buddhist Pali Canon.

also applied to the notion of self and identity. The discussion of these three marks of existence is a part of the Buddhist theories of the self which is known as tilakkhana. In Pali, “ti” means three and “lakkhana” means characteristics, so tilakkhana refers to the three characteristics of existence.

Though a comprehension of the impermanent nature of the Self, the personal self and personal identity is important to understand Johnson’s and Ozeki’s oeuvre, this idea is, in fact, merely one part of the whole idea which Johnson and Ozeki present as the overriding theme of Faith and the Good Thing and The Face: A Time Code. Indeed, to illuminate how an understanding of the Self contributes to an individual’s liberation from bondage, Johnson and Ozeki use the novels as devices to show the process of liberating one’s self through the protagonists’ phenomenological perspectives. As such, to completely grasp the messages the two writers convey we also need to look at two more parts of the whole message: (i) the dynamic process of life learning and (ii) the experiential knowledge which an individual needs in order to attain spiritual liberation from dualistic views and from the attachment to the notion of the permanent fixed self (which causes dukkha). Because of this, we find that what Johnson and Ozeki highlight in their novels is the process which the protagonists must go through to spiritually grow after they have gained more experience and internalized the experience as part of their own developing perceptions of their selves. To be exact, because Buddhism does not focus on belief but on a practitioner’s discovery, Johnson and Ozeki do not want to merely inform their readers about the nature of the self as an ideology. They seek to create fiction which presents the process of discovery by leading their readers to explore how the protagonists see the world at each stage of their life and what they directly learn before they finally grasp the true nature of the Self and their selves.

In the following discussion of the novels, I propose that the protagonists’ discovery of the certainty of uncertainty, which manifests through the impermanent nature of the Self, gives them the potential to see how they will negotiate their identities and overcome feelings of dissatisfaction and suffering. In order to accentuate the magnitude of an individual’s “right” perception to the world, Johnson and Ozeki do not

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5. This idea can also be seen in Ruth Ozeki, The Face: A Time Code (London: Restless Books, 2016), 18.
focus upon issues of marginalization, objectivization, or social otherness. Instead, they focus on the protagonist’s potential to see alternative ways to react to the world. This perspective is undoubtedly why the novels narrate incidents where the protagonists emphasize their phenomenological perspectives. In the following sections, I will demonstrate how Johnson and Ozeki lead us to explore the nature of the personal self and identity by dividing the discussion into two main sections focusing on *Faith and the Good Thing* and *The Face: A Time Code* respectively.

**In Search of the Lost Life and One’s Self in *Faith and the Good Thing***

Positioning himself as a writer of philosophical black literature alongside Jean Toomer, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, Charles Johnson deploys a phenomenological approach and the Buddhist philosophy of the Self to investigate issues of the personal self and identity. To Johnson, the art of philosophical black fiction is the interrogation of one’s experience rather than a didactic explanation of ideas or ideologies.\(^6\) Based on this principle, Johnson’s *Faith and the Good Thing* narrates Faith Cross’s quest for the “Good Thing.”\(^7\) In this philosophical novel, Johnson incorporates African folklore and the story of the spiritual journey of Faith, a truth-seeker, to investigate the nature of experience which, he believes, will help deepen the character’s understanding of the meaning of her own life.\(^8\) However, to understand the meaning of life here does not mean to know the definition of life but it means to possess a profound perception of the nature of life and its conditions. As a result, to detach oneself from the bondage of the secular world, in other words, one’s desires for temporal things, is likely to happen.

Johnson’s debut novel, published in 1974, *Faith and the Good Thing* encompasses broader racial and philosophical issues than those found in *Oxherding Tale* (1982) which I have discussed in Chapter One. Nevertheless, in a sequential discussion of the Buddhist principle of the Self in this second chapter, I wish to

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emphasize Johnson’s ideas about the notion of the personal self which is associated with the understanding of one’s personal identity. In *Faith and the Good Thing*, Johnson applies a phenomenological approach to implicitly criticize the notion of a static selfhood (this can be found in much of his fiction) which is associated to the notion of personal identities. Simultaneously, he also proposes the Buddhist philosophy of the “non-self,” an idea which is elucidated through the Buddhist theory of the three common characteristics of existence, to look at one’s personal self and identity. In doing so, he uses *Faith and the Good Thing* to probe the nature of good and beings because it will lead an individual to develop a “right” view on the nature of the self and life. Johnson, a Buddhist practitioner, implicitly acknowledges the potentially alien and challenging content of his novel. Therefore, to make his work and ideas comprehensible, he submerges the Buddhist ideas and represents them through Faith’s perspective as searches for the “Good Thing.” As such, in this discussion of *Faith and the Good Thing*, my objectives are to demonstrate what Johnson offers as the meaning of “the Good Thing”, and to identify the implications of the Buddhist philosophy of the Self throughout, and the process Faith goes about to understand it.

Indeed, the question of what constitutes the Good Thing is implicit in the novel’s title. Firstly, the title, *Faith and the Good Thing*, literally tells us that the novel is the story of Faith, a quester in pursuit of the “Good Thing”. Secondly, after we read the novel, the protagonist’s name Faith has a paradoxical meaning. Throughout the novel, she has no faith in her life but is always in doubt as to where she can find a perfect Good Thing (as her mother has instructed her to do). The title invites a question as to whether a person’s faith in the existence of the “Good Thing” can truly contribute to the discovery of it or not. Despite following her mother’s instruction to find the Good Thing, Faith’s experience teaches her that having faith in a false entity leads nowhere. Subsequently, the faith without wisdom from one’s own direct experience is directionless. This is evident only when Faith realizes her identity is transformable (i.e. the shift to become a Swamp Woman). This realization gives her freedom. This, along with the title of the novel, suggests a question about the adequacy of a person’s faith (faith which means an absolute belief without wisdom) and stresses the importance of wisdom.

Through the novel, Johnson presents the idea that everyone has many different good things to enjoy in their lives but they fail to recognize the presence of these good
things because of the misconception of the Self as static, fixed and a kind of attainable perfection. Certainly, this idea of Johnson is influenced by Buddhist philosophy. From the Buddhist perspective, holding such a belief in that kind of perfection results in people living with a hope of finding a form of the perfect, permanent “good” thing. As a consequence, they lose each present moment of their lives by living in the future which has not come yet. To convey this idea, he creates a fictional term to refer to the little good things in life as the “Good Thing.” In regard to this, he notes “[t]here are lots of little good things, according to the Swamp Woman, right, and they all have to be appreciated for themselves. And they’re all the same. It’s all an expression of the same thing, which is creative expression.” Although none of the critics mention this point in their work, I still regard Johnson’s *Faith and the Good Thing* as a successful novel in encouraging its readers to question their perceptions of the self as conceived in binary terms (or what I describe as “dualistic views”).

Critics such as Gary Storhoff, Jonathan Little, William R. Nash, Rudolph P. Byrd, Linda Furgerson Selzer and Yomna Saber use different approaches to *Faith and the Good Thing*, but they apply similar structures to develop their discussions. They commonly discuss how Johnson employs each of his characters in the novel to criticize some aspects of African American literary traditions such as the application of a naturalistic style and the use of African American folklore to please the white readers. All of them point out that Johnson implicitly criticizes prominent western philosophers’ ideas about the self, for example, those of Plato, materialists, idealists, Neo-Platonists, as well as those believing in conventional Christianity through the voices of characters interacting with Faith. While every critic points out why Johnson suggests that it is important to look at one’s personal self and identity beyond dualistic views, each of them relates their argument to different aspects of African American fictional traditions.

Apart from the problems caused by dualistic views, critics of this novel grasp the central idea that life is a process so nothing in life can be separated as a single good

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10. Dualism in Buddhist metaphysical philosophy refers to the belief in two opposite kinds of reality such as white and black, good and bad, suffering and happiness. In the analysis of *Faith and the Good Thing*, dualism emphatically refers to the ideas about good and bad.
thing. To look at life as a process means one needs to appreciate the holistic picture of everything in life. Actually, this is the idea which Johnson presents in all of his novels and always mentions in his interviews. It seems that most critics are aware of the problems caused by dualism which Johnson underlines in *Faith and the Good Thing*. For instance, Jonathan Little relates his interpretation of the novel to a dualistic perception of race. He notes that dualistic views in African American literature and thinking limit an individual’s ability to perceive the self and identity as it really is. Like Little, Nash focuses on the disadvantages of dualistic views which cause racial conflicts but his approach underlines the effectiveness of Johnson’s utilization of African American folklore in illustrating the value of one’s experience and the idea of a transformable identity. Byrd discusses the meaning of the Good Thing as other critics do but takes a different approach. Byrd draws upon the question of what is “the *idea* of the good?” which comes from Plato’s *Republic* to underline Johnson’s establishment of the tradition of philosophical black fiction which, he concludes, has to be “a fiction that is first and foremost a mode of thought and a process of hermeneutics.” Thus to Johnson, as Byrd reads, philosophical black fiction has to focus on the protagonist’s self-investigation of his or her perceptive experience rather than on their temporal reactions to the world.

In line with the critics I have mentioned above, Selzer and Saber attempt to put forth the definition of the Good Thing in similar ways. Though Selzer presents the same idea that life is a process, she emphasizes the influence of Marxism on African American literature and on its influence upon Johnson's idea. She deploys examples


from the text to affirm what she sees as his Marxist principles. Saber applies Michel de Certeau’s idea in “Walking in the City” from *The Practice of Everyday Life* that people walk in the city in order to create their own spatial world. Though her application of this notion to the novel to investigate only a part of Faith’s journey in Chicago is interesting, that she leaves out the analysis of the ending of the novel which takes place at the Swamp Woman’s bog makes her interpretation incomplete.

Among the critics who read *Faith and the Good Thing* through western philosophies and theories, Gary Storhoff is the only person who directly points out the presence of the Buddhist philosophies and theories in the novel. In his article, he integrates the notion of the self, the philosophy of emptiness, the theory of non-self, and the idea of dukkha to interpret this Hegelian dialectical novel and indicates a distinctive meaning of the Good Thing which he believes is offered by Johnson. Regarding dualism, Storhoff directly makes the point by drawing upon the Buddhist perspective to explain the cause of human suffering: “[t]he basic problem of humanity for Johnson is that our memory projects a dualistic vision of ordinary life that separates the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ things, an arbitrary division that for the enlightened person does not truly exist.” Through this, he interprets that the “true” Good Thing is “an acceptance of the idea of emptiness and the renunciation of the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ things.” His analysis of the philosophies or ideologies held by other characters who Faith encounters is to indicate the flaws of those ideas which make their believers fail to grasp the essence of the Good Thing. His view on the justification of the idea of emptiness contributes to his explanation of how effective Johnson’s utilization of magic realism is. He explains that Faith, who transforms into the Swamp Woman, represents


15. According to the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Hegel’s dialectics, which Johnson applies to be a style of his narrative, refers to a dialectical method of argument in which opposing ideas pertaining to a subject matter are argued against one another in linear fashion. Hegelian dialectical style is employed by Johnson in his philosophical novels and it is already mentioned in Chapter One. In *Faith and the Good Thing*, it refers to the way Johnson creates philosophical argument in his novel by demonstrating some opposing philosophical ideas or ideologies on the same topic about the meaning of the Good Thing through different characters’ voices who have interactions with Faith.


17. Storhoff, 27.
the enlightened person when she finally realizes that the fixed static self of Faith Cross is actually an illusory perception. In addition, Storhoff is the only one who profoundly explains the symbolic meaning of the magic realism in this story which is presented through Faith the Swamp Woman. Based on his understanding of the Engaged Buddhist movement, he even extends his explanation to mark the reason why the old Swamp Woman returns to the world.\textsuperscript{18} Regarding this point, he notes that “[e]nlightenment necessarily involves compassion, and compassion requires a wide, social context—not the seclusion of a monastic life.”\textsuperscript{19} Thus he argues that Johnson proposes such a perception of the impermanent and non-static self and identity to indicate how an individual can achieve liberation from dualistic views, the kind of liberation which is regarded as “the true freedom.”\textsuperscript{20}

Although Storhoff’s insightful critical monograph is grounded on Buddhist philosophies, his strategic approach is not very different from other critics. Storhoff focuses on interpreting each character’s philosophy or ideology. However, by focusing on what Faith learns from the other characters, Storhoff follows the critical consensus, which seems to conclude that Faith is not just an African American victim. Nonetheless, by attributing her learning to her interactions with others, she is denied agency. I believe that Johnson wishes to present Faith as in control of her own life and destiny, that his novel is more than a critique of western philosophies but an interrogation of a subject’s (i.e. Faith) ever evolving and unfolding nature of the Self.

To illustrate this point, I argue that Johnson illuminates the three characteristics of existence—impermanence, suffering, non-self—through Faith’s perceptive experience and reflection after she has passed various predicaments during her quest. And through this, the novel underlines that life lessons and philosophical

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} In brief, Engaged Buddhism, or Socially Engaged Buddhism, refers to a social movement of the Buddhists to help people who socially, politically, or economically suffered or to eliminate collective problems by means of non-violent actions and with compassion. This term was originally coined to explain the political and social movement of groups of Buddhists in Asia led by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen master, during the Vietnam War. Engaged Buddhism has been popular since then, especially in the West and it refers to the activism of Buddhists who apply the results of their insightful meditation and Buddhist teachings to alleviate people’s social, economic, or political problems and to protect the environment.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Storhoff, “Chapter 2: Faith and the Good Thing,” 51.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Storhoff, 52.
\end{itemize}
ideas from other truth-seekers can be only one’s physical stimuli to urge an individual to think and question. To grasp the idea of enjoying each present moment, an individual has to realize the unfixed and impermanent nature of the self which naturally and constantly manifests itself through their own experience. To demonstrate my argument, the following discussion begins with a brief description of Faith’s journey. Then it will move on to Johnson’s implication of the meaning of the Good Thing. Regarding Johnson’s proposed ideas of the Good Thing, I divide the discussion into two main parts. First, we will investigate the meaning of the Good Thing which is presented through Dr. Richard M. Barrett, a character whose life can be associated with Faith, the protagonist, and Kujichagulia, the character from African American folklore which Johnson interweaves into the novel. Secondly, the discussion will emphasize the process of how Faith’s perceptions of the Good Thing are transformed and developed.

**An Ontological Question of the Existence of the Good Thing**

In terms of the strategy to propose the Buddhist philosophy of non-self, Johnson establishes a tradition of philosophical black fiction which focuses on the process of discovery. Johnson uses a Hegelian dialectical style to present the encounter between Faith’s perception of the Good Thing and other characters’ perceptions. Nevertheless, Faith’s ideas about the Good Thing which transform throughout the story are the focus of the novel. In Chicago, Faith becomes a hopeless prostitute and meets a series of male characters who represent disparate beliefs or ideologies. Despite holding their own beliefs about the Good Thing, these characters, for example, Arnold T. Tippis, Dr. Richard Barrett, and Reverend Magnus fail to discover it in their realities. The narrator notes: “Not one of them knew of the Good Thing, or even believed in its possibility—its necessity.”

This implies Johnson’s question as to what the Good Thing is, which constitutes the very first step in understanding its necessity.

To illuminate that one must move from a perception of the Good Thing to the discovery of the “true” Good Thing through a process of self-interrogation, Johnson leads us to witness the process of enlightenment which Faith has gone through. Having

become a prostitute, Faith’s life remains the same until she decides to start a married life with Isaac Maxwell, a materialistic journalist. She conceals her past from him for fear that losing Maxwell will jeopardize her chance to achieve the Good Thing, which at this point she believes to be material success. At this point of the narrative, she believes that perhaps the Good Thing refers to the material objects which can make her happy. Nevertheless, though she can get and buy everything she wants after she gets married, she still feels restless and thinks of carrying on with her quest to find the Good Thing.

Until she reunites with her teenage lover, Alpha Omega Jones, her belief changes again. Faith believes that the Good Thing must be an idealistic being and Jones must be able to tell her about the Good Thing’s whereabouts. However, the fact is that he does not know about it, nor does he offer to take her along in his life, on his spiritual quest. Faith has learned lesson by lesson until she realizes that the permanent Good Thing which she expects to be something that makes her permanently feel good and happy and bring her true freedom from bondage does not exist. At the end of the novel, Faith’s journey ends after she breaks up with Maxwell when her background is disclosed. She finds herself pregnant, but Jones refuses to take care of her and her baby lest she becomes a burden in his quest for his Good Thing. Faith comes back to live in the Hotel Sinclair and gives birth to her baby by herself. Unfortunately, both Faith and her baby are burnt in a fire at the motel which breaks out while she is giving birth. After the fire disaster, the narrative unfolds in a magical realist style. Johnson uses magic realism to describe Faith’s enlightenment through her transformation into a Swamp Woman, a werewitch who has unlimited identities, back in Hatten County, Georgia, after she physically loses everything, even her baby, her body and her life in the fire.

In suggesting the meanings of the Good Thing, Johnson employs African American folklore to raise ontological questions as to whether the fixed permanent Good Thing exists before he points out that such a Good Thing is an illusion. At the beginning of the narrative, before Lavidia, Faith’s mother, dies, she tells Faith to definitely find the Good Thing without leaving any clue of what it is. This deathbed instruction causes Faith Cross to embark upon her journey of self-discovery from Hatten County, Georgia, to Chicago in the hope of discovering the “Good Thing.” The only one certain thing that Faith believes is that the Good Thing must exist somewhere and is waiting to be discovered. The only clue about the Good Thing she has ever heard
of is from the Swamp Woman, an African werewitch who is believed to be a survivor of an African tribe.

To answer Faith’s question of what the Good Thing is, the Swamp Woman tells Faith a talk-story of Kujichagulia, a truth-seeker. This talk-story is a microcosmic version of Faith’s story. Though Kujichagulia seems physically unlike Faith, his being a restless inquisitor is similar. In the village where Kujichagulia lives, people have faith in a Good Thing which the gods keep in Paradise. She notes that the Good Thing manifests itself in infinite forms. However, Kujichagulia is the only suspicious man in the village and he keeps asking questions about his own existence. From the day of his birth, he questions everything, including the “modes of the Good Thing” until one day he decides to seek for the Good Thing where gods live. Feeling incomplete and restless, he never lives his life in each present moment. Even after he marries Imani (her name means faith) and has a child, he always longs for the time he will be able to reach and touch the Good Thing. At the end of the talk-story, the Swamp Woman tells Faith that Kujichagulia finally leaves his family to chase after the Good Thing, and that although he manages to reach the Good Thing, he dies because of its power and the gods have hidden the Good Thing forever since then. This is the way Johnson proposes the idea that the tangible Good Thing is not attainable. However, to understand this idea a person needs to have direct experience of life and to reflect upon it, Johnson chooses to present the discussion about this through Faith’s story.

Unlike much African American fiction, Johnson emphasizes the hindrances which blind Faith to the true “Good Thing” rather than focusing upon racial predicaments. This is to underline his sense that, regardless of race, an individual has the power to choose their own way of life. To demonstrate this idea, Johnson suggests through Faith and the Good Thing that the major hindrance that prevents Faith from having a decent life is her attachment to dualistic views of what are good and bad in life. While she is in search of the Good Thing in Chicago, Faith once visited a church in the hope of obtaining the Good Thing. The conversation between the minister at the Church of Continual Light and Faith reveals how disorientated Faith is. She remarks that “I came to Chicago looking for the one true Good Thing, the one thing that would

22. Johnson, Faith and the Good Thing, 43.
end everyone’s bondage, and would bring us all out of the dark!”23 This demonstrates Faith’s idea of and belief in a definite fixed form of the Good Thing.

However, Johnson demonstrates that Faith’s “one true Good Thing” is merely an illusion. In the same conversation, Faith stresses that her strong faith in the existence of the “one true Good Thing” leads her to nothing:

I believe in it—I was devoted to it, just like you said. I looked for it, because I knew it had to be! Don’t you see? Wasn’t it possible that there were all kinds of things around us that we never knew about until we looked for them? Wasn’t there a purpose just waiting to show itself to someone who looked?24

In this explanation of her search, Faith deploys her experience to point out a problem when an individual has only faith in a thing. Though it is undeniable that her strong faith in the “one true” Good Thing gives Faith some hope to be free from bondage, such a delusion eventually brings her only disappointment and frustration. The logic of Faith’s enquiry stands up. If one being really exists, it must be able to be found. Even when the minister replies that “It’s within you, child—”, Faith immediately answers, “I looked there, too!” […] “There’s nothing inside, and there’s nothing outside—.”25

Moreover, for the minister and Faith, the Good Thing has different meanings. For the minister, it might mean faith in God which is also a kind of bondage but, for Faith, the Good Thing constitutes a being which will help liberate her from all kinds of bondage. As such, the minister’s suggestion that looking within one’s self will bring Faith to find the Good Thing is not what Faith is asking for. This illustrates that Faith’s belief in the existence of a permanent, perfect “good” thing causes her to be entrapped by the same notion other people have—trying to chase after what they desire and escape from what they perceive as the bad or unsatisfying thing. Living her life this way, she loses her life in each present moment, searching for what has not come yet and failing

23. Ibid., 102.
24. Ibid., 102.
25. Ibid.
to accept life as it is now—filled with phenomena which sometimes are good or bad, satisfying or dissatisfying.

Indeed, the question of the existence of the permanent perfect Good Thing is settled early in the narrative. In the novel’s second chapter, Johnson offers his idea about the conditioned and unfixed nature of what people commonly regard as the Good Thing through the tale of Kujichagulia’s quest. As Byrd points out, the technique Johnson uses to induce his readers to question the existence of the Good Thing is a kind of “double-voiced discourse,” as labelled by Mikhail Bakhtin.26 Through this method Johnson conveys two messages (or more) through one discourse, as evidenced, for example, in a mythological tale about the Good Thing that the Swamp Woman tells Faith:

[…] Once, men knew their place and were loath to leave it: paradise. Do ya hear me? Paradise. […] They had no nectar, no ambrosia; what they had, child, was the Good Thing—the one thing so good that no greater good can be conceived. […] not just your Good Thing, but everybody’s Good Thing as it manifests itself in an infinity of forms.27

Here, the Swamp Woman’s description of the Good Thing has two interpretations. Firstly, one can observe that the place described by the Swamp Woman is full of happiness as if “Paradise”, but then the tale also implies the impossibility of the existence of such a perfect Good Thing. However, this is not the only meaning of the above passage. Through the werewitch’s voice saying that “it manifests itself in an infinity of forms,” Johnson also deploys the tale as a source to imply the meaning of the Good Thing—a formless entity which manifests itself in each present moment of one’s life.

26. Byrd, “Faith and the Good Thing: What Is the Nature of the Good?,” 18. In his analysis, Byrd views that Johnson employs the technique of “double-voiced discourse” which refers to the employment of one discourse to convey more than one meanings or expressions. This is to pin down his or her position among other by creating a dialogue with other philosophers or writers who propose different stances towards one same issue. Byrd applies this approach to explore Johnson’s concept of “whole sight” which is demonstrated through the dialogue among himself, Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Plato, and other philosophers in Faith and the Good Thing.

27. Johnson, Faith and the Good Thing, 43.
Johnson’s use of the tale comments upon existing beliefs about the nature of a static selfhood/identity. The Swamp Woman explains:

Folks fancied that the gods put those forms of the Good Thing in the world. Now you can say men put them there—through dreaming, through some ancient need for order and certainty, and gave the gods credit, fooling themselves [Italic is mine].

As evidenced, the word “fancied” indicates that the belief in gods creating or controlling the Good Thing is false. The implication in this statement is emphasized even more strongly with the werewitch’s elaboration that the Good Thing, which is permanently good, exists only to serve people’s desires for “order and certainty.” Through this, one can see two purposes behind the application of the African folklore in the novel. Firstly, Johnson uses it as a method to explore his idea that the static, fixed self is illusion. Secondly, as Gary Storhoff indicates, the way Johnson employs the folklore to serve his philosophical purpose shows that his work can contribute other meaningful benefits, more than just to “satisfy the needs of a white readership” who wants to grasp “an essential black experience.” Therefore, instead of highlighting the African American protagonist’s predicaments (which might be viewed as an advocacy of an essential black experience), Johnson stresses the importance of an interrogation of an individual’s experience through the process in which Faith discovers the nature of the Good Thing. This is to illustrate the nature of an African American self which shares the characteristics of the personal self and the Self.

The Certainty of Uncertainty and the Manifestations of the Good Thing

To put it simply, in Faith and the Good Thing Johnson presents a dependent and changeable African American self through Faith’s discovery of the certainty of uncertainty by means of the manifestations of the three common characteristics of

28. The idea of the static self, as Johnson remarks in an interview (1987), is apparently found in naturalistic novels and other experimental novels which his predecessors like Richard Wright, Jean Toomer, and Ralph Ellison have applied in their novels. To Johnson, though these writers attempt to use different techniques in narrating their novels unique, the idea of a static and fixed racial identity causes the African American protagonists in their novels to be perceived as only victims.

29. Johnson, Faith and the Good Thing, 43.

existence. These three aspects of existence are: impermanence, conflicts and pressure, and the state of non-Self (this is the state one will only be able to understand when he or she comprehends the natural law of inter-dependent origination as discussed in Chapter One). Based on the explanation of that law, the Buddha points out that all beings are non-Self because their existence of the self depends upon others. Thus each of them are empty of an intrinsic defined self. The idea is that the existence of all beings at each moment in the current of time are uncertain and impermanent. Because they change according to their causal factors, they may rise or fade away. This condition makes it impossible to find a complete and perfect static thing. As a result, whoever does not understand this and becomes attached to the idea of obtaining a complete static happiness ends up with suffering (dukkha). This is rooted in his/her misconception of the Self. This condition is referred to as dukkhatā (conflict and pressure), the second characteristic of existence. And because of the two first characteristics of existence, nothing can be regarded as the Self but as the non-Self. From the Buddhist perspective, acknowledging all of these characteristics in all beings is a way to get beyond binary ideas of self.

Aware of this idea of existence, Johnson implicitly points out that Faith’s illusory belief in the Good Thing is the root cause of her suffering and her feeling of restlessness. Like other people, Faith’s hope to find the “one true Good Thing” generates cravings which come from her misconceptions of the Self. This kind of illusion is explicated by the Buddha’s philosophical postulation about humankind’s cravings:

We like things to be permanent, lasting, reliable, happy, controllable, and belonging to us. Because of such longings, we tend to look on the world as if it were like this, in spite of the fact that we are repeatedly reminded it is not. We are good at ignoring realities: spiritual ignorance. Thus arise what are called the “inversions” (vipallāsa; Skt viparyāsa) of mind, of perception or view: looking on what is impermanent as if it were permanent; looking on what is dukkha as if

it were happiness, or happiness-inducing; looking on what is not a permanent I/Self or its possession as if it were one (AN.II.52).

This excerpt from the Pali Canon (Tipitaka) [Aṅguttara Nikāya, volumn II, page 52] explains how a “wrong” view (diṭṭhi) ignites cravings (tanḥā) for things which are permanent, but which do not exist and, therefore, cause suffering. Based on this theory, the novel presents Faith as a person who transforms from a girl with “spiritual ignorance” to an enlightened werewitch.

Johnson demonstrates the above idea about impermanence through Faith’s various reminders about the impermanent nature of beings during the process which culminate in an epiphanic moment. The first description of Faith’s sentiment about the three characteristics of existence appears after Lavidia is dead when she looks around the farmhouse and unknowingly perceives the impermanence of things. Through the narrator’s voice, Faith’s perceptive experience is described:

Without her [Lavidia] the kitchen, the house, the world beyond fell apart. […] Faith felt her answer emerge from the contours of these objects: none of them was for her; they belonged, related to no one. Even Lavidia, perhaps, had not made them her own, because—with her death—they seemed suddenly freed to be as they were. Empty things, cold, without quality, distant. Without order—it was evident—there could be no life, no sense to things, no way to awake in the stillness of morning and move from the day to and through the terror of evening time.

As evidenced here, the sense of separation here defines Faith’s first epiphanic moment. Through this scene, Johnson illustrates that the idea about the state of the “Self” which is interdependent upon the existence of other beings: “[w]ithout her [Lavidia] the kitchen, the house, the world beyond fell apart.” Faith’s realization that the state of the Self which a person clings to and believes to be something emerge when they are related to other things in order. Without such order, things on their own are meaningless or non-Self, Faith thinks that things in the house and kitchen are freed from the existence of her mother. They become “[e]mpty things, cold, without quality, distant” and “there could be no life, no sense to things.”


33. Johnson, Faith and the Good Thing, 16.
Furthermore, Faith also applies this sentiment with the idea of her own self and identity. She thinks:

The unreality of life without Lavidia melted even the gloss of permanence she felt enveloped her life. No longer was she Faith, only child of Todd and Lavidia Cross, no longer was what she believed herself to be: only a self-conscious pressure drifting about the empty, changing, charged-with-otherness kitchen, drifting through a cold space filled with shadows.  

Here, Lavidia’s death becomes a stimulus to Faith’s realization of the false idea of permanence which she used to cling to. Through this scene, Johnson illustrates the Buddhist idea of the three common characteristics of things. Faith begins to be aware that she used to identify her own self and her personal identity by familial bondage. However, Faith’s realization is not yet evidenced at this moment of life when she has not enough direct experience of impermanence. As such, the narrator explains her feeling that without the physical presence of her parents, she is pressured by manifestations of uncertainty, a consequence of the natural law of interdependence.

However, though Johnson conveys life as a non-Self because it is subject to changes and interdependent with other beings, life is not equivalent to nothingness. Instead, he seems to propose that what happens at each present moment of life designates its consequence through Faith’s thought of the interconnectedness of life in each moment. As life is not detachable from time (this idea is also presented by Ruth Ozeki’s A Tale for the Time Being in Chapter One), the issue about time is figuratively described through the narrator’s explanation about Faith’s sentiment that: “[t]ime was suspended, and tomorrow took its true form as illusion. Only the present was immediate and everywhere [...]” This shows that Faith at once realizes that the most precious moment of life is not in the future which is always suspended but it is at each present moment. Nevertheless, to her, Lavidia’s deathbed instruction that Faith has to get herself a Good Thing is the most significant instruction. Thus, despite the encounter

34. Ibid., 16–17.
35. Ibid., 24.
36. Ibid., 14–15.
with impermanence in life she has faced, Faith carries on in her quest for the “one true Good Thing”.

This same topic about time is also discussed in relation to the existence of the static Good Thing which all characters in the novel search for. One significant conversation about this is the one between Arnold T. Tippis and Faith. Tippis forces Faith to think about past and present time. His mention of the interconnectedness in beings’ selves causes Faith to interrogate her own ideas about permanence and impermanence, and about the interconnectedness in things. Tippis says, “[y]our every past action and thought have made you what you are. Am I right or wrong?” This forces Faith to contemplate the possibility and impossibility of the Good Thing to be in the world:

His words troubled Faith. The past, remote and distorted by mercy of waning memories, had the terrible power to be present at all times in its effects: this was true. It was some kind of law. […] Everything includes the Good Thing, seemed to hinge on it. […] Each event would weigh you down, alter you, send you through endless changes. You were in bondage.37

To relate the matter of the law of time with the existence of the Good Thing, Faith logically decodes Tippis’s theory in order to ascertain some fact about the Good Thing. To Faith, the idea about the interconnected effects of each event in time makes sense. Though the past is “remote and distorted by mercy of waning memories,” Faith knows that it does have effect on the present moment. She even regards it as a law of nature and realizes that all beings, including the Good Thing, her own self and memories of the past, will never be the same but continuously change through the flow of time.

Nevertheless, with a hope to see the possibility that the “one true Good Thing” will exist, Faith tries looking at this issue from another angle. She further contemplates:

And the other way?—could you be brand-new each instant, remade by the power of either your own hand or magical thoughts? She turned it over and over: the Good Thing, if it could be at all, if it was indeed the truly unique good thing, had to be in the second way, above and beyond the wastepaper basket of the past; but didn’t that imply that it, being so aloft, so absolute, was not really in the world—that the slim

37. Ibid., 78.
line between perfection and impossibility was no distinction at all? It was all confusing.\(^{38}\)

This quotation shows Faith’s logical understanding about the existence of the Good Thing. Through her logic, if the Good Thing truly exists, it must be “remade by power of either your own hand or magical thoughts.”\(^ {39}\) This means that it must be in one’s own control instead of arising and passing away according to other factors. Therefore, according to this logic, the Good Thing, which is an absolutely perfect good as Faith expects to find, never exists. Despite this reasoning Faith, as her name suggests, keeps her strong faith in the Good Thing and continues her quest.

Ostensibly, Faith’s and Tippis’s logic seems to make sense. However, what hinders them from seeing the way to liberate themselves from the bondage of the past and future is their inability to see the non-Self state of beings. Even though they understand the ceaseless changes of being in the flow of time, they fail to fathom that even the concept of the interconnected effects of the past on the present is also a kind of being. And those effects are also impermanent and can cause dukkha if a person clings to that concept. Through the explanation of Faith’s logic about the influence of time and impermanence, Faith seems to see the common characteristics of time as a being (a being here refers to an existence of a thing). Unfortunately, the fact is that Faith only sees one thing while she is blinded by another thing. She detaches from the notion of “permanence” as a characteristic of life, as represented by time, but changes to attach to the idea that the past is a static Self. Though she knows that “the past” will be affected and “distorted by mercy of waning memories,” she still clings to the notion of a static Self of the past. All of this come from her misunderstanding of the common characteristics of all things.

**The Conjuror and the Discovery of the Miracle of Each Moment in Life**

In fact, that Faith unknowingly overlooks the three characteristics of existence she has directly experienced in her life has an implication. Through this Johnson conveys that one’s direct experience and reflection on life to see all (not some) of the

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 79.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 79.
three characteristics is most important. This is also a way to underline that clinging onto a false belief of static selfhood can delay a person’s discovery of the truth about the existence of all beings. While Faith clings to her belief in the existence of “one true Good Thing,” she has an opportunity to converse with Dr. Richard M. Barrett, who discovers that the Good Thing which he and Faith look for is an illusion. Compared with Faith, Barrett is a veteran quester. In his case, his loss of all he holds dear in life brings enlightenment. Before he dies, he wants to convey all lessons he has learned to Faith, but his intention fails. Johnson creates this character to demonstrate that the Good Thing is in the here and now. At the same time, he wishes to use Faith’s inability to understand Barrett’s message to underline that an individual will be able to grasp those lessons only through one’s own reflection upon his/her direct experience.

Johnson stresses that a person can enjoy the real Good Thing by ceasing to long for things in the past or in the future and by paying attention to what is happening in each present moment. This is implied through Barrett’s realization that he has chased after the great Good Thing for all his life. Concerning this idea, Barrett tells Faith that he used to believe:

[T]here had to be a greater good thing than any man could conceive […] because part of good is being actual. […] And I nurtured that tenuous belief all my life, child. Everything paled beside it. I could be enjoying myself immensely—I could be drunk—literally—with joy, in the middle of sex, but suddenly I’d become conscious of myself. I’d sober up immediately […] something in my head would say, ‘Is this really the greatest good?’ And once you’ve asked that, you’ve ruined it. You’ve destroyed that particular joy with questioning. […] Years later, after I’d experimented with everything under the sun, settled down, married, and began teaching at Princeton, the questions still persisted: is this it?40

Barrett’s story suggests that an individual’s view of the world and being renders the method which he or she use to pursue the Good Thing. Barrett, instead of achieving his goal, contains an insatiable desire for what he believes to be a happiness-inducing thing. His attempts to look for a perfect Good Thing render his mission unachievable, causing only disappointment and the loss of his valuable moments of life. What he discovers is that the real Good Thing disappears immediately after he asks whether the joyful thing

40. Ibid., 114.
in front of him is the great Good Thing he has been looking for. He relates his experiences in the hope that they might prevent Faith from the same fate but Faith does not understand until she experiences it herself.

While demonstrating the importance of one’s own experience to gain wisdom through Faith’s spiritual journey, Johnson repeatedly inserts messages which underline that the real Good Thing is not one absolute entity but actually manifest in indefinite forms. This idea is first conveyed by the Swamp Woman and stressed again when Faith looks at the Swamp Woman’s picture drawn by Alpha Omega Jones. Looking at the picture, Faith senses that the Swamp Woman tells her:

The good things were the things of the moment, the things that had been felt and tasted and touched in the past, and might be tasted still. Kujichagulia should have stayed in the village of mountain vales. He should have loved and worked and lived to feel the Good Thing in its small reflection. He might have lived longer that way.41

Here, Johnson reveals the real meaning of the Good Thing and the analogous implication of the narrative of Kujichagulia. The real Good Thing pertains to the things which a person experiences in every present moment of their life. Barrett’s and Faith’s lives move in the same direction as that of Kujichagulia. With their “wrong” view of life, they focus on their pursuit of a perfect great Good Thing, which causes them to miss all the actual good things in their lives. Indeed, this point is elaborated in detail when Faith meets Barrett and is symbolized by his Doomsday Book.

The empty Doomsday Book which Barrett leaves with Faith before he dies is the symbol of life’s condition of non-Self. The narrator describes that:

[…] Faith saw that each of the hundred pages of the black-bound, dog-eared Doomsday Book was, from up to bottom, blank, as empty as she imagined the world to be, and by virtue of this a sort of screen onto which her thoughts spread out like an oil slick on the surface of the sea. She smiled to herself and stared at the pages as though they actually held words, images. They did, but only as long as she conjured them there.42

41. Ibid., 191–92.
42. Ibid., 119.
Barrett’s *Doomsday Book* shows us life wherein each moment arises and fades away and becomes the past. Through this process, not one moment of life can be captured. Each moment is affected by changes in other causal constituents again and again. Perhaps achieving this understanding, Barrett leaves every page of his diary blank. And perhaps the reason he leaves the pages empty is for Faith to learn one day that as soon as one thing happens it exists just for a moment and then changes. This is to underline that an individual’s ability to “conjure” or to appreciate each moment of life is important.

Indeed, the importance of one’s ability to conjure is emphasized throughout the story. Johnson has Faith learn how to be awakened from the illusion of the Good Thing which is held by other unsuccessful questers in the novel. At the end of the novel, Johnson conveys this message through Faith’s symbolic actions. Faith’s decision to become a conjurer reborn as a new Swamp Woman in the last section of the story is the indication of her epiphanic moment. At the Swamp Woman’s place lies Johnson’s proposed idea about how an individual can discover the “real” Good Thing, or the insight into the nature of life. In this scene, Johnson implies his proposed idea about how to live one’s live through the old Swamp Woman’s voice when she tells Faith that:

> Ya take every path: the oracle’s, the teacher’s, the artist’s, and even the path of the common fool, and ya keep learn a li’l bit from each one. That’s life, girlie. Ya keep right on steppin’ and pickn’ up the pieces until ya gets the whole thing—the Good Thing. As for me, werewitchin’ is pretty played out.43

Through this, the Swamp Woman’s words highlight how an individual’s self-exploration and reflection upon one’s own experience is a must if he or she wishes to understand “the whole thing—the Good Thing”. The ability to see the “whole thing” refers to an individual’s ability to appreciate one’s own experience which is accumulatively revealed at each moment without attaching entirely to a single judgement. This is because clinging to a single judgement is equivalent to you losing your ability to transcend binary views. As the Swamp Women explains to Faith: “[…]

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43. Ibid., 228.
‘cause the Good Thing’s spontaneous; it’s absolutely nothin’, but particularly it’s everythin’.”

Faith’s transformation indicates her acceptance and understanding of the condition of non-Self after she gains first-hand experiences from her own unsuccessful quest for a static Good Thing. At this point, Johnson appoints Faith the new conjurer, underlining his idea that everyone has many good things to be discovered in life if they can break through their own illusions. He even suggests that if an individual achieves the same thing as Faith, the wisdom which Faith gains from her experiences will enable him/her to see alternative ways to get through the predicaments of life. This is implied at the end of the novel that “[…] what good things lie in a serpent’s way of being-in-the-world? Someday she would have to try that one too.”

As I have discussed above, my reading of Faith’s perceptive experience suggests that although Faith has conversed and discussed the meaning of the Good Thing with a variety of questers, what contributes to her disillusionment and enlightenment is her own life experience. By focusing on the protagonist’s perspective on beings, Johnson’s belief in the magnitude of an individual’s way to view the world is explicit. He applies the Buddhist theory of three common characteristics of existence in *Faith and the Good Thing* in order to point out that the possibility to succeed or fail in finding good things in life depends upon one’s “right” view on the self. As in his other novels, he carries on suggesting that *dukkha* stems from views on binary oppositions—particularly on race and the dichotomy between good and bad. Based upon this proposal, he offers a potential way for an individual to liberate himself or herself from those views. In doing so, he suggests two significant ideas. First, how an understanding of the true nature of beings—including the Self, the personal identity, the racial self, and life as beings—will contribute to an individual’s awakened mind. Second, faith with the wisdom which an individual has to learn from accumulative experience of each moment of life is more important than faith without wisdom.

44. Ibid., 234.

45. Ibid., 238.
Johnson often remarks in his interviews that life which defines one’s self, for him, is process. That is why he concludes that “life is a verb not a noun.”46 This does not mean that he wishes to tell us that one must attach to that idea and look at life as a process. On the contrary, as is evident in the novel, he means that having a “whole sight” of life refers to an individual appreciating each moment in life and enjoying what is happening in the here and now. And this idea is behind the song which the Swamp Woman sings after she meets Faith for the first time: “If you find what’s Good/ You’d better knocked on wood/ You’d better hold it fast/ ‘Cause it might not last—/ You’d better squeeze it tight/ And try to eat it all/ ‘Cause it’ll soon take flight/ Like a—pterodactyl! Hee hee!”47 Through this song, Johnson emphasizes that each present moment as a sentient being is important because it continuously arises and then disperses in the flow and flux of time.

In the following section of this chapter, Ruth Ozeki’s *The Face: A Time Code* is selected as another exemplary demonstration of how Buddhist American writers apply his or her Buddhist perspective on the notion of self as a means for the protagonist to negotiate her personal and racial identities. Like the concept of the self in Johnson’s *Faith and the Good Thing*, the concept of the self in Ozeki’s *The Face* is approached with the Buddhist theory of the three common characteristics of existence. Neither of the fictions overlook the issues of marginalization, objectivization or social otherness. Rather, these issues are deployed as the stimuli to the main characters’ quests for the static self which they, at first, believe that will lead them to inner peace or the liberation from the feeling of a lack of self. In the above discussion, we have seen that Faith’s failure in the quest for a Good Thing is caused by her attachment to the misconception of it as a static perfect self. In the second part, we will look at Ruth, who experiments with the exploration of her own face in hoping for finding a hidden truth about her own self. Though these two stories are written in different times, contexts and techniques, the importance of an understanding of the natural condition of the self is at the heart of both texts. Both Johnson and Ozeki highlight the importance of the characters’ understanding of the interdependent existence of beings and the acceptance


47. Ibid., 66.
of impermanence through the application of the three characteristics of existence because they view them as a primary step to understand the self and transcend the dualistic views on race.

The Reflection of One’s Personal Self in The Face: A Time Code

In this part of the chapter, I approach Ruth Ozeki’s The Face: A Time Code (2016) as an autobiographical Japanese American text. The search for the self which is illustrated in the book is a common theme in ethnic American literature and no less so in Japanese American writings. Since the writings by the second-generation of Japanese American, the nisei, were first published outside Japanese communities in America in the mid-1950s, critics have observed that these writings, like ethnic American writing and women’s writing, have revolved around a quest for the self and identity. Despite the shared theme, I argue, The Face is distinctive from other Japanese American writings both in terms of the form and the suggested meaning of the self. The account of Ozeki’s reflection upon fragmented thoughts and experiences in the memoir conveys to us Ozeki’s new perception of her own self. The understanding of the self here is that Ozeki accepts herself as she really is, rather than seeking the approval of other Americans as in predecessors’ auto/biographies or memoirs. To demonstrate how the understanding of the self and identities Ozeki offers in this memoir is distinctive, I will begin the discussion with an overview of the convention of Japanese American auto/biographies or memoirs and their effects concerning the quest for selfhood in Ozeki’s predecessors’ books.

Elaine M. Kim points out that Japanese American autobiographical writings concern the protagonist’s desire for acceptance from white Americans. As such, the


49. This point is also discussed in Helena Grice, “Introduction,” in Negotiating Identities: An Introduction to Asian American Women’s Writing (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 7.
common conflict in Japanese American writings, starting with Monic Sone’s *Nisei Daughter* (1953), mainly concerns the protagonist’s conflicted identity between Japanese-ness and American-ness.\(^{50}\) In terms of the convention of Japanese American auto/biographies or memoirs, each narrative starts with the protagonist’s childhood, then is chronologically followed by details about the protagonist’s experiences concerning familial or social pressure caused by racism or gender oppression. Typically, such narratives end up with the protagonist’s discovery of his or her “multiplicity” and the acceptance of his or her Japanese American identity.\(^{51}\) However, this closure is still a controversial issue in Japanese American literature.

Aki Uchida addresses this issue of the protagonist’s discovery of multiplicity as controversial and problematic. Uchida suggests that though such closure is presented as a complete process of the self-discovery which contributes to the end of the protagonist’s feeling of restlessness, such a picture of the complete process does not reflect a realistic nature of the self because, she believes, it has to be an unfinished process. To delineate this point, Uchida examines the outcome of the quest for identity in Monica Sone’s memoir *Nisei Daughter* to illustrate her concerns about the limited effects of the traditional autobiographical narrative that:

> As a result, readers have tended to see the autobiographical writings of Japanese and other ethnic American women as stories of personal victories of “coming to terms with” or “discovering” who they “really” are often enduring and overcoming racial barriers and difficulties, rather than as critiques of the identity that the dominant culture imposes on them or as the unfinished process of newly creating who they are.\(^{52}\)

Through this, Uchida implies that the reader is so engrossed with the protagonist’s “discovery” of the “real” self that the narrative is considered a success. Ending like this, the narrative fails to function as a voice to resist the dominant culture in America.

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50. In the post-war period, Monic Sone’s *Nisei Daughter* (1953) was one of the well-received auto/biographical books in North America. Other auto/biographical books after *Nisei Daughter* are, for example, Daniel Inouye and Lawrence Elliott’s *Journey to Washington* (1967), Jim Yoshida and Bill Hosokawa’s *The Two Worlds of Jim Yoshida* (1972), Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston’s *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973).


52. Uchida, 127.
because it lacks “the critiques” pertaining to the notion of American identity and the unique identity created by an individual character which are more crucial. Uchida’s comments are reasonable. This kind of closure conveys that the protagonist’s discovery of the two sides of his or her racial identities is merely the consequence of the process in which the protagonist learns to accept the identities imposed by the American hegemony rather than the discovery of a way to liberation from the trap of the East Asian stereotypes.

Uchida’s stance suggests that the protagonist’s discovery of his or her “multiplicity” is totally different from the acceptance of pluralism. The discovery of one’s personal self, as mentioned in Uchida’s article, can be inferred as the writer’s advocacy of a racial discourse imposed by the non-Asian American. What is more, it stresses the dichotomy between Asian-ness and American-ness in the Japanese American subject. In fact, the concern about the strategy to resist the American hegemony has been recognized by Kim since 1982. Kim’s research on Asian American literature points out that the narratives in Japanese American autobiographies since the mid-1950s present to us “the process of self-negation.” As Uchida accentuates, this is worse than the lack of self-constructed identities. Kim explains that the process “had been continuing at an accelerated and relentless pace for twenty years” since *Nisei Daughter.* Furthermore, she indicates the problematic point in Japanese American writings that “[t]he result, […], is the almost complete disappearance of the self. The more complete the process of self-negation, the more likely that the autobiography will be hailed as a “success story.”

In regard to the above issue, in my view the words “discovery” of the hidden self or “multiplicity” are not problematic in themselves. What is important is not “discovering” or “construction” of new or hidden selves, it is a matter of understanding the self, arriving at an ontological understanding of the Self stripped of the accoutrements of national identity, familial identity, etc. If the terms are problematic, it is because the narratives which illuminate those ideas insinuate the presence of the


54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.
protagonists’ dualistic or binary views on the notion of self. A dualistic view on the matter of race stems from a belief in the static self and identities, which lead to an impasse in the quest for the self.

Anthony Elliott suggests that the self is dependent on many factors. He notes that “[o]ne key characteristic of the self that emerges from all this [all of the stances about the self put forward by other social theorists] is that selfhood is personally created, interpretatively elaborated, and interpersonally constructed.” In other words, Elliott’s explanation suggests that in fact the self is selfless because it lacks a fixed form or a set of essential characteristics. This idea directly contrasts with the notion of a static or fixed self which was presented in early Japanese American autobiographies and memoirs of the post-war period. Elliott also notes that the notion of the static self seems to imply that identities can be melted into one or linked with “other” selves/identities in the name of pluralism.

Another downside of the notion of a static self is identified by Uchida in her analysis of Japanese American women’s identities. She suggests that the belief in essentialism pertaining to Japanese American women’s identities causes their identities to be “seen as reducible to either being ‘Japanese women’ or ‘American women’.” Subsequently, for Uchida, that mind-set forces the Japanese American woman in the texts to choose one and reject the other. As a result, Uchida points out, “their choice still marginalizes them.” As such, when considering Elliot’s theory and Uchida’s views on the notion of self, what should be expected in the ethnic American literature which focuses on the theme of the selfhood is the manifestation of an unfinished process of the transformative personal self and identity.

**A Face-to-Face Experiment: the Strategy to Look into the Self**

In correspondence with the idea of the contingent and transformative self, Ozeki suggests through *The Face* that the existence of one’s personal self is contingent

58. Uchida, 124.
to an individual’s experience and contexts. As such, the memoir highlights that comprehending the constituents of the sense-of-self is crucial for a person to be free from the suffering which is caused by dualistic views on the self and identities. In order to present this idea, an examination of the emergence of identities and of the process of grasping the nature of the self is presented as a fundamental step for Ozeki to gain insight into the existence of her present self. This is the process in which the self can be looked at through a non-dualistic view. This Zen-inspired memoir, the record of a three-hour experiment of staring at the reflection of Ozeki’s own face, shows that the identification of one’s self is an unfinished process because it is not a process that can be controlled by one’s self. It presents an exploration of the author and her various identities throughout her life in the United States. To associate the idea of the self, human experience, and time as a manifestation of interdependent nature and the three characteristics of existence of the narrator’s personal self and identity, Ozeki presents the narrative by offering what she calls a “time code” to chronologically indicate each moment of her thought. All of this is so she can understand the ontology of her present self.

In terms of its content, each lineament of Ozeki’s face conjures up, for example, a childhood game, the lessons of Noh mask making, the process of having her portrait photograph taken, and various memories about the relationships between Ozeki and her parents. These experiences concern Ozeki’s past perceptions on her ethnic, professional and American identities, aiming towards an insight into her personal self. This opportunity to revisit her past identities allows her to see that actually she has had many versions of the self, not just a static one. Not only are the reports of her thoughts presented, Ozeki also inserts short essays discussing ideas raised through the revisiting of her experiences. The Zen influence on her ideas manifests through key words which are derived from Zen riddles (koan). Some of them are, for example, “an original face”, “silence”, and “face-to-face”. In doing so, she contemplates the impermanent characteristics of life as manifested through her memories and attitudes towards things at different ages. Alongside the Zen perspectives on the self, Ozeki incorporates American perspectives on the individual self and identity and this provokes a discussion pertaining to the definition of individualism. This approach serves as a means for her to understand her personal self against the dominant American cultural values bound up with individualism with which she was raised.
The aim of this autobiographical book, as stated by Ozeki, differs from those implied in her predecessors’ texts about the protagonists’ identities. At the beginning of the memoir, Ozeki states that the objective of the experiment is to discover what is hidden within her face. In “experiment” she begins the memoir with an overarching question regarding the experiment, stating that the aim of the experiment is “…not looking for liberation or enlightenment” but she is “just trying to write this essay about my [her] face.” The “face” she mentions here implies two layers of meaning: the literal meaning of it as Ozeki’s face and the figurative meaning which refers to her “true self.” In this case, the “true self” which is usually mentioned in Zen texts refers to two kinds of self. First, in terms of philosophy, it is the Self as a being which must be examined ontologically. Secondly, psychologically speaking, it is the self which a person can identify through his or her sense-of-self. With these two definitions of the “true self,” this essay will investigate what Ozeki discovers about the existence of her self and about her self-identity which depends upon her sense-of-self.

Unlike many previous Japanese American autobiographical texts which primarily illustrate the notion of self and identity within racial and gender contexts and some of which are in search of the construction of self, The Face emphasizes Ozeki’s understanding of the Self in relation to her own self at a philosophical level. As such, Ozeki’s memoir does not function merely as “a space for self-articulation and representation” to the non-Asian American reader as many other Asian American writings arguably do. Rather, Ozeki’s reflection on her experiences and thoughts during the experiment paves the way for her to grapple with causal elements such as the facets of her identities which are combined to formulate the existence of her current self. To achieve this objective, the memoir illustrates the non-essentialist idea of the self. It begins to challenge the essentialist idea of self and identity by raising the ontological and epistemological questions which are rarely found in other Japanese-American auto/biographical writings.


As Helena Grice delineates, the matter of negotiating identities “is not just a case of locating one identity, or resolving a conflict between identities, but is a continual quest for answers to the question ‘Who am I?’” It is true that negotiating one’s identities is always an unfinished job. A person is naturally required to do it again and again with every new experience. In *The Face*, Ozeki also conveys this message, so the “continual quest for answers to the question ‘Who am I?’” appears as part of its main focus. However, I propose that Ozeki suggests that the way to look at this question must be to look beyond the question “Who am I?” One must undertake a study of the self, take an ontological approach to the question. Therefore, instead of the question “Who am I?,” the question should be “What is the self?” Ozeki starts finding the answer to the question “What is the self?” by delving into such questions as “Does the self exist?” and “How does it exist?” These essential ontological questions must be answered because if the self does not exist, “I” as we perceive it does not exist. If this is so, the question “Who am I?” is invalid. In correspondence with this logic, Ozeki prioritizes the understanding of the self, which includes the questions as to “what the nature of the self is” and “whether the self exists,” before the question “Who am I?” Through this, she discovers a new way to perceive her own self and self-identity which differs from the dualistic views on identities and the self which she has absorbed from mainstream America ideals since she was young. In *The Face*, while Ozeki is contemplating her different “faces,” she draws upon this Buddhist theory of the self as an approach to look deeply into her own self by focusing on the philosophy of impermanence.

**The Association of a Face, Time, and the Transformation of the Self**

To explain the unfamiliar perception of the self which is perceived through the Buddhist philosophy of impermanence, Ozeki adopts the concept of the “time battery” from an article about an experimental teaching method written by Jennifer L. Roberts. This concept originates with an art historian, David Joselit, who calls paintings “time

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62. Jennifer L. Roberts is a Harvard Professor of History of Arts and Architecture. She has applied David Joselit’s idea of understanding paintings as “time batteries” in her taught courses.
batteries.” If Joselit regards paintings as “time batteries” because of the human experience hidden in them, Ozeki views her face and the artwork as similar. In regard to this point, she confesses that at first she does not see how her face can be compared with a work of art but “…after reading Roberts’s article, it occurred to me that a face is a time battery, too.” Roberts explains that a three-hour experiment on looking at John Singleton Copley’s *A Boy with A Flying Squirrel*, painted in 1765, made her realize that when a person has seen something it does not mean that person has truly “seen”. “Seen” in this case refers to understanding. To understand a piece of art, a person needs to take time to truly perceive it and see the details and meanings locked inside it. These details and meanings which are locked inside are time batteries.

Like the “time batteries” in the work of art, Ozeki conveys through this memoir that an individual’s experiences in their life are “time batteries.” In *The Face*, Ozeki believes that the meditative observation of her face will lead to the revelation of one’s “original face” through the “exorbitant stockpile of temporal experience” in a person’s life. The words “time battery” connote the idea about the associations between “the self”, “life”, “time”, and “battery.” The implication is that “the self” and “life” which are abstract beings never exist by themselves if without “human experience,” which is always increasing according to the flow of “time”. To communicate this implication to her readers, Ozeki makes the abstract beings, the self and life, more concrete by having them represented by a face. Thus, drawing on Roberts’s work she compares the face with a “time battery”.

For Ozeki, the face is a manifestation of the temporally evolving self and life of an individual for whom existence depends upon human experience and time. Also, in terms of the representation of the procedures of her experiment, she illustrates the flow of her thoughts at each moment of the three hours by utilizing the time code as indicators. Ozeki indicates the association between the “time battery” concept and her assumption about the personal self by adapting the Zen Buddhist concepts of “original


face” to refer to an individual self, instead of the metaphysical self as it is conventionally mentioned in Zen doctrinal texts. Nevertheless, this concept of the “original face” is not the only one Ozeki borrows from other sources. She also adopts varying ideas such as the Zen Buddhist doctrines found in Noh performance and mask making to help make philosophical ideas about the self and identity more accessible to the reader.

Published as part of a series by Restless Books, The Face was commissioned and edited by Joshua Ellison who revealed that he invited diverse writers such as Tash Aw, Chris Abani, and Ozeki and he gave them a quotation by Jorge Luis Borges as an inspiration. The quotation is as follows:

As the years go by, he [a writer] peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face.66

For Ozeki, this quotation conjured up the question as to what the face reveals. This resulted in the creation of The Face. She explains the background to the memoir as the idea of the face revealing one’s self and one’s experience; this is associated with the study of the self which is at the heart of Zen Buddhism. Through this understanding, Ozeki reinterprets the phrase “face-to-face transmission,” one of the tenets of Zen to gain (Buddhist) enlightenment (the state of ultimate liberation from dukkha).

Within the Zen tradition, “face-to-face transmission” refers to the belief that a person can attain the state of ultimate liberation only through one’s own direct experience which he or she gains from deeply looking into one’s own self. Such wisdom, yielded by one’s own practice, cannot be mediated through language. In Zen tradition, language functions merely as a device, in the form of koan (Zen riddles), in driving the practitioner to face his or her true self, the self which manifests itself without the influence of its owner’s presuppositions, logical thinking, or dualistic views. Regarding this point, Thich Nhat Hanh, a world-renowned Zen master, explains the way to attain Buddhist enlightenment as follows: “[…] the Buddha made it known

from the beginning that this awakening, this understanding [the wisdom to liberate a person from dukkha], can only be acquired by the practice of the “Way” and not by studies or speculation. Liberation, in Buddhism, comes about through understanding and not by grace or merit.”67 This is the original meaning of the face-to-face transmission which focuses on the attainment of spiritual liberation from dukkha.

Ozeki follows Hanh’s skepticism about study and speculation as a means to enlightenment. She notes:

Face-to-face transmission is an essential part of Zen and the Zen lineage. It points to an understanding that can’t be taken from books and can’t be conveyed through words. It’s an understanding that can only emerge in the intimacy of the face-to-face meeting between student and teacher, and it’s been passed down this way since the time of the Buddha.68

Ozeki uses the literal meaning of Zen’s “face-to-face transmission” to initiate the face-to-face experiment in order to make it more concrete for her readers. She presents the “face-to-face” experiment in which she as the narrator faces her own reflection in the mirror to offer the reader an opportunity to see what a person’s face can reveal to its owner. Through this method, Ozeki notes that “[t]he observation experiment, like meditation, has had the effect of waking me up to things that I ordinarily would not notice or would have ignored.”69

As a Zen-inspired text, the memoir highlights the importance of each present moment which arises then immediately declines because it is naturally replaced with other thoughts in the next moment. If thought is transmuted, changed, evolved, so is a person’s self. The process of this realization can be demonstrated in two major steps. Firstly, her face brings her back to see the source of her lifelong suffering which has been instilled in her mind since her childhood. Through this, she discovers that, as a child, the pressure of predominant American values has made her unknowingly absorb a one-sided idea of American individualism, which brings her into conflict with two

69. Ozeki, 134.
aspects of her identity. Secondly, the encounter implicitly provokes the question as to what individualism means, whether identities can be constructed, and whether static identities exist or not. I observe that this step of the exploration allows Ozeki to fully penetrate the set of attributes which shape her own self. While her face brings her to look back to her past, Ozeki experiences many versions of her own self and metaphorically refers to them as “faces” and this leads to her contemplation of impermanence as one of the three common characteristics of the self as a being. Thirdly, the previous two steps Ozeki has passed during the experiment contribute to the awakening of a new self within her mundane life.

**Time Decoding: Differentiating the Mask from the True Face**

The first observation of her mundane life through the impermanence characteristic of life starts with Ozeki’s reactions to her face as a physical representation of her self in the mirror at different ages. In the initial part of the memoir, Ozeki’s acknowledgement of the changes in her reactions to her face raises questions as to what the self constitutes. The memoir suggests that an individual’s self depends on his or her sense-of-self (this idea can be found in other texts about the self and identity). This theory of the relation between the self and the sense-of-self is attested by Ozeki’s experience in the experiment. For example, she recalls that:

> My relationship with my reflection has changed over the years. As a young child, I was indifferent to my reflected self. As I grew a bit older, I turned shy and avoided my reflection, but by the time I was a teenager, I was spending lavish amounts of time in front of mirrors [...].

This quotation suggests that Ozeki’s self-described physical changes at different ages show the signs of impermanence and her reactions suggest a transition in her sense-of-self. The acknowledgment of these changes in Ozeki’s sense-of-self reveals to her the transformable nature of the self which depends on new experiences gained “over the years.” As her first observation mentioned in the memoir, this awakening to the transformable nature of her sense-of-self invokes Ozeki’s thought about impermanence as a characteristic of beings.

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70. Ozeki, 13.
With the realization of the impermanent sense-of-self in mind, when Ozeki carries on examining her face, the identity conflict that has been stirred within her becomes clearer. She can see for the first time that the cause of her identity conflict arises from her attachment to the dichotomy between the Asian identity imposed by dominant American values of the post-war period and the personal identity she wishes to have. That conflict between these two identities leaves her with a fractured sense-of-self. In discussing this point, she delves into her own self and articulates what she learns from revisiting her memories. She refers to her past selves as “masks” and “faces.”

Ozeki refers to the self which resulted from conformity with the stereotype of Asian women as a “mask.” This suggests that the stereotype of Asian women which Americans impose on Chinese and Japanese immigrants was the attribute she wanted to suppress when she was young. On the contrary to her Asian characteristics, Ozeki refers to other dimensions of her own self or self-identities as “faces.” Regarding the negative perception of her Asian self, Ozeki confesses that as a child:

I suspect I also felt relieved and even grateful that as a diluted yellow person, the peril I represented was only half what I might be. And so, in order to align myself further with the hegemony and keep the bad words at bay, I raised my voice and joined the chorus [in a game while she was playing with her friends], pulling my eyes out of shape and singing out Chinee… Japane….”

Here, Ozeki demonstrates the difficulty of being Asian in a predominantly Caucasian culture. She notes that she represented only a “diluted peril” in order to subtly undermine notion of Asian danger referring to the wartime phrase “the yellow peril.” Moreover, she joined in the games which mocked Asians’ enunciation and appearance in order to fit in with American culture more widely.

71. Ozeki, 25.

72. In this context, the phrase “the yellow peril” refers to harmful stereotypes of the East Asian conceived by the Anglo-Americans. The phrase has its root from the white American’s fear of the great expansion of Chinese immigrants in the United States around the late nineteenth century. Before the World War II, the phrase “yellow peril” started to connote the threat of the great number of Japanese immigrants. This is because the white Americans began to be aware that the Japanese immigrants, the first generation of the Japanese American or issei, might take over their lands. For detail of this matter, see William F. Wu, “Introduction,” in The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction 1850-1940 (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1982), 1–11; Elaine H. Kim, “Images of Asians in Anglo-American Literature,” in Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 3–4.
From the reflection upon herself, Ozeki’s comprehension of her childhood self shows a progress within her self-examination. From her current self’s perspective, she can identify that social pressures rooted in the context during the 1960s, her fragmented mentality as an Asian girl with identity conflict, and her choice of identity resulted in her childhood self. In terms of the social context, she illustrates that “[i]n [a] racially and ethnically segregated society like America in the 1950s and ’60s, there [was] no way to look at the face of a mixed-race person and not be immediately reminded of sex and difference.”73 She recalls how as a child she encountered racial discrimination. Subsequently, the young Ozeki believed that by suppressing her Asian-half and assimilating herself to the group she might “keep the bad words at bay.” Looking back at this experience from the perspective of a fifty-nine-year old woman, she articulates the reason why her sense of Asian American identity was influenced and assigned by forces outside of herself. She knows that, as an Asian American and as a woman, she felt doubly marginalized, by the white American’s cultural stereotypes at that time.

From 1905 to 1948, there were “antimiscegenation laws in force in California” stating that inter-marriage was illegal for the Japanese.74 Therefore, in the postwar period it is understandable that her Japanese-American looks were exotic and her identity even more obscure to white Americans and to herself. Ozeki’s remark that “a nondualistic understanding was not yet possible” shows her better understanding of what brought about the stereotypes of Asian identities.75 The pressure created by her Asian features was more intensified due to the inescapability of her Asian identity. The memoir suggests that the young Ozeki’s choice of identity undermines her own individuality as an Asian American woman. Instead of stressing her own individuality by embracing her difference from white Americans, Ozeki’s choice of identity inadvertently advocated essentializing Asian-ness. Concerning this matter, she tells us about her life experience in terms of the notion of self-identity that:

Growing up in Connecticut, I never thought of myself [as] half-white or half-American. White American was the default, so that half never needed to be articulated. White American was not comical or joke-worthy, and there was no need to point fingers at it.\textsuperscript{76}

Here, Ozeki implies that she had never spent much time thinking about her self-identity because, to her, “white American was the default.” Thus Ozeki notes that “[w]hen I was young, my half-Japanese face signified a self that was at odds with who I felt myself to be.”\textsuperscript{77} However, the denial of Ozeki’s Japanese identity does not determine her actual behaviour. She expresses her discomfort when American people, especially men, look at her as an Asian girl: “[m]y face was a surface onto which people, especially men, projected their ideas of race and sexuality, Asian-ness and femininity, ideas that had little or nothing to do with me.”\textsuperscript{78}

The contradictory selves which she had to choose entrapped her with fixed notions of identity. Compared with the fifty-nine-year-old Ozeki who has come to a better self-understanding, the young Ozeki fell into a situation in which she was forced by society to choose only one identity. The utter confusion about her self-identity manifests itself through Ozeki’s contradictory identities which are influenced by stereotypes of Asian women as perceived by American men. Regarding this matter, Ozeki tells us that:

I turned fourteen in 1970. The image of Asian girls as exotic, ageless, child sex objects was still very much a part of the post-World War II, post-Korean War, post-Vietnam War culture in America. These Asian wars had created a persistent sexual stereotype. Asian girls were Other, and men who might have refrained from having sex with a fourteen-year-old white girl who looked like their sister or daughter felt less inhibition with me. During my teenage years, I had several relationships with these older men who often held positions of power and authority and were supposed to be responsible for my well-being.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{76} Ozeki, 24.  
\textsuperscript{77} Ozeki, 69.  
\textsuperscript{78} Ozeki, 69.  
\textsuperscript{79} Ozeki, 70.
Her revelation of the historical context which influenced the image of Asian girls indicates her understanding of how collective identity was formed. Moreover, her explanation shows us Ozeki’s realization of what she had to encounter when she was a girl. Encountered as an Asian girls as “Other,” she is sexualized and considered in terms of her “foreignness”. Ozeki found she was forced in these situations to be an “Asian” rather than an “American” girl. The tone above shows Ozeki’s awareness of some American men’s negative and predatory attitudes toward Asian women. Nevertheless, it indicates that although Ozeki realized that she would be perceived as an “Other”, or even worse, as a sex object, she chose to conform to the stereotype. Through this, the fifty-nine-year-old critically indicates that as a young girl with limited experience of life, who was struggling to fit into American society, social pressures and expectations left her no choices but to conform to Asian American stereotypes.

The above discussion shows that to Ozeki, racial and gender identities cannot be entirely self-constructed but they are inevitably imposed by both an individual’s choice and external factors such as historical, social, and cultural contexts. Nevertheless, the reflection upon her racial and gender identities leads to the differentiation of Ozeki’s personal idea of self and the self which is contingent upon other contexts. In articulating the recognition of her identity conflict, Ozeki compares her undesirable self to a “mask” to illustrate her consciousness of her different selves. She states that the experiment provides her an opportunity to see why “I [she] grew up wearing a mask on my face that I didn’t know was there, but over the years, of course, the mask shaped me.”80 This expression shows that although Ozeki seeks to understand her past self, she feels it is needed to differentiate the undesirable self from her other selves.

Ozeki delineates her inner conflict about self-identity by referring to the self formed from dominant attitudes toward American women in the 1950s, as “I”. She expresses that when looking back to her past “relationships [with older men who have power and authority] never felt real. That “I” desperately wanted to be different from me.”81 The “I” and the “me” in this quotation are apparently used to signify her

80. Ozeki, 69.
81. Ozeki, 70.
different personae. The “I” refers to Ozeki’s self which is shaped by the sexual attitudes of American men in the post-Asian war period who, according to Ozeki, viewed Asian women as representatives of “exotic, ageless, child sex objects,” while the “me” refers to Ozeki’s sense-of-self in which the Anglo-American half is prioritized over the Asian-half. However, both the “I” and the “me” are undeniably part of Ozeki’s self which she deliberately chooses at different times. This realization is the beginning of a new perspective on her own self and self-identity.

The process of taking off her mask and finding her true “face” continues when her spontaneous thoughts bring her to examine each of her “faces,” especially her “face” as a daughter and her public face as a writer. Regarding the perception Ozeki has of her personal self, her memory about a conflict she had with her father when she was young invokes a better understanding of the meaning of individualism for her. In “silence,” her face conjures up an idea about the relation between her own self as a professional writer, a daughter, and as an American who is the descendant of a Japanese woman. She introduces this section in the memoir through the topic of a “code of silence” which operates within families. Centring on her father as the source of her family’s silence, the account of the experiment suggests how Ozeki might unlock the code.

In decoding the “code of silence”, Ozeki intends through the re-using of the word “code” to illustrate to her reader that a static perspective of a person on something can lead to a personal misunderstanding. In the code entitled “Silence,” she describes her relationship between her younger self and her father. Believing in an individual’s freedom to speak to the world, Ozeki became so engrossed with the concept that she forgot to take other people’s feelings into consideration. The young Ozeki mistook that her father’s taciturn nature as “silence”. She notes that “[m]y father, shy and shamed by his fundamentalist Christian upbringing, was the obvious source of our silence.” Having no clue as to why her father asked her mother not to write letters to newspaper and magazine editors, she rationalizes her father’s demand: “[t]he only explanation I

82. Ozeki, 69.
83. Ozeki, 49.
84. Ozeki, 49.
can imagine is that the range of self-expression he could tolerate was so narrow that it choked off the possibility for those closest to him, his wife and his daughter, to have a voice in the world." This misunderstanding of her father remains imprinted on her mind (part of her dukkha) until she is almost fifty years old.

Ozeki perceived the conflict with her father through the perspective of a young American woman attached to the concepts of freedom and individualism. As the memoir unfolds, she discovers that her father worried about his sister’s reaction to various family details becoming known. Ozeki found that she had misunderstood her father and the reasons for his silence. Many decades later, after young Ozeki spent time with her father and talked about her novels and her job, her father told her why he did not want his surname to be published. She notes:

He [her father] was proud of me, proud that I’d written a novel, proud that I was going to be a published author. […] I asked him if I publishing the book under his family name (my surname) would embarrass him, and he started to cry. He explained to me then that he was worried about his sister. She was old and still a devout fundamentalist Christian, and he didn’t want to hurt or offend her. […] I believe my dad would have been willing to suffer his own discomfort and embarrassment for my sake [...].

As revealed, her father’s confession regarding concern for others’ feelings awakens Ozeki to her own individualistic perspective. Her father’s concerns about his sister remind Ozeki that a person’s individuality and freedom are interrelated with those of others. An individual’s freedom does not solely depend on the single entity that is the person. While Ozeki was concerned only about herself, her father always thought of someone else’s feelings. While she thought only of her own freedom, her father was careful not to hurt other people. These understandings of individuality and freedom implicitly indicate the clash between two interpretations of individualism.

Stephanie M. Walls proffers in her research on the sociological meaning of American individualism two major presentations of individualism found in the United

85. Ozeki, 51.
86. Ozeki, 54–55.
States: negative individualism and positive individualism.\textsuperscript{87} Walls’s proposal, which emphasizes the relation between an individual and the society where he or she lives, can be used to explain the disparate concepts of individualism presented in the memoir before and after Ozeki’s observation experiment. The negative individualism mentioned in Walls’s book refers to the presentation of an individual who cares only about his or her own freedom and “there are no societal bonds.”\textsuperscript{88} Walls states that “it [negative individualism] simply states that if the needs of the individual and society conflict, the individual takes priority.”\textsuperscript{89}

Certainly, this is the inversion of positive individualism. Positive individualism is discussed as the basic idea that “societal interests should come before individual rights.”\textsuperscript{90} Although these two contrary concepts of individualism have been extensively discussed in terms of the sociological and political sciences, the advantages of positive individualism are worth considering in terms of the family. Ozeki’s case demonstrates that her previous concept of individualism, which complies with Walls’s negative individualism, allowed her to understand her father only from one narrow perspective and, more importantly, imprisons her within the mist of misunderstanding for decades. From this realization, Ozeki is aware that it is natural that a person may have many “faces” or identities in life. Only by deeply looking at an individual’s faces, his or her original self or the true Self is revealed.

This clear view on her heterogeneous self enables her to be free from the limited sense-of-self she once held as a Japanese American girl. At this point, Ozeki understands the fact that a person naturally has many identities, depending upon one’s responsibilities, roles, and positions, throughout the course of a life. These identities have different sets of attributes which are mainly identified by either oneself or others in the society. Regardless of race, gender, or profession, her insight into those facts enables her to embrace all the differences in her self and resolve the identity conflict in

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\textsuperscript{88} Stephanie M. Walls, 13.
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\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 14.
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her mind. An example of this is illustrated through Ozeki’s thoughts about her professional self in “silence.” She notes in the memoir that Ozeki is the pen name chosen to represent her writer’s “face.” She explains that, “Ozeki is not my father’s face nor my mother’s face, either. Ozeki is my face, the face I chose, a nominal face that keeps them safe from me, and me from them.”91 Her determination to designate her own professional identity and her respect for her parents’ lives is clearly illuminated here. This results in her apprehension that each kind of identity is spatially related to different aspects of life. And this is the sign to show that ultimate freedom arises only from an understanding of the interdependent origination of beings.

The “Perfectly Imperfect” Existence of Beings

Ozeki’s awakening to the fact that identity is not static, but discursive and dependent, leads her to know that fighting for others’ acceptance of one’s self is futile. As a consequence, she realizes that the most important thing is not the discovery of a particular kind of self or identity but it is an individual’s understanding of his/her personal self. To demonstrate this, Ozeki implicitly conveys that her spiritual freedom from the dualistic views of racial ideas or of identity can be achieved only if a person truly “sees” the interconnectedness of all beings in time. In the memoir, she notes that, through the understanding of the interdependent nature of the self and identities, the ability of a person who can get through up-and-down or sad-and-happy circumstances in each day “is kind of heroic.”92

This idea of a daily heroism is implicit in Ozeki’s new perspective on her everyday life, events which were previously mundane are now something more than that. She further adds that she thinks so because “[…] after all is said and done, all we really know is this: our eyes are horizontal and our noses are vertical. Just this.”93 This style of simple expression belongs to a Zen tradition which is derived from Dōgen Zenji’s remark. In “Face-to-Face,” Ozeki tells her readers that after Dōgen returned to Japan from his four-year quest for enlightenment in China, someone asked him about

92. Ozeki, 137.
93. Ibid.
what he learned from his practice. He answered that “What I know is this: that my eyes are horizontal and my nose is vertical. I can no longer be misled.”\(^9^4\) Ozeki applies in her work Dōgen’s remark to suggest that her readers see their face in geometrical terms, or literally, in order to break through racial and gender inflected ways of looking at one’s face. However, Ozeki learns that her experience as a victim trapped within an overriding racial discourse has actually been necessary to help her reach this point of enlightenment. The emphasis on the phrase “after all is said and done” implies the significance of every single experience as a stepping stone to access to the understanding of non-dualism.\(^9^5\)

Regarding the non-dualistic view on the Self, Ozeki discusses the matter of impermanence which manifests itself through changes happening in her everyday life. The being which people see as the Self is actually the result of the emergence of a transient sense-of-self at each moment of life. This kind of conditioned and transient self causes suffering to people who do not “see” and accept its nature. At one point in the experiment, Ozeki mentions her unwillingness to accept her physical changes. She remarks that although she does not feel ready to face herself, she theoretically knows that she should accept the truth of life: aging. In addition, she also confesses that at the age of sixty she knows she should not expect to ask questions about her beauty.\(^9^6\) Thus, to come to terms with this matter, Ozeki draws upon the Buddhist concept of impermanence by encapsulating the concept of the three marks of existence as follows:

In Zen teachings, *impermanence* is the first of the three marks of existence. Everything changes, nothing stays the same. The second mark of existence is *no-self*, which derives from the first: if everything changes and nothing stays the same, then there is no such thing as a fixed self. The self is only a passing notion, a changing story, relative to its momentary position in space and time. *Suffering*, the third mark of existence, derives quite logically from the first two. We don’t like

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\(^9^4\) Ibid, 127.

\(^9^5\) The ultimate goal of Zen Buddhism is the spiritual liberation from both dualism and non-dualism. This is because if a person attaches to non-dualism it means that person also attaches to the idea that dualism exists. Thus, from the Buddhist perspective, to discern both the dualistic views and non-dualistic views are crucial as a means for a person to detach oneself from both dualism and non-dualism. However, as it is shown in the memoir, Ozeki does not aim to present the liberation at that ultimate level, but to indicate merely how a person can see one’s face as it originally is through a non-dualistic view.

impermanence, we want to be someone, a fixed self, and we want that self to last. Lacking that fixity, we suffer.\textsuperscript{97}

Here, the quotation not only points out the cause of suffering, an individual’s attachment to the belief in certainty and a fixed self, but it implicitly suggests the possible way to stop the cycle of suffering. However, understanding the meanings of the three marks at a metaphysical level requires an individual meditative experience and a highly philosophical discussion. Therefore, the challenge for Ozeki is to convey how the philosophy of impermanence helps her comprehend the existence of her self in order to resolve the impasse created by the notion of a static self/identity.

To convey her positive perspective of impermanence, Ozeki defines the beauty of the Noh masks as a “perfectly imperfect” beauty, drawing upon the Zen philosophy which is implicit in Noh, a Japanese performance art. In the memoir, thinking about her aging face reminds Ozeki of the lessons about life she learned from Noh mask-making in Japan. She expresses that the process to make the Noh mask looks old “is not an attempt to falsify or make a fake antique. It’s a way of paying homage to the passage of time by evoking the qualities of wabi-sabi, another key element in Japanese aesthetics, which describes the beauty of things that are imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete.”\textsuperscript{98} This notion of beauty and impermanence awakens her to the virtue of time in relation to the Buddhist notion of No-Self, which is part of the philosophy of the Self. Ozeki applies the concept of Noh’s aesthetic to her own life through the interpretation of “wabi-sabi”.

To delineate that concept of beauty, Ozeki tells us that when the two words “wabi-sabi” come “[t]ogether, [they] evoke the aching appreciation of the beauty of the moment, which arises from our human awareness that everything in life is transient. Wabi-sabi is the aesthetic expression of the Zen teachings of the three marks of existence: suffering, impermanence, and no-self.”\textsuperscript{99} Her articulation of the meaning as “aching appreciation of the beauty of moment” theoretically indicates her profound understanding of human feelings. She realizes that logically (not intuitively) accepting

\textsuperscript{97} Ozeki, 16.
\textsuperscript{98} Ozeki, 77.
\textsuperscript{99} Ozeki, 78.
that the Self is actually a being which does not have its own essence, soul or self is hard. This is because to accept that the belief in the existence of the self is subverted can cause people to feel hollow inside. Knowing this, Ozeki realizes that the appreciation of such beauty is “aching”. Nevertheless, that notion of no-self is frightening only when a person does not fully understand the nature of transient beings. From the Buddhist point of view, the teaching of no-self \( (anattatā) \) does not mean that the existence of beings is nothingness.\(^{100}\) It means that the Self which is static does not exist; the Self a person perceives is merely a being which arises at one moment then declines at another moment because of their conditioned existence. It is the “suchness” of beings \( (tatha-tā) \).\(^{101}\)

Based on that understanding of the interdependent nature of self, the memoir suggests that changes or impermanence are beneficial to life because, without them, nothing exists. For example, C exists because of B which is the result of the transformable A which exists; without the changes in A, B never exists and C impossibly arises. Whether A, B, and C will arise or not depends upon the flow of time. Through this view, we can say that each present moment, in which causal factors of an existence arise and decline, is as important as the next. This point is exemplified through the conversation between Ozeki and her mother who has Alzheimer’s. Ozeki asked her mother:

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\(^{100}\) Please note that the translated versions of “\( anattatā \)” that are “non-self”, “no-self”, “emptiness” and “nothingness” have caused distortion in meaning to some extent. According to Shakyamuni Buddha, “\( anattatā \)” means there is no such a “being” which has its own essence and can be labelled as the “Self” \( (attā) \), the entire entity which can exist dependently on itself. Neither does this “\( anattatā \)” mean there is no “Self” nor mean “nothingness.” To grasp the most accurate meaning of “\( anattatā \),” which Ozeki chooses to translate as “no-self”, we have to keep in mind that the “no-self” concept here is based on the understanding that no being is pertinent to the Self because the existence of all beings is interdependent and co-exists. Therefore, the Buddhist notion of “no-self” is the result of an understanding of the natural law of causes and effects: when A exists, B exists; so when A changes, B also changes; A and B are interdependent, transitory and conditioned; without A or B, both A and B cease to exist. As such, at the metaphysical level, all beings are “\( anattatā \)” (the “Self-less” beings). For more relevant detailed discussion, see Harvey, “Dukkha, Non-Self, and the Teaching on the Four ‘Noble Truths,’” 69.

\(^{101}\) “Suchness” or \( taha-tā \) in Pali refers to the condition of beings under the natural law of interdependence. Because the interdependent relations of beings in the universe, being cannot be judged as one entity or many entities. This philosophical idea is discussed through the Zen concept of “all in one and one in all”, which is subtle and complicated. For details, see Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, The Essentials of Zen Buddhism: Selected from the Writings of Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (New York: Dutton, 1962), 438.
“When you can’t remember things. Does it frighten you? Do you feel sad?”
“Well, not really. I have this condition, you see. It’s called osteo… ost…”
“You mean Alzheimer’s?” I said, helping her out.
…
“There’s not a single thing I can do about it,” she told me, when I reminded her. “If there was something I could do and I wasn’t doing it, then I could feel sad or depressed. But as it is…” She shrugged.
“So you’re okay with it?”
She looked at me, patiently, “I don’t have much choice,” she explained, “so I may as well be happy.”

Her mother’s answers remind Ozeki of the fact that, to live one’s life, nothing is better than to concentrate on the present moment and to accept things as they really are at each moment. As the Buddha postulated, the future has not arrived yet and the past, which once was the present, has already gone, the precious moment which a person is living is now. Ozeki’s mother will fear losing her memory only if she struggles to resist the symptoms of her disease and desire the opposite to her present condition. As we can see, Ozeki’s mother is calm because she chooses to live in every present moment. Therefore, she has more energy to appreciate the beauty of the moment, despite the ceaseless flow of time. Nevertheless, as Ozeki notes, to appreciate the beauty of the moment requires human awareness. It needs a person’s acknowledgement of impermanence through the study of the self.

At this point, Ozeki’s reflection upon her transitory self and her identities enables her to break through the dualistic views imposed by external factors. It is the first time that she truly “sees” the “true” face of herself. She notes that:

Now, at fifty-nine, I’m finally catching up with them [her parents]. Now I’m at the age they were when I remember them best, and even though they are both dead, they will be with me for the rest of my life—in my aging eyes, my aging nose, my aging mouth, my aging cheekbones, just below the surface of my aging skin. They will be with me when I die, too, and I find this reassuring.

103. Ozeki, 121.
Ozeki finally realizes that time drags everything in one’s life. Therefore, time and life are the same kind of beings whose inseparable characteristic of them is impermanence. Ozeki underlines her awareness of impermanence as a common characteristic of being by articulating that she is “finally catching up with” her parents. Furthermore, instead of resisting her aging appearance as she did before, Ozeki illustrates that her face is a manifestation of her parents’ experience and life over the past fifty-nine years within her. The shift in her perspective of her self is apparent here. In the above quotation, the belief in her personal identity as a separate entity from her parents transforms to be the belief in the interconnected self. She willingly embraces her aging face, appreciating the advantages of impermanence which bring along the life experiences of her parents as an embedded part of her life and what is labelled as her “self.” She even contemplates death as a subject to help her. This illuminates the interconnection between herself and her deceased parents. She remarks that “[i]t made death a little less frightening, a little more intimate, a little more dear.”

As I have discussed above, the three hours of the experiment on her face results in Ozeki’s success in finding what is hidden in her face. Through the process of time decoding, Ozeki’s reflection enables her to “see” the ceaseless flow of experience which then becomes part of her self and her self-identity. As a result, it leads to her insight regarding impermanence as a common characteristic of beings and contributes to Ozeki’s new perspective on the self. Based on the discussion on the association between the issue of beauty and impermanence, the memoir suggests to us a new way of looking at a face, as a manifestation of a life, through Ozeki’s appreciation of imperfect beauty. As we can see, regardless of the matters of identity, age, race, and gender, Ozeki shifts from a person who wants to see her face in perfect condition to be a person who is appreciative of the “perfectly imperfect” beauty of her self. The mission to find the “true” face enables her to see extraordinary moments in life and accept her self as she really is. Through all of these, I attest that Ozeki’s The Face is distinctive from previous ethnic American autobiographies/memoirs. Other auto/biographical books suggest various ways to deal with the matter of self and identity conflict through dualistic views: American selves and ethnic selves, gendered.

104. Ozeki, 122.
selves, or even competing national selves. But by deploying the Buddhist notion of Self, Ozeki proposes that this perennial self and identity conflict can be resolved if a person looks at it through from non-dualistic viewpoint, by looking and seeing that a face is merely the combination of two geometric lines: the horizontal line of one’s eyes and the vertical line of a nose.

In the second half of the dissertation, I will deal with Johnson’s and Ozeki’s illustration of how the understanding of the Self which arises from a Buddhist understanding of interdependence, interconnectedness and interrelation contributes to a person’s perception of the relation between their selves and wider society. In this part, we have seen Johnson and Ozeki proposing their ideas regarding the “right” understanding of the Self which is presented in Faith and the Good Thing and Oxherding Tale and Ozeki’s A Tale for the Time Being and The Face: A Time Code. They stress that discerning that the Self and one’s self are the two composites of transient constituents arising in an individual’s life, and therefore alike. They are non-self, unfixed, and transformative. And, through these novels, they convey that such understanding of the Self leads an individual to discover inner peace, the state in which a person will not be forced to struggle between suffering and happiness. In the second half of my work, I will look at how both writers show us their appreciation of how that understanding of interdependent origination, which is the nature of the Self, has a great influence upon an individual’s attitude towards life and wider society, focusing upon Middle Passage (1990), Dreamer (1998), My Year of Meat (1998), and All Over Creation (2013).
Part Two
Chapter Three

Understanding Interconnectedness: The Possibility of Unity

In this chapter, I will extend my point regarding the Buddhist perspective of the Self, which writers use to explain the personal self and identity, which I touched upon in previous chapters. Here, I will examine how an understanding of the Self results in an individual’s ability to appreciate the interrelation between one’s self and others’ selves. As I have discussed previously in the analysis of the characters in *Oxherding Tale* (1982), the distorted belief in the existence of static and fixed self is the root cause of a person’s metaphysical servitude. Therefore, gaining an understanding of the unfixed self leads to a person’s inner peace, and will help to develop compassion for other lives and care for others’ well-being, the process which Johnson exemplifies through his historical fictions *Middle Passage* (1990) and *Dreamer* (1998). Through these two novels, Johnson emphasizes that establishing a person’s inner peace must start from an understanding of dependent co-arising, the natural law which renders the existence of the Self. Considering the emphasis upon inner peace in this respect, I will apply the modern interpretation of Buddhist interconnectedness (the one that has been developed from the Buddhist idea of dependent co-arising) to analyze *Middle Passage* and *Dreamer* in this chapter.¹ This concept appears as the ideology of a Buddhist movement known as “Socially Engaged Buddhism”.

As we have seen in his first two novels, Johnson’s proposed strategy to cope with people’s dukkha in *Faith and the Good Thing* and *Oxherding Tale* is to challenge dualistic views of race, point out its drawbacks, and then offer a non-dualistic view as a solution. In *Middle Passage* and *Dreamer*, we also find that strategy but the emphasis is shifted to the interdependence and interrelation of people. This highlighted idea results in a focus upon compassion and loving-kindness which are opposite to anger and

¹. To recapitulate it again, the Buddhist principle of dependent co-arising refers to the Buddha’s explanation that the existence of one thing depends upon that of other things and the existence of the other things are also dependent upon that one thing and other factors. This principle has been adapted until it becomes a contemporary Buddhist concept of interconnectedness which sometimes is referred to as interdependence and became a fundamental idea of the Socially Engaged Buddhist movement.
hatred. Thus, Johnson underlines the shortcomings of the two emotions which incite both psychological and physical violence between “us” and the “other”.

Before proceeding to the analyses of Middle Passage and Dreamer, I will briefly introduce the idea of Socially Engaged Buddhism. The term Socially Engaged Buddhism, or, in short, Engaged Buddhism, was coined by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen monk, a peace activist, writer, and poet. Engaged Buddhism emerged in the 1960s. Also known as “New Buddhism,” or “Neo-Buddhism,” the movement originally emerged in Asian Buddhist countries and its popularity has grown in the West. The basic philosophy of Engaged Buddhism comes from the Buddhist philosophy of the Self which is associated with the Buddhist principle of interdependence/interconnectedness and the idea of non-self. Regarding this, David L. McMahan explains the concept of Engaged Buddhism as follows:

It stresses finding root causes and seeking out hidden sources of social problems. The idea of interdependence, therefore, is an essential part of the conceptual arsenal of engaged Buddhism, the contemporary activist movement that strives to relieve suffering by addressing human rights, war, poverty, injustice, and environmental degradation.

Buddhists who practise such faith view that the well-being of other organisms such as other people, animals, and environment are as important as their own. They perceive the “I” to be interdependent, composed of the existence of other constituents, and lacking an intrinsic, individual self. Engaged Buddhists view their responsibility as helping relieve the political, social, economic, and ecological problems (suffering) of all beings through non-violence. All of these ideas result from an understanding of the

2. In fact, this movement happened in many parts of the world where Buddhists non-violently attempted to ease different kinds of social suffering. However, among texts which address this movement, there are three prominent figures who are well-known for their Socially Engaged Buddhist activism: B.R. Ambedkar, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the fourteenth Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso).


interdependent nature of the Self, which Johnson demonstrates in Middle Passage and Dreamer.

Theoretically, although the term Engaged Buddhism is used to describe the activism of Buddhists who apply their meditative insights and their understanding of Buddhist doctrine, this same kind of ethical deed can be (and has been) performed by people from any religion. The two figures who have had greatest influence on Johnson and who are the inspiration for his novels and his characters are Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Both figures appear in Dreamer and are used by Johnson to demonstrate how the understanding of the interconnectedness and interrelation among beings contribute to people’s ethical actions (even though neither Gandhi nor King were Buddhists, per se).

In Middle Passage and Dreamer, Johnson employs Rutherford Calhoun and Matthew Bishop to show how the understanding of the Self contributes to one’s dedication to others (as happens in Socially Engaged Buddhist practices). Rutherford, who cares only about his own contentment, is forced by situations on the ship and his encounter with death, to become a better man and see others’ needs before his own. Likewise, Matthew, who is an observer and admirer of Martin Luther King Jr., becomes mature and accepts life as a process after he learns from King throughout the narrative.

Middle Passage and Dreamer are based on historical tragedy. The first one is narrated by an African American crew who survives the shipwreck of the Republic, a slave ship, in 1830. The story pertains to the Middle Passage, which was once a forgotten part of American history regarding the triangular voyage of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to America from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. The second novel, Dreamer, begins with the story of a fictionalized King during the 1966 Chicago riots. It is narrated from the perspective of a well-educated African American who works with an assistant on the team of Martin Luther King, Jr., before King was assassinated in 1968. By centring on the narrators’ evolving perspectives of their personal and racial selves, the two novels emphasize the process in which the protagonists’ perceptive experiences evolve through time. This is to show how one’s insights into the nature of the self contributes to an understanding of non-self and selflessness, which leads an individual to appreciate humanity (as those within the Engaged Buddhist movement do).
Despite being set in different historical periods, both novels present sequential ethical themes. *Middle Passage* concentrates on the protagonist’s selfless actions which come from his understanding of the interconnectedness of all lives, while *Dreamer* extends that understanding as a source of one’s compassion for others and the nonviolent actions, *ahimsa*. If we look at these two novels as part of a developmental sequence of Johnson’s ideas, the idea about the ramifications of the protagonist’s awakening to the true nature of the *self* in *Middle Passage* operate at an ideological level, while questions raised in *Dreamer* reflect Johnson’s own ideas about the possibility of nonviolent activism.

In the analysis of the two novels, I will divide the analysis of the novels into two sections. The first section is the discussion on the understanding of the *Self* which Rutherford Calhoun gains during his journey in the *Middle Passage*. The novel charts his journey to become a spiritually-free African American. Through *Middle Passage*, Johnson implicitly associates the issues of personal self, racial self, and national identity through the process of his growing up. In investigating how Johnson suggests the association between the understanding of the *Self* and ethical practice in *Middle Passage*, I will examine the protagonist’s perception of “freedom” in relation to his own freedom. In the second part, I will deal with these perceptions by considering an idea and a question raised in *Dreamer*: (1) the idea that life is a process and (2) the questions as to whether selflessness is the answer “to end evils without creating evil.” The emphasis of the discussion in the second part of this chapter is the relation between an understanding of the *Self*, selflessness and *ahimsa*, a key strategy which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. adopted from Mahatma Gandhi. These two parts of this chapter are to demonstrate that the understanding of the nature of the *Self* is the most important step for a person to find peace both at an individual and a communal levels.

**The Pursuit of Freedom in *Middle Passage***

In terms of the storyline, *Middle Passage* is narrated in the same fashion as a neo-slave narrative but pertains to metaphysical slavery instead of physical slavery. *Middle Passage* is the narrative of Rutherford Calhoun’s journey from spiritual enslavement to spiritual freedom, a trajectory we have seen before in *Oxherding Tale*. When the story opens, Rutherford has recently been manumitted by his master, a clergyman named Peleg Chandler, who teaches him philosophy and theology. After
being freed, Rutherford moves from Makanda, Illinois, to find a better life in New Orleans, where he later stows away on the ship to avoid getting married to Isadora Bailey, an African American woman who falls in love with him. *Middle Passage* is unfolded as a flashback of the *Republic*’s passage in 1830 which is recorded in the ship’s logbook by Rutherford Calhoun. In the narrative, Calhoun addresses himself as Rutherford to differentiate himself as the narrator and presents Rutherford as a character in the book. Before Captain Ebenezer Falcon commits suicide on board after the mutiny and revolt of the enslaved Africans on the ship, he asks Rutherford to record all incidents on the ship in the logbook. The book recounts the experiences of Rutherford as a middle-man, who chooses to take neither the white men’s side nor the side of the enslaved African tribesmen on the *Republic*. Because of this, the content of the logbook appears to be like Rutherford’s diary, divided into nine entries where Rutherford’s transformative self illuminates the association between his perception of the self and his sense of freedom.

Johnson has often expressed in interviews that he wishes to be a writer who writes African American philosophical fiction to “fill the gap” in African American literature.⁶ Therefore, it is unsurprising that *Middle Passage* (1990), like his other novels, was also written as a philosophical novel. The narrative centers on the metaphysical question of what the self is, the primary question of Johnson’s writing. In 1993, he remarked in an interview that “I’m interested in the nature of the self in our larger cultural discussions of identity, personal identity, racial identity, and so forth.”⁷ However, in *Middle Passage*, though he uses the storyline of *Faith and the Good Thing* and *Oxherding Tale*, the protagonist’s spiritual journey from an ignorant man to an enlightened one, he extends the topic from a metaphysical level to an ethical level.

At the ethical level, as shown in *Middle Passage* and *Dreamer*, the protagonists’ appreciation of how their selves are interrelated with others’ selves encourages them to perform selfless actions. In *Middle Passage*, Johnson escalates the protagonist’s discovery of the nature of their selves to an underlying question about the

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meaning of freedom which constitutes an important factor of the protagonist’s success or failure in finding a way to his real “home.” That state of finding “home” is referred to as the protagonist’s “enlightenment” by Gary Storhoff and some other critics. In order to have Middle Passage speak of a forgotten part of African American history at the same time that it leads the reader to contemplate the quest for real “freedom,” Johnson uses the form of the historical novel as both an account of the Middle Passage and as a metaphorical narrative of how the Americans will survive the social divisions which have been caused by racism.

Middle Passage is a revision of three problems often explored in African American literature since the nineteenth century. In Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970 (1988), Johnson discusses the themes of the self and identity found in African American fiction since the nineteenth century. He observes that “[t]he black American writer begins his or her career with—and continues to exhibit—a crisis of identity. If anything, black fiction is about [italics in original] the troubled quest for identity and liberty, the agony of social alienation, the longing for a real and at times a mythical home.” As revealed, Johnson mentions his concern about perennial problems raised in African American literature. In addition, when he refers to the quest for “home” in his predecessors’ fiction as “a mythical home,” he implies that the meaning of “home” is still obscure and its real meaning needs to be examined.

Corresponding with this observation, Johnson presents Middle Passage as the narrative of Rutherford Calhoun’s transformative sense of his personal self, along with his changing perception of freedom as conveyed through his quest for “home.” One point which differentiates Middle Passage and Dreamer from his other novels is that Johnson uses the characters’ encounters with the matter of life and death as stimuli for them to reflect upon their own selves and the meaning of freedom. This is a strategy

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8. In my thesis, I intend to avoid referring to the understanding of the self of each protagonist in Johnson’s novels as the “enlightenment.” This is to avoid a misunderstanding between the concepts of the enlightenment which refers the ultimate understanding of “truth” or nirvana (nibbāna) in Buddhism and the one which refers to a complete comprehension of something.


10. Ibid., 8.
which is adopted from one of the forty strategies of Buddhist meditation.\textsuperscript{11} The transformation of Rutherford’s attachment to dualistic views to his understanding of the interrelation between his self and others’ selves is the focus of this discussion. Through this reading, I argue that Johnson still centres his novel upon the protagonist’s evolving perception of the self which directly has influence upon that person’s ability to see the interrelation between one’s self and the selves of others. By contrasting Rutherford’s two perceptions of the self, Johnson focuses upon that which can transform an egocentric person into an altruistic person who has “home” in his/her heart and can make any place his/her home.

In analyzing \underline{Middle Passage}, I will begin with a critical overview focused upon themes of selfhood and home. From here, my discussion will focus on the idea of interconnectedness and interrelation which Johnson presents through the experiences Rutherford gains on board. I will begin the analysis of \underline{Middle Passage} with the exploration of Rutherford’s perception of his self in order to see the process of his transforming self while he is in search of freedom and home. Then the discussion will move on to investigate Rutherford’s understanding of the interrelation between himself and others. This is to see how that understanding contributes to his wisdom of the self and his perception of his national identity which leads him to discover the freedom and home that he looks for throughout the story.

As previously noted, Johnson was keen to present his African American characters not as a victimized men who react to inhumane treatment.\textsuperscript{12} He rationalizes that if the character is portrayed like that “[…] what you get is pity for that person, but you don’t get respect for him.”\textsuperscript{13} For this reason, he does not emphasize the stereotypical characteristics of ruthless white masters or miserable victimized African

\textsuperscript{11}. In Buddhist meditation practices, there are two kinds of meditation: an insight meditation (\textit{vipassanā}) and concentration meditation (\textit{samatha}). For the latter one, there are forty meditative devices to develop a practitioner’s contemplation of mind. In contemplating on corpses, a practitioner is inevitably required to recollecting death as a process to meditate on corpses. This contemplation of death and corpses (\textit{asubha}) is one device which Johnson uses in \underline{Middle Passage} and \underline{Dreamer}, which we have already found in Ozeki’s \textit{The Face: A Time Code}. For details, see Analayo, “A Corpse in Decay,” in \textit{Perspectives on Satipathana} (Cambridge: Windhorse Publications, 2013), 104–5; Phra Prayudh Payutto, “How Should We Live Our Lives?,” in \textit{Buddhadhamma: Natural Laws and Values for Life}, 1995), 272.

\textsuperscript{12}. Johnson, “First Philosophy,” 7.

\textsuperscript{13}. Bosche, “An Interview with Charles Johnson,” 91.
Americans in *Middle Passage* (or in his other novels). Rather *Middle Passage* points out the drawbacks of anger and hatred, a crucial element of both *Middle Passage* and *Dreamer*. This corresponds with the principle of Engaged Buddhism which stresses a human being’s compassion and sees no point in the use of anger or hatred.

Critical responses to Johnson’s *Middle Passage* can be broken into three groups. First, critics such as Celestin Walby, Virginia Whatley Smith, Jonathan Little, and Tuire Valkeakari analyze the novel by comparing and contrasting it to other sea novels. A second group of critics apply different approaches to the novel by focusing on *Middle Passage*’s form as historical novel. For instance, Brian Fagel approaches the novel from a postcolonial perspective. He analyzes the protagonist’s position of middle-ness and indicates how Rutherford’s authority as a history writer empowers him and transforms him to the position of the subject. Similarly, Marc Steinberg is interested in the effects of how Johnson historicizes his narration while exploring the meanings of slavery and freedom as presented in the novel. H.A. Rushdy, for example, offers discussion on how the authority of Rutherford as a writer empowers him in negotiating his transformative identity as an African American. Finally, a third group of critics apply different philosophical approaches to explore *Middle Passage*; critics such as Linda Furgerson Selzer, Gary Storhoff, Marc C. Conner, and Rudolph P. Byrd.

Among these critics, the work of Steinberg, Storhoff, and Byrd is of most relevance because they deal with the exploration of the meaning of freedom for African

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Americans in the post-emancipation era, which is the focus of *Middle Passage*. *Middle Passage* is set in 1830. In Steinberg’s article, he looks at the meaning of freedom through the investigation of several forms of servitude which are slavery in disguise. He explicates many forms of servitude through the analyses of characters such as Captain Ebenezer Falcon, Perter Cringle and Rutherford Calhoun. This point is also recognized as an important one by Storhoff and Byrd. Storhoff’s comprehensive interpretation of *Middle Passage* concentrates upon how Johnson’s concept of freedom is associated with the Buddhist idea of the importance of the present moment and the conception of American identity, alongside an analysis of the allusions within the text. Similarly, Byrd’s writing focuses on the meaning of freedom and compares the novel with his predecessors’ writings. He applies the idea of Georg Hegel to the question of freedom. He concluded that the definition of freedom as suggested in Johnson’s *Middle Passage* corresponds with Hegel’s concept which stresses freedom in the form of positive relationships between two persons or among people. The interpretations of Steinberg, Storhoff, and Byrd provide an overview of Johnson’s emphasis upon the invisible forms of slavery and the metaphysical meaning of freedom. Storhoff’s article stresses the novel as a microcosmic proposal for national identity; he also relates Rutherford’s transformation and his appreciation of each present moment with his ethical determination. This is close to my investigation of the novel’s contribution to the protagonist’s selfless actions.

### The Perception of One’s Self and the Sense of Freedom

In reading *Middle Passage* metaphorically, the message Johnson conveys is to propose a potential perspective which will help Americans find a way out of suffering arising from the history of slavery in America. As an implied warning statement about the survival of the American nation, Johnson expresses this message through

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Rutherford’s declaration of his standpoint that “I’m not on anybody’s side! I’m just trying to keep us alive! I don’t know who’s right or wrong on this ship anymore, and I don’t much care! All I want is to go home.” As revealed here, when Rutherford is forced to choose between the side of the white crew and that of the Allmuseri on the Republic, his answer implies Johnson’s concern about racial problems in America. Metaphorically, Johnson seems to present the shipwreck of the Republic in Middle Passage to imply the ramification of racial conflicts. Thus the message conveyed through this quotation is that, though idealistic, the survival of the nation depends upon its people’s capacity to transcend dualistic views on race. This is implied through Rutherford’s insistence that he will not take either side but cares only about finding a way home. In order to explore Johnson’s proposal for the existence of America, which constitutes the American’s “home”, in the following discussion I will focus on the transformation of the protagonist’s perception of the self and its consequences of his recognition of the interrelation between his own self and others’ selves and the interrelation between the past and the present.

The theme of home and freedom is highlighted immediately in the opening scene of the narrative. After Rutherford arrives in New Orleans, he tells himself that “Here, Rutherford is home” [italics in original]. At this very beginning of his quest for freedom and home, we learn that home is where he feels a sense of freedom. At the first stage of the narrative, Rutherford is portrayed as a dissolute man. The knowledge he gains from his master’s attempt to educate him makes him a potentially enlightened person who has gone through a lot of life lessons on the ship. Rutherford’s intellectual ability becomes an essential feature that make his enlightened self possible. Concerning this transformation of perception, Calhoun’s authorial voice hints to us at the beginning of the narrative that “[b]ut had I not been a thief, I would not have met Isadora and shortly thereafter found myself [italics mine] literally at sea.” This implies two points. First, Johnson suggests that the past, whether good or bad, is an indelible part of Calhoun’s present self. Second, he conveys that the quest for one’s self is still the heart

22. Ibid., 2.
23. Ibid., 4.
of the story. In *Middle Passage*, Johnson underlines that discovering the self is a necessary process to the discovery of “true” freedom, the message which he wishes to offer to a contemporary African American readership.

Indeed, the quests for the self, home, or freedom in the context of this novel are the same thing. They are related to one another as causes and effects. Discovering one’s self will indicate how one can achieve freedom. Once one gains freedom; they can feel at home and vice versa. The relation between the matter of the self and freedom as Johnson presents in *Oxherding Tale, Middle Passage*, and *Dreamer* is a significant topic also recognized by David R. Roy. In Roy’s “The Lack of Freedom” (2002), he indicates that the question of what freedom is and how to obtain freedom have to start from a consideration of the inseparable relation between the perception of freedom and the existence of the self. He notes that, from the long Western history of the philosophy of the self, freedom is defined by “self-determination” and this is indicative of the belief in the existence of the self. This belief contradicts non-Western beliefs and philosophy, particularly Buddhist philosophy, which holds that the self which contains its own entity and has an intrinsic self never exists. As we have discussed in previous chapters, that what is called the “Self” or one’s self is merely a form or phenomenon which arises as the result of numerous causal factors that also arise in the same way so, through this logic, the “Self” or one’s personal self actually has no real essence of self. Given this logic, a person believing freedom depends upon self-determination will never be able to experience true freedom until he/she realizes the true nature of the Self which is non-self. As such, the lack of the self is the nature of the Self and it determines that the “real” sense of freedom (I do not mean physical freedom) has to arise from a person’s acceptance of the non-self nature of beings and an understanding of interdependence.

Although Byrd concludes at the end of his writing on *Middle Passage* that freedom can be achieved by a person’s feeling of mutual compassion (which is close to the idea of the interdependent self), Byrd analyzes this concept from an existential perspective on the self which is distinctive from the Buddhist idea of interdependence.

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Byrd explains, “[…] Calhoun believes that freedom is to be realized through self-determination, duty, self-control, and communion in community with others.” He also explains that Calhoun’s transformation is inspired by his appreciation of humanity which he sees through death but he does not concentrate on the metaphysical question of the self which constitutes the root cause of an understanding of the Self. Considering Byrd’s interpretation in this respect, the question of the interrelation between the self and freedom raised by Roy still needs to be examined in the analysis of *Middle Passage*. This is because it will tell us why Johnson implicitly offers the Buddhist perspective of the Self as the novel’s primary step to discover a way to cease the suffering of contemporary African Americans which results from the long history of slavery.

**Toward the Realization of the State of Non-Self**

The contradiction between the western belief in a static self and the Buddhist inspired nature of the Self, of course, results in a person’s unfulfilled sense of freedom if that person looks for the self which is static and solid in nature, as shown in Rutherford’s attempt to fulfil his desires. He is never aware of the significance of inner peace. On the other hand, he pursues self-satisfaction until he acknowledges the impermanence of life after the explosion on the ship. He describes his sentiment as follows:

> I had not known before that everything, within and without, could break down so thoroughly. For all I knew I had already lived through many afflictions and survived them, too busy at ship’s business to know I was afflicted. And then they were gone. No, they did not walk out. One second they stood beside me, then they dematerialized like phantoms.

As shown here, Rutherford’s contemplation on his past experience on the ship provides him with an enlightened moment, wherein he realizes that everything in life is non-self. To explain this from a Buddhist view, Rutherford, for the first time, realizes that everything is not the Self (a being which has an intrinsic essence). When he expresses

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that “[a]ll that day and night I lay in a dissolving, diseased world, unable to find a position comfortable enough to remain in,“ he grasps that the self as he perceives before is, in fact, merely a composite entity which emerges when all causal factors gathering at a time then disperses when those factors cease to be.

Correspondingly, Roy explains that “[…] if the self-existence and autonomy of that sense-of-self is an illusion, as Buddhism claims, then such a self will never be able to experience itself as enough of a self—that is, it will never feel free enough. It will try to resolve its lack by expanding the sphere of its freedom, yet that can never become large enough to be comfortable.” In this regard, Rutherford’s quest for selfhood and identity insinuates his belief in the existence of a person’s self. The fact that Rutherford’s self is impermanent and interdependent upon other elements of life, his search for the self will never give him feelings of satisfaction but the feeling of lacking a self and of uncertainty. This state drives him to endlessly seek ways or things to psychologically compensate his lack and results in Rutherford being in the captivity of desire to fulfill his “hunger” for certainty and freedom.

Rutherford intermittently reveals his negative attitude and the dissatisfaction with his self which drives him to commit trivial crimes, calling himself as a “social parasite.” Also, he claims that it causes him to search for his self, and claims his “hunger” for “experiences” as a way to creating his own self and identity. For example, Rutherford tells us the moment he just has freedom that “I have never been able to do things halfway, and I hungered—literally hungered—for life in all its shades and hues: I was hooked on sensation […] of new ‘experiences.’ And so, with hateful, dull Illinois behind me, I drifted about New Orleans those few first months […]” Here, fatherless Rutherford, who lost his mother when he was a child, is not aware at all of his feeling of emptiness. After he tastes physical freedom for the first time in life, he cannot differentiate the taste of physical freedom from metaphysical slavery. He is so

27. Ibid.  
29. Ibid., 2.  
30. Ibid., 47.  
31. Ibid., 3.
delirious that he is not aware of other forms of servitude, for example, his being a slave to desires, which arguably in some ways are as pernicious as physical slavery. His excitement at having such a kind of freedom is illuminated when he notes that “New Orleans wasn’t home. It was Heaven.”\textsuperscript{32} Despite that, the way he describes himself with verbs like “hungered” and “drifted” suggests his insatiable desires and his sense of a directionless life.

In order to replace his sense of a directionless life, Rutherford looks for something solid which will psychologically compensate his sense of lack. Calhoun the narrator explains why “experiences” are important to him by comparing others’ and his perception of experiences: “[l]ike Captain Falcon, like me and so many other people (except Isadora), he [Josiah Squibb, an alcoholic cook on the Republic] seemed to hunger for “experience” as the bourgeois Creoles desired possessions. Believing ourselves better than that, too refined to crave gross, physical things, we heaped and hived “experiences” instead, as Madame Toulouse filled her rooms with imported furniture, as if \textit{life} [italics in original] was a commodity, a \textit{thing} [italics in original] we could cram into ourselves.”\textsuperscript{33} Rutherford’s analogy of experiences as “possessions,” “furniture,” a “commodity,” and a “thing” signifies his belief (and other people’s beliefs) in materialistic experiences.

Because of his sense of the lack of self that renders the feeling of incompleteness, Rutherford mistakes his desire for “experiences” as part of his enjoyment of “freedom.” As a newcomer to New Orleans, though he cannot find a job and turns up a petty thief, he loves such a life. His contentment with this “freedom” shows that “freedom” for him is the state in which he can do anything to fulfil his own desires. This is the freedom which comes from an egocentric worldview. Calhoun implicitly comments on this throughout the narrative noting that life in New Orleans teaches Rutherford a kind of “freedom” which people in New Orleans use as a label for selfishness. He describes how they call it “individual freedom,” and this constitutes real “freedom” for Rutherford at that time.\textsuperscript{34} This explanation of freedom shows Calhoun’s

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item 32. Ibid., 2.
  \item 33. Ibid., 38.
  \item 34. Ibid., 4.
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awareness of Rutherford’s distorted view of life (the belief in dualism). If it is “true” freedom, it should make him feel at peace and there must be no need for him to keep escaping.

It seems that Rutherford’s incompleteness partly arises from his lack of love. Calhoun confesses this feeling about his self through his explanation of the search for his father:

I have searched the faces of black men on Illinois farms and streets for fifteen years, hoping to identify this man named Riley Calhoun, primarily to give him a piece of my mind, followed by the drubbing he so richly deserved for selfishly enjoying his individual liberty after our mother, Ruby, died, thus leaving me in the care of a brother like a negative of myself.35

Through this, Johnson provides his readers the source of Rutherford’s feeling of lack. On the one hand, he gives us the psychological reason for Rutherford’s feeling of lack. On the other hand, he shows us that the existence of a person’s self is a compounded being. At the narrative level, though Rutherford expresses his resistance against his father and wants to make him guilty in revenge for his father Riley leaving his family, in fact, his hope to find his father tells us that deep down in his heart Rutherford accepts his father and his brother as part of his current self. This quotation shows us the interdependent nature of the self at the metaphysical level.

Regarding this matter, Rutherford further explains that “[h]e [his brother Jackson Calhoun] was (to me) the possible-me that lived my life’s alternate options, the me I fled. Me. Yet not me. Me if I let go. Me if I gave in.”36 In this quotation, a contradictory message about himself can be seen. When he refers to his brother Jackson as “the possible-me,” implies that Calhoun perceives his brother as his double self (the idea which Johnson later elaborates in Dreamer). He implies that if he is ready and learns how to let go of the conflicts in his mind, he may be like his brother who has loving-kindness for others and appreciates the interrelation between all beings. However, the words “Me if I gave in,” seems to suggest that he still regards his brother’s assumed identity as submissive. This indicates that Rutherford, at this point,

35. Ibid., 112.
36. Ibid., 112.
still attaches a dualistic view to race which is illuminated in his divisive view on his brother’s submissiveness as opposite to his own rebellious character and that he has not gained an understanding of how he can be as selfless as his brother is.

**In the Captivity of Dualistic Views**

However, a lack of love is not the only cause of Rutherford’s feeling lost. His dualistic view on the dichotomy between white and the black, good and bad, us and other is a major hindrance. His dualistic views make him unable to appreciate love, to transcend the binary opposition of race, or to overcome his racially-induced dukkha from racial problems. About this, Rutherford’s perspective on Jackson is a good example. He reveals that:

> Some part of me loved my brother. Yes. But we couldn’t get along or see things the same way. If you are born on the bottom—in bondage—there are only two ways you can go: outright sedition or plodding reform. I choose the first, expressing my childhood hatred of colonization in boyish foul-ups […] But Jackson went the other way: a proper Negro, he was, a churchgoing boy who matched my every responsibility with a selfless deed as if he wanted to shame me, or subvert each bigot’s lie about blacks by providing countercontext, saying to the slaveholding world, “Not even this can make me miss a step.” If that was what being a “gentleman of color” amounted to, then I decided I wanted none of it.\(^\text{37}\)

As revealed here, Calhoun insists that he loves his brother but he blames his predicaments for the conflicts between himself and his brother. Because of his worldview which is limited by the dichotomy between white and black, Rutherford is incapable of viewing Jackson in any other way. He interprets his brother being “fair, sympathetic, and well meaning,”\(^\text{38}\) and his care for others (his tender care for Master Peleg Chandler on his deathbed), as merely the actions of those who try to please white Americans by becoming a “gentleman of color,” an image that Rutherford despises.\(^\text{39}\)

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 114.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 111.

\(^{39}\) Seemingly, Johnson employs this quotation to comment on opposing opinions about the concept of the New Negro and the self-definition of the African American by the Harlem Renaissance. He conceptualizes the self-definition of the African American into two radical categories in order to indicate that either concept mentioned here derives from a dualistic view of race, neither of which will lead to a final solution.
Indeed Johnson seems to employ the contrast between Rutherford and Jackson to suggest the differences between Rutherford’s belief in the self as an entire entity and Jackson’s belief in the interdependent self. In one way, Johnson portrays Jackson as a slave whose physical appearance and behavior conform to ideals set out by white Americans in order to provide material for Rutherford to argue about the attributes of a “gentleman of color.” In another way, Jackson might be viewed as a man of virtue who perceives the interconnectedness in beings. When Master Peleg, on his deathbed, wants to grant Jackson his wishes, Jackson replies that:

[…] I could ask for land, but how can any man, even you, sir, own something like those trees outside? […] Nothing can stand by itself. Took a million years, I figure, for the copper and tin in that pitcher to come together as pewter. Took the sun, the seasons, the metalworker, his family and forebears, and the whole of Creation, seems to me, sir, to make that one pitcher. How can I say I own something like that?40

Here, it is evident that Jackson has equal compassion for every being, his demeanor is not an act put on to conform to expectations. The description of the interrelation between a pitcher and elements of the natural world is a common discourse found in modern Buddhist texts about interdependence and interconnectedness. Also, Johnson uses this perception of Rutherford’s brother to point out the narrow perception of dualistic views about race.

In order to present how dualistic views bring about only the impossibility of a solution to the suffering of African Americans (or even white Americans), Johnson uses a life and death crisis with the potential sinking of the ship (a metaphorical America). The narrative suggests that people on the ship (the Americans) are trapped in a metaphysical slavery. As Steinberg notes, “[w]e are loudly reminded here that a freed man can never escape slavery. The very act of forced servitude is so profound—so incapable of being transcended that the free Rutherford Calhoun enters a state of slavery by his own free will.”41 Here Steinberg highlights that Rutherford’s being a slave “by his own free will” corresponds with my interpretation that the factors which


41. Steinberg, “Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*: Fictionalizing History and Historicizing Fiction,” 384.
causes him to be or not to be a slave is generated by his own perception. In this case, it is the perception of the Self.

One concrete example of the consequence of the misconception of the self is presented through Falcon’s belief. Like Ezekiel in Oxherding Tale, Falcon believes that the existence of the self depends upon that of an other self. However, the relation between the two selves as Falcon believes not the same as that within Buddhist philosophy which underlines interrelations among the existence of one being and other constituents. To Falcon, the self will exist and be meaningful only if another self appears as a rival. Falcon insists upon a binary or oppositional sense of self. Calhoun recalls that Falcon tells him that he believes in philosophers’ ideologies which explain that “[…] war is divine […] For a self to act, it must have somethin’ to act on. […] 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.” Based upon this belief, Falcon’s strategy to maintain his authority on the Republic is to seek people’s secrets and manipulate them.

Falcon’s view on the rival selves even harms his own life. In regard to this matter, Peter Cringle, the first mate of the ship, tells Rutherford that Falcon is “…self-pitying. And vicious, lad. He keeps a list of personal affronts, insults and abuses he’s received, or believes he’s received, and dates them—he reviews them when he’s drunk, keeps them alive, and always watches or a man’s weaknesses once he’s signed on.” Falcon finally kills himself after he is defeated by the Allmuseri. Here Johnson seems to implicitly suggest that Falcon’s inability to see the interrelation between himself and others results in his revivification of his traumatic past which rewards nothing but inner pain and suffering.

Moreover, Johnson also highlights the negative energy generated by Falcon:

What was odd in this was that it wasn’t their (the crew) [italics in original] anger at all—it was Falcon’s. His emotions permeated the ship like the smell of rum and rotting wood, and these feelings—as is always true of groups confined together in small quarters, or of

42. Ibid., 97.
43. Ibid., 63.
couples—the men picked up, believing the directionless rage they felt to be their own. All this explained (for Me) Falcon’s webwork of traps, the spring-released darts coated with curare.44

Johnson conveys that anger from Falcon’s worldview harms not only himself, but contaminates the atmosphere and harms others like “spring-released darts.” Rutherford’s description of his anger as the “smell of rum and rotting wood” emphasizes its bad effect insofar as it causes people to believe his anger is their own. To concretize this idea, Johnson creates the Allmuseri, the enslaved South Africans, to reflect the disadvantages of anger and also to be “the Ur-tribe of humanity.”45

The Allmuseri serve two purposes in this novel: a manifestation of the boomerang effect of rage and a voice to enunciate Johnson’s idealistic worldview of the interdependent self. The oppression the Allmuseri endures suggests that Johnson is not so idealistic that he does not understand his ancestors’ rage and pain. This can be seen from Rutherford’s note about the mutiny of the Allmuseri. When they succeed in overthrowing Falcon and take control of the Republic, Rutherford, as an observer, tells us that “Ngonyama [the Allmuseri man who learns English from Rutherford and is one of the leaders who revolts against Falcon] and maybe all the Africans, I realized, were not wholly Allmuseri anymore. We had changed them.”46 He seems to imply that if humans are good by nature, a misconception of the Self which he sees in Falcon can change that goodness into something negative.

Concerning this same matter, Rutherford further explains the poisonous effect of anger that “I suspected even he [Ngonyama] 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. […] No longer Africans, yet not Americans either. Then what? And of what were they now capable?”47 The questions left here seem to be the questions Johnson raises to ask the reader whose ancestors are African but have lived in America for a long time. For

44. Ibid., 53.
45. Ibid., 61.
46. Ibid., 124.
47. Ibid., 124–25.
Johnson, as he metaphorically presents in *Middle Passage*, overlooking the common characteristics of humans (that all human beings have to encounter death and various forms of *dukkha* throughout their lives regardless of their age, gender, nation, or culture) leads to the destruction of the *Republic*, the nation, and the individual subject.

**Transcending Duality: Only Humanity is Matter**

However, the demonstration of the disadvantages of rage or anger is just one step of the process which Johnson uses before offering a solution to the long-lasting *dukkha* that his people have experienced and continue to experience in the present day. Considering it the responsibility of a writer, Johnson implicitly proposes a constructive perspective to look at the problem. In doing so, he symbolically points out that, regardless of race and culture, we share a universal humanity. Therefore, to overcome the hindrances that blinds us to this fact, it is crucial to delve deeply into the nature of our self. Johnson communicates this message through the origin and the ideology of the Allmuseri, then presents the result of the understanding of this message through the transformation of Rutherford’s self.

Instead of philosophically explaining the principle of the interdependent self, Johnson mythologizes the principle by inventing the Allmuseri tribe. The rumors regarding the origin of the Allmuseri’s history suggest that people from this tribe are the representation of humanity. Rutherford tells us that “[p]hysically, they seemed a synthesis of several tribes, […] a clan distilled from the essence of everything came earlier. Put another way, they might have been the Ur-tribe of humanity itself.”

Apart from that, Johnson also suggests the interrelation between human and other beings by saying that “[i]n deed, what I felt was the presence of countless others *in* them, a crowd spun from everything this vast continent had created.”

Additionally, he suggests a disadvantage in the inability to see the unity of beings through Rutherford’s perspectives on cultures. On the one hand, Johnson implicitly suggests that, indeed, no one is better than the others. Cultural differences are the causes of misunderstandings between human beings. This can be seen in an ironic

48. Ibid., 61.

49. Ibid., 61.
scene when Rutherford reveals of the Allmuseri that “[b]elieve it or not, a Barker told us they [the Allmuseri] thought we were barbarians shipping them to America to be eaten. They saw us as savages.”

This observation reveals the importance of perspective—inverting the usual ideas about savagery. However, in this same dialogue, Johnson also foreshadows the fate of the Allmuseri if they are transformed by the oppression of the slavery as Rutherford goes on to say: “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.”

This quotation demonstrates the universality of the tribe, it also emphasizes the danger of the contamination of dualistic views on race. It is the introduction of dualistic views that leads the Allmuseri to the revolution and to the annihilation of the enslaved Allmuseri in the fire and the explosion at the end of the novel.

The Allmuseri do not only represent the idea of the interdependence, Johnson also designates them as an exemplar of the attachment to one side of a binary opposition (while Falcon is on the other side of the two extremes). In this case, their suffering becomes a catalyst which activates rage and this rage emerges from their attachment to their ideology. And this causes them to question the “way” to make peace which Johnson also mentions in Dreamer. As Rutherford reflects upon Ngonyama’s reaction after the mutiny:

Ngonyama wondered, I could see, if it had all been worth it, this costly victory in exchange for their souls, for that indeed was what was at stake. […] From the perspective of the Allmuseri the captain [Falcon] had made Ngonyama and his tribemen as bloodthirsty as himself, thereby placing upon these people a shackle, a breach of virtue, far tighter than any chain of common steel.

Rutherford presents an image of the Allmuseri’s spiritual enslavement, which underlines the disadvantage of the attachment to dualistic views on race. Nevertheless, it seems that Johnson implicitly expresses his sympathy for the oppressed Africans who

50. Ibid., 65.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., 140.
do not know other ways to liberate themselves from their slavery. As such, he raises a question by stating that “[t]he problem was how to win without defeating the other person. And they had failed. Such things mattered to Ngonyama. Whether he liked it or not, he had fallen; he was now part of the world of multiplicity, of me versus thee.”

Here, Johnson’s voice is clear. Through Rutherford’s observation of Ngonyama, Johnson stresses the consequence of combating violence with violence.

Indeed Johnson does not show only the problems, he also stresses the benefit of human unity as an antidote to the intensified conflicts on board before the shipwreck. When the ship is in crisis, regardless of race, religions, culture, or background, everyone tries their best to save the ship, as Rutherford describes:

> Without speaking, we all clapped our hands together as one company—thirty-two sopping-wet cutthroats black-toothed rakes traitors drunkards rascallions thieves poltroons forgers clotpolls sots loboocks sodomists prison escapees and debauchees simultaneously praying like choirboys, our heads tipped, begging forgiveness after this brush with death in Irish, Cockney, Spanish, and Hindi for a litany of collective sins so long I could not number them.

This picture highlights the potential of human unity which is essential for survival. This is also pointed out by Little who explains that:

> On another level, the ship is a symbol of the United States’s identity […] Through the vehicle of the ship Johnson stresses the socially applicable tenor—the integrationist, interdependent, and mutual nature of the successful social enterprise, which, before it can be successful, must adopt and adapt to new ways of seeing.

And the “new ways of seeing” as he mentions here must founded on an acceptance of the interdependent nature of the Self.

After Rutherford has gone through the crisis of life and death on the ship, his perception of his personal self and the Self has changed. And this means so much to him that he feels at “home.” As Storhoff mentions in his analysis of Middle Passage:

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid., 82.

55. Little, “Revisions of Self and Society: Middle Passage and Invisible Man,” 141.
“Rutherford’s narrative task, paradoxically, is to accept this emptiness as an understanding of his true being […]”\(^{56}\) After he encounters death and the conflicts on the ship where everyone hopes to be able to reach their “home,” Rutherford transforms from an egocentric person into an altruistic person. This can be seen from his worldview, in which he delineates that “[t]he “I” that I was, was a mosaic of many countries, a patchwork of others and objects stretching backward to perhaps the beginning of time. What I felt, seeing this, was indebtedness.”\(^{57}\) This shows Rutherford’s acceptance of his self as a being which is empty of an intrinsic self. He views that what is called his “self” (“I”) is a compound being arising from the accumulation of his experiences in the past until present. This insight renders two things in Rutherford’s transformed self: becoming an altruistic person and finding a way “home.”

Firstly, an important lesson Rutherford learns on the Republic, after he understands the interdependent nature of the self, is how to forget his self on behalf of the others. Rutherford’s understanding of the self changes him to become a helpful man. After the explosion that the Allmuseri men accidentally cause on the ship Cringle, who always sacrifices himself to help others, regardless of race, is seriously injured. Looking to Cringle as a role model, the new Rutherford seeks ways to be useful to others. He tells us for the first time that:

[…]

the first thing I was forced to do was forget my personal cares, my pains, and my hopes before repairing to the deckhouse where the sufferers were sprawled. I placed a hand on each of them foreheads and listened. Though tired and sleepless, I clowned and smiled for the children; I told American jokes that failed miserably in translation. I prayed, like my brother, that all would be well, though I knew the ship was straining at every seam, making water, that beneath the thrashing waves there was only bottomless death, the extinction of personality, with not a sliver of land on the horizon […]\(^{58}\)

This marks a full transformation of Rutherford’s self. His attitude towards life totally changes from a self-centred concern for his own contentment to one of selflessness. He

\(^{56}\) Storhoff, “Chapter 5: Middle Passage,” 160.

\(^{57}\) Johnson, Middle Passage, 162–63.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 161.
even confesses that he becomes like his brother who he used to blame as a “gentleman of color.” All of these happen when he has to be in the face of death on the ship which is a good force driving people to reflect upon their selves and the meaning of life.

Secondly, Rutherford finds his way “home.” In the last entry of the novel, the narrative implies Rutherford’s state of mind which is ready for a household responsibility through his transferring from the Republic to the Juno, the name which reminds us of marriage and a possible romantic relationship, as is also remarked in Little’s article on Middle Passage. While on the Republic, Rutherford positions himself as a middle man who does not choose to take any side of the people on board but concentrates on the survival of the community. His experience on the slaver becomes his opportunity to probe into life lessons and discover a way “home.” Though his selfless attempts to take everyone home fails, all he learns from that moment results in a conviction pertinent to his new perception of “home,” which also associates with that of “freedom.” The implication of the following quotation reveals Rutherford’s idea about “home.” After he is rescued and gains consciousness on the Juno, he thinks to himself that:

Then, as before, I desperately dreamed of home. I’m sure the Allmuseri did the same, but home was a clear, positive image to them as they worked on the ship. As I [italics in original] remembered home, it was a battlefield, a boiling cauldron. It created white rascals like Ebenezer Falcon, black ones like Zeringue, uppity Creoles, hundreds of slave lords, bondmen cripple and caricatured by the disfiguring hand of servitude. Nay, the States were hardly the sort of place a Negro would pine for, but pine them I did. Even for that [italics in original] I was ready now after months at sea, for the strangeness and mystery of black life, even for the endless round of social obstacles and challenges and trials colored men faced every blessed day of their lives, for there were indeed triumphs, I remembered, that balanced the suffering on shore […]

Here, Rutherford mentions both the physical home of the Allmuseri, which refers to their home in South Africa, then contemplates deeply about his own “home.” The way

59. Juno is the name of a Roman goddess of marriage and childbirth. The association between this mythological goddess and the ship in Middle Passage is mentioned Jonathan Little’s critical article. See Little, “Revision of Self and Society: Middle Passage and Invisible Man,” 141.

60. Johnson, Middle Passage, 179.
he compares his own impression of America with “a battlefield, a boiling cauldron” indicates two things. First, he now accepts America as his home and embraces all its downsides as part of “home.” With his realistic perception of America where all kinds of people struggle to live their lives according to their beliefs, Rutherford can accept all the history and its people. When Rutherford says that “Nay, the States were hardly the sort of place a Negro would pine for, but pine them I did,” this implies Johnson’s acknowledgement of the traumatic history of the African American, but the need to move beyond this, to free oneself. Through Rutherford, Johnson carries on offering the notion of interdependence as a new way of looking at American cultural relations and society, which will break the dukkha which arises from the trap of dualism.

The narrative signifies Rutherford’s state of being at peace through his new perception of life. In contemplating his life upon the slaver, Rutherford notes:

Looking back at the asceticism of the Middle Passage, I saw how the frame of mind I had adopted left me unattached, like the slaves who, not knowing what awaited them in the New World, put a high premium on living from moment to moment, and this, I realized, was why they did not commit suicide. […] I felt no need to possess or dominate, only appreciate in the ever extended present.”

Rutherford’s transformation is evident here. From a man in search of a freedom based upon the misconception of the self, he transforms into a selfless man who is pleased with what he has at each present moment. Through him, Johnson points out the way a person can be at peace while living one’s life. Here, we see that Rutherford’s new perception of the self directly affects his perception of life and freedom. It turns him into a family man, ready for a family life. He willingly adopts Baleka, an Allmuseri orphan, as his daughter, and embraces Isadora as his life companion.

As discussed above, Middle Passage displays how the Buddhist principle of the Self and the understanding of interdependence alleviates people’s suffering from race relations and slavery. However, I have selected only one angle of the novel to

61. Ibid., 187.

62. Indeed, the closure of Middle Passage can also be treated as Johnson’s allegorical message. For details, see Byrd, ”Middle Passage: What Is the Nature of Freedom?,” 142–43; Storhoff, “Chapter 5: Middle Passage;” 180–81.
demonstrate Johnson’s belief in non-violence which corresponds with Socially Engaged Buddhism. In this thesis, I read *Middle Passage* as an allegory which Johnson uses as a means to communicate his idea of a possible solution to the problems African Americans have encountered. In *Dreamer*, also based upon the ideas of Engaged Buddhism, he uses the novel to show how the protagonist’s wisdom of self in *Middle Passage* contributes to the possibility of peace in a wider society.

**American Brotherhood and a Dream of an Integrated Community in *Dreamer***

In *Middle Passage*, the understanding of interconnectedness is presented as a primary idea which awakens Rutherford from his egocentric self to become a new altruistic person. He transforms from a man who sees no value in himself to be a man who sees his own value in helping others. In *Dreamer*, Johnson shows a greater benefit of the understanding of the interconnectedness and the non-self nature of beings in generating peace on a national scale through the fictionalized narrative of Martin Luther King Jr. Inspired by King’s spiritual strength, Johnson created *Dreamer* to communicate that the possibility of the “beloved community” of America did not fade away with King’s death. To illuminate this idea, Johnson demonstrates the bondage of brotherhood through the Buddhist concept of interconnectedness.

Based upon this idea, in this section, I contend that Johnson presents the manifestations of interconnectedness in three aspects. First, King’s perception of interconnectedness is the origin of his compassion and unconditional love for others. King had faith in the possibility of a “beloved community” in the United States. Second, Johnson interweaves the idea of interconnectedness and the notion of brotherhood in the novel by means of an allusion to the biblical story of Cain and Abel. This conveys that King’s healing vision may continue even without his physical presence. Finally, Johnson applies the idea of interconnectedness to his clarification of how America has the potential to become a community without division and iniquity despite its history of slavery and racial oppression.

*Dreamer* (1998) is the narrative of the life and attitudes of three main characters—the fictitious King at the age of 37, Matthew Bishop, a philosophy student, and Chaym Smith, a man who looks physically like King but has an antithetical worldview. The novel foregrounds the transformation of Matthew, a truth-seeker, who looks to King as his role model. In the novel, King assigns Matthew and Amy Griffith
to prepare needed information for Chaym and take care of him. While presenting Matthew as an observant narrator who is engrossed with King’s heroic image, the novel deconstructs King’s image of an ideal heroic leader by revealing some aspects of his weaknesses, thereby highlighting King’s spiritual strength, selflessness, and determination to create the “beloved community,” the community where human integration is cherished. In order to interweave the main ideas of the novel together, Johnson alludes to the story of Cain and Abel with its underlying connotations of betrayal and brotherhood.

As in Johnson’s other novels, the narrator of *Dreamer* is on a quest for selfhood. To be able to illustrate Matthew’s process of spiritual transformation and King’s inner strength, Johnson provides two perspectives in narrating the story. The novel’s points of view alternates between the perspectives of the fictitious King and Matthew, a young member of his assistant team at the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference). Through Matthew’s perspective, Johnson illustrates Matthew’s transformation and his understanding of King, which he learns throughout the story beginning in July 1966 and ending on the date of King’s funeral ceremony, April 5th, 1968. Over the course of the story, Matthew’s narration alternates with King’s inner thoughts, which partly underlines Matthew’s idealization of King’s altruistic deeds and portrays King as an ordinary human being in terms of his weariness, homesickness, disappointments and uncertainty. We are privy to King’s struggles to overcome many problems in order to carry on his mission as a civil rights leader.

According to Joseph Darda, Johnson started the project to write *Dreamer* after the 1992 LA Riots because the event reminded him of the 1966 Chicago West Side Riots. The novel revives two ideas of Martin Luther King Jr.: (1) the ideal of the “beloved community,” where people live peacefully in a society without any form of division and injustice; and (2) the idea of defeating evil and violence with unconditional love and nonviolence. These are the ideas King adopted from Mahatma Gandhi and Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk whom King nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967. In relation to *Dreamer*, Johnson has revealed that what he wished to offer

through *Dreamer* (1998) is a resuscitation of King’s “social vision for an America that has fallen away from the ideals of integration and brotherhood.” The two ideals could be possible if one accepts the interrelatedness of all beings.

In comparison to his previous novels, what Johnson especially highlights in *Dreamer* is no longer the metaphysical nature of the Self but how an understanding of the interdependent self leads to the cultivation of compassion and loving-kindness in an individual’s mind. He considers this quality as a thing which will sustainably result in each individual’s respect of nonviolent actions as espoused by King. This way, Johnson sees that the solution to the perennial racial problems in America is possible. This is evidenced by his explanation that “[w]e need to understand that nonviolence was never intended just to be a strategy for civil rights movements, but a way of life. We would be in a different position as a people, and America would be in a different position if we had heeded this man [MLK]. But America never really has.” Despite this regret regarding what happened to King, Johnson does not relinquish King’s so-called civil disobedience and uses *Dreamer* to convey that it is the responsibility of everyone to make the dream come true by carrying out what King started.

*Dreamer* suggests Johnson’s appreciation of King’s insight into interdependence/interconnectedness. Though *Dreamer* seems to foreground Christian beliefs as they are conveyed through King’s faith, in fact, Johnson embraces both eastern and western philosophies and faiths that enhance an understanding of the interrelatedness of human beings. In *Dreamer*, he adapts a biblical story to fit the main characters’ cultural contexts. However, the presence of eastern wisdom can also be seen throughout the novel. For example, in the prologue to the novel, Johnson describes the Chicago West Side riots as “a modern plain of Kurushetra,” the battlefield where brothers of the same blood fight each other. There is also a reference to the Bhagavad Gita, a nod to the Hindu tradition.


In “The King We Need: Teachings for a Nation in Search of Itself” (2014), Johnson reveals his opinion about the relation between King’s attitude and his own Buddhist-inspired idea that the principle of interdependence and interconnectedness is a fundamental idea which “resonates beneath the surface of King’s remarkable and too-brief thirty-nine years of life.”67 Similarly, Alice Walker also presents *The Color Purple* without overtly mentioning Buddhist terms but revealed in an interview that “*The Color Purple* is a Buddha book that’s not Buddhism.”68 In *Dreamer*, Johnson seems to look beyond the demarcation of religions and points to the universality of humanity’s selfless actions. This perspective is projected through the fictitious King. In the novel (and in his real life), he enduringly proposes nonviolence, agapic love, and integration as key concepts for the civil rights movement and as a way of life.

However, because of the allusion to the Story of Cain and Abel, the majority of critics, including John Whalen-Bridge, Gary Storhoff, Rudolph P. Byrd, and Marc C. Corner, have applied a theological approach to analyze Johnson’s *Dreamer*, stressing the interpretation of an association between the story of Cain and Abel and the main characters in *Dreamer*. Some others have applied a political approach to the novel. Among those critics, Preston Park Cooper is the only one who applies a Buddhist perspective to investigate Johnson’s engagement with the tenets of postmodernism and the idea of racism in *Dreamer* and points out that the root cause of social problems raised in the novel is “the placing of importance upon identity” and such problems “create the dissonance of racial prejudice.”69

While Cooper focuses on investigating the cause of racial conflict, I seek to pin down Johnson’s implicit proposal of how the problem can be healed. Therefore, in this analysis, I will investigate how Johnson implicitly answers his own question of “how to

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end evil without creating evil” which he articulates through King. In doing so, the discussion on Johnson’s *Dreamer* will be divided into four steps: (1) to analyze how Johnson dispels King’s idealized image and to identify the qualities of King’s spiritual strength; (2) to look at King’s vision of the interconnected world; (3) to examine Johnson’s depiction of the concept of brotherhood; and (4) to point out Johnson’s proposed solution to racial problems in American society.

**King’s Idealized Image and his Immortality**

In *Dreamer*, Johnson employs the idea of King’s immortality (the perpetuity of his vision) to convey two messages. Firstly, he uses it to point out that King’s idealized image is an illusion which becomes a hindrance to the possibility of American unity because it makes people look at King’s non-violent strategy as a dated idea after King’s death. In conveying this message, Johnson presents the illusory nature of King’s idealized image through Chaym’s and Matthew’s perception of King. Secondly, Johnson presents that if King’s “immortality” does exist it is manifest in later generations of Americans. He demonstrates this idea through the concept of interconnectedness, the idea which Johnson elaborates throughout the novel.

The immortality which is represented as the manifestation of the belief in the static self is presented in the first scene after Chaym meets King. Chaym says, “I don’t want just a job, Matthew. […] I want a li’l of what the good doctor in there has got in such great abundance,” and Matthew hears Chaym say, “Immortality [italics in original].”70 Regarding this perception of immortality, Storhoff clearly explains that “[t]he illusion that one individual can be ‘immortal,’ even be more important than another, depends on the belief that fame itself is a reality.”71 According to this explanation, Chaym’s perception of King as a heroic leader suggests to us his illusory perception of the self. After he accepts for the position as King’s stand-in, Matthew and Amy learn that Chaym had prepared for a long time to take on this role. Matthew, who also wishes to be an important person in King’s team, believes Chaym can easily double as King. He confesses to the reader that “I began to feel that, for all his

70. Johnson, *Dreamer*, 43.

exasperating qualities, perhaps he could stand in for King […]”72 Both Chaym’s and Matthew’s thoughts as quoted here reflect King’s image which is superficially perceived by people.

Regarding King’s idealized image, Johnson has remarked in an interview that King is “canonized and we revere him.”73 He points out that this makes us see no possibility to follow his way because we do not see the relation between ourselves and King. In order to deconstruct the idealized image and, at the same time, point to the association between King and the ordinary American person, in Dreamer Johnson allows us to enter the fictitious King’s inner life. In these chapters narrating Johnson’s King’s inner life, we see King’s inner conflicts which he tries to overcome. The main conflicts, as listed in the novel, are his discouragement and his uncertainty about the triumph of his principle against “evils.” There are times when he doubts the power of his non-violent way to counter that which he calls “evils” or the “polarities” of things.74 Johnson portrays King as a man capable of being disheartened, exhausted, and wanting to give up. He even confesses that “[m]any nights when he lay beside his wife, unable to sleep, he did want to put a gun to his head. […] and not once did he exclude himself from the realm of sinners, though more than anything else in this world he wanted to be a good man.”75 This demonstrates the obstacles faced by King, and the necessity of his spiritual strength to his cause.

Seemingly, Johnson realizes that when it comes to the self or identity of a revered figure such as Martin Luther King Jr., it is natural for people not to perceive King’s life as imperfect, unfinished, and transformative like their own lives. To demonstrate the theme of interconnectedness, Johnson illustrates how everyone is not unlike King by showing that their heroic figure is also an ordinary African American. To demonstrate how King becomes the heroic figure perceived by others, Johnson stresses King’s compassion and the loving-kindness that arise from his understanding of

72. Johnson, Dreamer, 86.
74. Ibid., 223.
75. Ibid., 195.
the non-self. These two qualities contribute to his faith in non-violent civil disobedience. Though Johnson inserts messages concerning this matter throughout the narrative, the one that best encapsulates King’s philosophy of life is the speech entitled “The Drum Major Instinct,” which he delivered at the Calvary AME.⁷⁶ This speech is inserted in the last chapter, before the assassination of King. King tells the audience, “[e]very night when I get down on my knees to pray or close my eyes in quiet meditation I’m holding a funeral for the self. I’m digging a little grave for the ego.”⁷⁷ As is implied here, King seems to be aware of his position as a role model. In this quotation, he encourages African American audiences to see the value of being selfless and egoless which he himself takes as a way of life. He points to the importance of detaching from one’s self and ego by further explicating that “[a]nd what’s left when you get the I [italics in original] out of the way? Only the others, living and dead, who are already so thoroughly integrated into our lives before you even began. Nothing stands alone.”⁷⁸ Through this, King illustrates how being selfless will result in a stronger community where people care about each other.

King’s Healing Vision: The Interconnectedness in Beings

Johnson does not present King’s selflessness as a heroic attribute without any cause. Rather, he sees it is important to present its strong background in King’s insight into the interdependent existence of beings. In Chapter 7 of the novel, King’s speech “The Drum Major Instinct” (1968) adduces his idea of interconnectedness:

Nothing stands alone. You know, not one member of the White Citizens’ Councils can finish breakfast in the morning without relying on the rest of the world. That sponge ‘Bull’ Conner bathes with came from the Pacific Islands. His towel was spun in Turkey. The coffee Orval Faubus drinks travelled all the way from South Africa, the tea from China, the cocoa from West Africa. And every time George Wallace or Malcolm X writes his name he’s using ink evolved from India, and an alphabet inherited from the Romans, who derived it from Greeks after they’d borrowed it from Phoenicians, who received their

⁷⁶ Johnson mentions that “The Drum Major Instinct” was King’s favorite speech. See Mudee, “The Human Dimension: An Interview with Writer-Philosopher Charles Johnson (1999),” 239.

⁷⁷ Johnson, Dreamer, 139.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 139.
symbols from Seirites living on the Sinai peninsula [sic.] between Egypt and Palestine [...]\textsuperscript{79}

This quotation illustrates that King not only sees the interconnectedness in humans but he penetrates all webs of interconnectedness across the world and across time. His comprehension of this makes him view his own self in others and encourages the respect of all lives.

When the fictional King finds cockroaches in a room in which he stays, he thinks of the Jain priests he met in Kerala, India. They reminded him of the reason not to harm any creatures. The Jain priests always carried brooms in order to sweep away any creatures which may possibly exist on the ground before they walked. King talks to himself:

\begin{quote}
Whatever it is, it is you. No, as much as he might want to, he could not harm even these loathsome things without harming himself. The exercise of reining in his revulsion would do him good, he thought, maybe even make him thankful to something he hated for giving him the opportunity to work through his disgust.\textsuperscript{80}
\end{quote}

This is one example of the life lesson regarding non-violence which King has gone through. His practice of subduing his unpleasant feelings toward others is based upon his grappling with the interconnectedness in all beings. He becomes a civil disobedience leader, not because of being born an idealistic good person, but because of his commitment to the process of purifying himself.

At this point, the idea of life as a process is invoked again. Johnson’s primary view on life and one’s self is used again in \textit{Dreamer} to convey his wish to offer a potential view on race, along with a relatively relevant perspective on the interracial history of America. Johnson conveys this attitude through a poem composed by his namesake Martin Luther:

\begin{quote}
This life, therefore
is not righteousness
but growth in righteousness
not health but healing
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 139–40.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 47.
not being but becoming
not rest but exercise

We are not yet what we shall be
but we are growing toward it.
The process is not yet finished
but it is going on,
this is not the end
but it is the road.

All does not gleam in glory
but all is being purified.81

Here, Johnson draws upon the poem composed by Martin Luther, the democratizing German Protestant reformer, to conjure the association between him and King in terms of spirituality. Martin Luther and King, though living in different times, had the same desire for harmony, solidarity, and purity. In Dreamer, as the fictitious King reveals in the novel, he always feels better when he contemplates the meaning of this poem. The poem suggests that both life and every aspect of life “is” a process. They are transforming all the time in the current of time and this is also the case for other lives. If a person is in pursuit of purity, it is significant that he/she needs to realize this process.

Therefore, in the novel, the narrator tells us that, whenever King feels desperate because of his self-judgement and his disappointment at himself, this poem reminds him of the fact that he himself (and others as well) “is” a process, not a pre-formed perfect good man. In spite of these facts about King’s inner life, it is unfortunate that Matthew, who wants to become an important person in King’s movement, and Chaym, who King wants to help, but however believes himself as King’s helper, never see the real King as an ordinary man with his own inner struggles. With their inability to see the interconnectedness between King and their selves, both men fail to see that they can be part of the movement that will change America.

Johnson interprets that, despite King’s intermittent suspicion of his own non-violent strategy, King gains his determination back because his understanding of the nature of life as a process under the natural law of interdependence. King thinks that “[t]here were many times when he wondered if he was wrong. […] Nonviolence, he felt, was an experiment with truth. It was a truth-seeking process. That was all in this

81. Ibid., 195.
world he could say with certainty [...]” 82 This quotation illuminates that King does not view his principles for civil disobedience as static, absolute solutions. He realizes that defeating “evils” is arduous work. Based upon his understanding of an interdependent existence, he says to himself that “[n]onviolence […] was an experiment with truth. It was a truth-seeking process. That was all in this world he could say with certainty.” 83

This conviction derives from two understandings of (i) the nature of life and one’s self which is empty of intrinsic self because its existence is dependent upon other elements; and (ii) dualism as the origin of social “sickness and evils” 83

We have already discussed the first of these understandings but the second requires further elaboration. After the fictitious King experiences violent attacks at Marquette Park, he tells his audience that fears are the source of “sickness and evil”:

In every one of those screaming white faces I saw hatred that obliterated the last vestiges of humanity. I saw sickness and evil brought on by segregation and sin-ruined lives. Because, you see, those people were living in fear. They were afraid that accepting Negroes as their neighbors—or anybody different—meant they’d lose their homes, their jobs, their place in society, possibly even their sons and daughters in marriage to people who don’t look the way they do. They feared losing their sense of self, and we all know that’s the most powerful fear on earth, the one that fuels all the others. Fear, I’ve been told, is a drug [...] 84

In this quotation, King elaborates that hatred, which is caused by fear, exists as the root cause of all, dualistic views on race. Because the white looks at “negroes” as the “other”, they overlook their shared human qualities. As he further describes, “[p]eople throwing bricks at phantoms. Shouting at shadows, since there are no Negroes, and whites either, except of course in their own deluded minds [...]” 85 Through this, King argues that, in fact, people are fighting not with real enemies but their own delusions. As shown in the above discussion about King’s perspective on interconnectedness, Johnson presents King’s appreciation of interconnectedness to emphasize that King’s

82. Ibid., 74.
83. Ibid., 138.
84. Ibid.
85. Ibid.
spiritual strength arises from his commitment to purify himself while he attempts to help alleviate suffering of the others.

**The Cain and Abel Story: The Brother-Relation between King and Others**

Also, based upon the idea of interconnectedness, Johnson presents the relationship between King and Chaym which he believes will later demonstrate an association between King and later generations of American people. He presents the Cain and Abel story to illustrate the theme of brotherhood which is represented through the relationship between Chaym and King in *Dreamer*. The Biblical story of Cain and Abel, the first two sons of Adam and Eve, in which Cain, who kills his brother Abel because he is infuriated that God is more pleased with Abel’s produce than his crops, is well known. As a consequence, Cain is cursed by God to exile. Although the reason Cain slays his brother is not often mentioned, it is generally regarded that Cain’s jealousy is the root of this evil deed. For Johnson, the Cain and Abel story offers an appropriate device in portraying America as a place of warring brothers. Marc C. Conner notes that “[t]he primary importance lies in the novel’s depiction of a world in strife, a world in which blood-hatred dominates.”

In *Dreamer*, Johnson presents a picture of human brothers in the different disguises of race and culture.

Johnson associates the Cain and Abel story with the ongoing situation in *Dreamer* by presenting Chaym and King as double characters with contrasting attitudes towards the value of life. This is evident when Matthew observes that:

> His [Cain’s] war was with God, the Father who spurned him. Of the two—him and Abel—only Cain possessed subjectivity. A complex inner life. It was said that Western man himself was Cain, cursed with the burden of restlessness and endless quest for selfhood. Down through the centuries, his name was spelled differently in different time. Caym, Kaym, even Chaym, were etymological variations on it.

Through this, Johnson directly pins down the association between the parable and the characters in *Dreamer*, stressing that the source of people's “restlessness and endless

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quest for selfhood” is their “complex inner life.” This indicates the importance of one’s appreciation of the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of all beings, which Johnson considers a potential perspective to bring about the ideal of racial reconciliation and individual inner peace. Chaym first appears in the novel as a pessimist with a dualistic belief in “predators and prey,” explaining to Matthew that “[…] there’s two kinds of people in this world. Predators and prey. Lions and lunch.”\(^88\) In opposition to Chaym’s belief, King perceives the relation of all beings as interdependent. The archetypal relation between Cain and Abel that is reflected in Chaym and King establishes a dialogue regarding King’s immortality which Johnson implicitly presents through Matthew’s perception of the relationship between King and all Americans.

While King’s insight into the interdependence and interconnectedness in all beings is underlined as an antidote to his intermittent self-doubt, Chaym, who is as knowledgeable as King, is presented as a man holding beliefs in binary oppositions. Similar to King, Chaym is an experienced philosopher. He reads a wide range of texts from Bible, theology, the Buddhist canon, Indian philosophy, mathematics, and Japanese manga, etc.\(^89\) He has even been trained in a Zen monastery in Japan. However, he lacks the spiritual strength King has. His attachment to binary opposition views and anger result from his being discriminated against and limits his belief in people’s potential to reform. Chaym’s worldview is similar to that of Captain Falcon in *Middle Passage*. He tells Matthew:

> You got to remember that nobody on earth likes Negroes. Not even Negroes. We’re outcasts. And outcasts can’t never create a community. I been to a lot of places and it’s the same everywhere. We’re despised worldwide. You ever thought we might be second-class citizens because generally we are [italics in original] second-rate?\(^90\)

As revealed here, while King has faith in the possibility of the “beloved community,” Chaym, like Falcon, repeatedly outlines his bitter anger at how African Americans have been oppressed, and his words reflect his own absorption of the racists’ views on race.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., 55.

\(^{89}\) Ibid., 58–59.

\(^{90}\) Ibid., 65.
Contrary to Chaym’s belief in the impossibility of the “beloved community,” Johnson presents the Evanston community and Jackson County as models of the communities where everyone helps each other. According to Amy, Evanston community is the place where African Americans such as Dr. Jennifer Hale and Robert Jackson have tried their best to enhance the quality of life for the African Americans in the community. Similarly, Jackson County is a community where African Americans pull together. Although these two communities are not exactly like King’s “beloved community” as they do not represent integrated communities, Johnson seems to use these two communities to stress the significance of people’s compassion and loving-kindness for others. For instance, this message is evident in the Griffiths’s altruistic deeds. Amy told Matthew and Chaym that in Jackson County the Griffiths are known as people who “[…] did not judge others by their possessions, dress, family pedigree, or how often they got their names in the newspaper. […] They did not hesitate to share what little they had, whether it was food, labor, their home, or the skills each had developed in order to survive.”

Although Chaym has acquired a wide range of knowledge, it leads him nowhere if he fails to understand the nature of the self and still attaches to the idea of the self as a static entity. His lack of wisdom is revealed in his directionless response to Amy’s story. He warns Matthew that “[a]ll narratives are lies, man, an illusion. […] If you want to be free, you best go beyond all that.” While Matthew seems to be convinced with Amy’s narrative, the pessimist Chaym applies his knowledge to convince him that “[w]ords are just webs. Memory is mostly imagination” to generalize the narrative of Jackson County as a lie. However, when Matthew throws him back a question, “To what?” Chaym cannot answer and replies: “That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

91. Ibid., 126–29.
92. Ibid., 89.
93. Ibid., 92.
94. Ibid.
95. Ibid.
As revealed in the above discussion, though Chaym’s suspicion is directionless, it seems that he persistently defies what others [such as King] leads him to without any cause. This indicates that Chaym lacks the spiritual strength which King fully possesses. In regard to this point, Cooper comments on the process that Chaym tries to imitate King:

It is a process that is quite easy on the outside, but somewhat difficult insofar as Smith more or less must master King’s speaking patterns, speechmaking inflections, and mannerisms, but hardest when it comes to qualities that Smith most wishes to copy—King’s inner strength, peace, and faith. Smith desires these because he knows that it is mostly these that provide King with his power and this serves as key to King’s eventual immortality.96

Here, Cooper’s explanation of Chaym’s failure is clear. Because he thinks that he is comparable with King in terms of his physical appearance and knowledge, Chaym is envious of King (an implicit representation of Abel with Chaym as Cain, in this instance). After he undergoes an assassination attempt intended for King, he learns that “King’s inner strength, peace, and faith” are not something easy to imitate. They are things one must cultivate from within. Later Chaym becomes more understanding of King’s position and seems to accept King’s principle of civil disobedience. He says to Matthew that “Little by little, … [I] learned that if there was a single philosophical law to the minister’s life, an essence, it was embodied in three profound ideals, Others first, Always.”97 Chaym’s acceptance of King’s ideals is signified by his agreement in signing the Decalogue of the Movement and in the shift in his drawing style from being “anguished and grotesque” to being “delicate [and] lovingly detailed.”98 As revealed in this discussion, Johnson presents the archetypal relation between Cain and Abel which is illuminated in Chaym and King and emphasized through their relationship. What makes Chaym and King different is King’s spiritual strength arises from his understanding of interconnectedness/interdependence.

96. Cooper, “‘All Narrative Are Lies, Man, an Illusion’: Buddhism and Postmodernism Versus Racism in Charles Johnson’s Middle Passage and Dreamer,” 198.


98. Ibid., 208–9.
Though Chaym begins to accept King, when the two FBI agents, Groat and Withersby, approach him, he is forced to do a mysterious job against his mentor. He admits to feeling, like Cain, that he has been abandoned by God. He says, “My faith was frail. Prayers had always failed me. Like millions of black men, I was a bastard who’d never known his father—the word used for people like me was ‘illegitimate.’ Whoever my father was, he’d rejected me long ago.” Here Johnson’s implicit comparison between Chaym and “millions of black men” portrays that being selfless while still oppressed by racism is very hard. Without a deep understanding of the interconnectedness between beings such as King has, racial segregation and other kinds of division will still exist.

King’s Healing Vision of Race: Non-violence Has Not Died

Although Johnson has sympathy for African Americans’ suffering, he stresses that dualistic views are the root cause of human divisions arising from a misunderstanding of the self as an isolated entity. At one point in the novel, King compares himself to “a tightrope walker straddling two worlds. One of matter. One of spirit. Every social evil he could think of, and every ‘ontological fear,’ as he was fond of saying lately, arose from that mysterious dichotomy inscribed at the heart of things: self and other, I and Thou, inner and outer, perceiver and perceived. It was schism that, if not healed, would consume the entire world.” Here, the fictitious King considers the failure to see the interconnectedness in all beings as an immense mistake.

For King, the only way to heal the “schism” is love, as he emphasizes in his speech “The Drum Major Instinct.” King stresses that “Keep feeling the need for being important. Keep feeling the need for being first. But I want you to be first in love. I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity. That’s what I want you to do […]” In correspondence with this message, Matthew notes that King advocates the ideas suggested by “Epictetus, Keats, Emerson, and Dunbar,” quoting that “[t]here will be no permanent end to the race problem until oppressed men

99. Ibid., 214.
100. Ibid., 18.
101. Ibid., 234.
develop the capacity to love their enemies.”102 This is the message which reveals that Johnson’s King is realistic about his pursuit of the American beloved community. He sees the dream to build a “beloved community” as a potential plan which can happen when people face their fears and face each other.

Johnson presents the Griffiths, the family of Amy, a female African American colleague, with whom Matthew falls in love, as a microcosmic example of the “beloved community.” Matthew conveys the message that James Griffiths, Amy’s great-grandfather, told his family about the definition of “family” for him that “The family, […], was far more than a group bonded by blood. More even than a collective that insured the survival of its members.”103 This shows that for people who have compassion and unconditional love for others, brotherhood is not limited only to a group of people tied together by blood bonds but encompasses other lives in the community. James further elaborates the meaning of family: “More than anything else, […], it was the finest opportunity anyone would have for practicing selflessness, for giving to others day in, day out, and for this privilege, this chance to outgrow his own petty likes and dislikes, opinions and tastes, he gave abundant thanks. If they wanted to be happy, he counselled them, the first step was to make someone else happy.104 Through this, Johnson implicitly shows his belief about the way to create a peaceful community which is founded on people’s insight into the interconnectedness in all beings. At the same time, he underlines that selflessness and altruistic actions are things we have to regularly practice.

Significantly, in emphasizing that point about agape and integration as a way of life, Johnson also indicates that these practices must come from an individual’s compassion and must be generated from within. This is suggested in a part of Smith’s observation of King’s strategy for the civil rights movement:

Yet over and over he insisted that the Movement needed to wage war on two fronts. First, changing the souls of men so that they not only protested for peace but in themselves were [italics in original] peace

102. Ibid., 136.
103. Ibid., 90.
104. Ibid.
embodied, loving in even life’s smallest affairs. And, second, he called for changing society so the soul might have a field in which to flourish. Neither front, he said, could be ignored, for one reinforced the other. Tremendous effort had gone into the second theatre of battle, I thought. Far less into the first.105

Through Chaym’s criticism, Johnson underlines that racial reconciliation and national peace lie equally on each individual’s inner peace and political confrontation and has also implicitly notes that people have given less importance to how we can cultivate peace within our heart. Also, this implies the reason Johnson stresses the importance of the understanding of interconnectedness/interdependence in Dreamer.

In order to associate the idea of interconnectedness as a source of agapic love with the concept of brotherhood, Johnson suggests that King’s non-violence is immortal. To examine this point, I will look at Matthew’s role. Byrd notes that the relationship between Chaym and Matthew reminds us of the relation between Reb, the Taoist character, and Andrew in Oxherding Tale.106 As a truth-seeker, Matthew, like Andrew and other protagonists in Johnson’s novels, scrutinizes Chaym’s character and observes King’s external life in order to understand his own self. Nevertheless, Matthew’s quest for selfhood is different from those characters in other novels by Johnson because Matthew not only understands his personal self as a composite self but he perceives himself as being interrelated with King and others. Through him, Johnson interweaves the theme of a personal self and national self by showing how one’s self is interrelated with others’ selves in the wider American community.

For instance, Matthew gains a new perception of the self, after he and Chaym study the amalgamation of the resources of King’s speeches. He thinks that:

[… ] if the self we constructed was anything more than a fragile composite of other selves we’d encountered—a kind of epistemological salad—indebted to all spoken languages, all evolutionary forms, all lives that preceded our own, so that, when we

105. Ibid., 62.

spoke, it could be said, in the final analysis, subjectivity vanished and the world sang in every sentence we uttered.  

The multiplicity and intertextuality of King’s speeches are analogous to the multiplicitious self. To Matthew, the speeches conjure up a clear picture of a constructed being, an entity of multiple aspects, layers of the past. Because of this understanding, Matthew notes that “the world sang in every sentence we uttered.” Johnson points to the presence of our past, which intermingles with each of our present moments. Mathew further contemplates the idea of a constructed self:

[...] In learning, there was an inescapable moment of alienation and displacement, a plunge into uncertainty and insecurity in the new, the other; but then, miraculously, as he relaxed from resisting the revolution possible with each new perception, that interval of disorientation passed, and he found that no matter how far his mind had traveled, or how alien the data of knowledge might have seemed at first, he had in the end through these studies encountered only a dimension of himself.

Here the epistemological perspective of experience, or the process of learning, is clarified. Matthew explicates the process in which each “moment of alienation and displacement” gradually transforms into “the new, the other.” Then that “other” becomes part of one’s new self at each moment, when one psychologically relaxes and stops resisting a new experience.

In connection to this idea, Johnson offers the idea of living at a present moment as a means of coming to terms with the past, of overcoming the U.S.’s history of slavery and racism. To delineate this idea, Johnson employs King’s speech “Reformist.” Chaym tells Matthew about his experience of attending King’s speech while he was a first year student at Columbia in 1964:

That speech had looked inward, not out. It emphasized being fully alive in the present, which I found appealing, because didn’t dwelling on the Promised Land or heaven or the Workers’ paradise postpone full immersion in life to the distant future, so that since the Civil War black people could never be at peace in the present, comfortable with

107. Johnson, Dreamer, 104.
108. Ibid., 104.
the past, and were waiting, for a day of redemption that forever receded like the horizon?\textsuperscript{109}

This living in the past and waiting for the future entail only dissatisfaction and pain. Thus Johnson, via King, proposes that one has to live life at each present moment with an understanding that the past has already ended and become part of the present and what the future will be depends on the present. This is a point we also find in Ozeki’s novels. Johnson regularly presents King as a person who can transcend his difficulties through mindfulness of the present moment. As Storhoff notes, “King is Johnson’s consummate symbol of Buddhist mindfulness as he accepts the world’s bitter divisions.”\textsuperscript{110}

In the last chapter of the novel, Johnson clearly shows his attitude toward the direction of the African American search for freedom and equality through Matthew. He demonstrates the relations between King, Chaym, and Americans more generally in Matthew’s revelation of his opinions about King’s death. Matthew answers Amy’s question of who kills Dr. King as follows:

\begin{quote}
We’d killed him—all of us, black and white—because we didn’t listen when he was alive […] Even before his death, we were looking for other, more “radical” black spokesmen. The Way of agapic love, with its bottomless demands, had proven too hard for this nation. Hatred and competition were easier.\textsuperscript{111}
\end{quote}

As revealed, Matthew thinks all Americans participated in the assassination because of everyone’s weaknesses. This message is affirmed by the fact that, after King’s death, people easily believe the propaganda disseminated by Floyd McKissick claiming that “Nonviolence is a dead philosophy” and that “[…] it was not the black people that killed it. It was the white people that killed nonviolence, and the white racists at that” because it is easier.\textsuperscript{112} Johnson deploys this instance as a backdrop to Matthew’s critical view on King’s non-violent civil rights strategy. Through Matthew’s voice, Johnson comments that the “Way of agapic love” needs one’s spiritual strength and his/her

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{110} Storhoff, “Chapter 6: Dreamer,” 205.
\textsuperscript{111} Johnson, Dreamer, 236.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 226.
profound understanding of the self and interconnectedness in beings. People tend to choose what is easier so, Matthew notes in above quotation, they “were looking for another, more radical black spokesman.” Thus Matthew’s remark that “[w]e’d killed him—all of us, black and white” implies that everyone’s attachment to dualistic view on race which causes hatred and competition to arise is the root cause of King’s death.

Johnson integrates ideas about the reactions to King’s agapic love, the concept of brotherhood, and the Buddhist concept of interconnectedness. Zen Buddhism believes that all living things have the potential to attain a state of enlightenment, zatori. It is a person’s “wrong view” which comes from his/her misplaced pursuit of a static, permanent self or dualistic views which hinder the attainment of zatori. In Dreamer, Johnson’s concept of brotherhood is based on this Zen perspective and the concept of interconnectedness/interdependence so he proposes that King’s self and others’ selves are interrelated. When Matthew says to Amy that “[w]e are all Canites. And deservedly cursed. Did we not kill the best in ourselves when we killed King?” Matthew not only compares all Americans to Canites, he also relates the reader to King, a representative of Abel. This is also apparent when Amy asks: “[w]hat about Chaym? Where do you think he is?” and Matthew answers, “Everywhere.” Matthew says, “[w]asn’t every murder a suicide as well?”. This logic which derives from the Buddhist principle of interdependence renders the idea that killing others is like killing ourselves.

Incorporating the Buddhist concept of interconnectedness, Johnson revives King’s concepts to eradicate social prejudices. He implies that to achieve King’s dream of “the beloved community,” despite difficulties, we have to counter evil or violence with nonviolence and unconditional love. Secondly, such love cannot be merely by one superficially or physically imitating King, but by understanding that the interdependent self and unconditional love have to be cultivated from the inside of a man. This gives individuals an insight into the inter-relationality of life and transcends dualistic views. Johnson underlines the process required to reach this state in Dreamer, but he also points out America’s failure to promote the brotherhood King foretold.

113. Ibid., 236.
114. Ibid.
115. Ibid.
All in all, in this chapter, we have looked at *Middle Passage* (1990) and *Dreamer* (1998) presenting the Buddhist concept of the interconnectedness/interdependence of beings. In both novels, Johnson demonstrates the different ramifications of holding a belief in the static and fixed self and an understanding of the interdependent nature of the self which entails an individual’s altruistic deeds, as we have seen in Rutherford Calhoun in *Middle Passage*. In *Dreamer*, Johnson revives King’s three major concepts which he believes will help create a “beloved community” among the contemporary readership. The three concepts are nonviolence, agapic love, and integration. In making the “beloved community” possible, Johnson implicitly proposes that each individual is an important constituent of this “beloved community.” Therefore, he implies throughout the novel that the success or failure of creating a “beloved community” depends upon us all. We can see that in both *Middle Passage* and *Dreamer*, Johnson suggests that the fundamental point we all need is to understand the interdependent nature of the self and life. Through this, one will transform from being like Cain to become a less selfish and more selfless person like King, the personification of Abel in the novel. In the next chapter, I will extend my discussion to how an understanding of the self and interconnectedness are related to the issues of ecological problems in Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* (1998) and *All Over Creation* (2002), two novels which investigate how human life is interrelated with the non-human world.
Chapter Four

Interdependent Lives and Human Responsibility

In this chapter, the discussion centers on Ruth Ozeki’s application of the Buddhist principle of interconnectedness as an explanation of the nature of the Self in My Year of Meats (1998) and All Over Creation (2002). The two novels mainly concern the physical repercussions of the use of hormones in American meat and the production of GMO potatoes upon both producers’ and consumers’ lives. Ozeki, a Japanese-American writer, a Zen Buddhist priest and a documentary producer, has explained that her first two novels—My Year of Meats and All Over Creation—see the notion of interrelatedness or interdependence as being presented through “the connections between the way our food is produced and who we become.”¹ These novels offer the reader a temporal dimension of the Buddhist philosophy of the Self through the principle of interconnectedness.

Ozeki’s demonstration of the relation between the Buddhist notion of interconnectedness and the relation between the human world and non-human world can be situated as part of “deep ecology” which emerged in the 1970s. The term “deep ecology” was coined by Arne Naess in 1973.² According to Pradittasanee, it is the movement which holds separate ideology from “shallow ecology.” While deep ecologists believes in the intricate interconnectedness between the human world and non-human world which is based on the understanding of interdependence in all beings, the belief in “shallow ecology” which contributes to economic growth is founded on the ideology that a human’s self has an entire entity and does not relate to the non-human

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¹. Eleanor Ty, “‘A Universe of Many Worlds’: An Interview with Ruth Ozeki. (Interview),” MELUS 38, no. 3 (2013): 162.

world. In the “deep ecology” thinkers began to view the association between ethics and metaphysics, as we will see in Ozeki’s works.

Ozeki overtly states in an interview that the Buddhist notion of interconnectedness is a primary Buddhist perspective of her novels, alongside other Buddhist doctrines. She reveals her perspective on the existence of all beings as follows:

I see them all as interrelated. I see them all as inseparable, a kind of interconnectedness…. Of course, this notion [interconnectedness] really comes from Buddhism. So much of what I am writing in this book [A Tale for the Time Being] is informed by basic Buddhist principles—of interdependence, impermanence, interconnectedness—these kinds of things.

Ozeki’s assertion about the integration between her religious beliefs and her secular perceptions of the contemporary world indicates that, to her, the ability to penetrate common characteristics in all beings, starting from interconnectedness, then moving on to interdependence, interrelatedness, and impermanence is of the utmost importance in living one’s life. All of these ideas are part of the fundamental teachings of Buddhism that will lead a person to ultimate spiritual achievement, to be liberated from suffering. Buddhists believe that when a person acknowledges their experience of dukkha—“the suffering or deep unsatisfactoriness that pervades human experience”—and want to


4. Indeed, “deep ecology” is viewed as a movement of ecologists with different ideologies and religions such as Buddhism, Hindu, and Christianity who adopt the same lifestyle which enhances the harmony between humans and ecology. For details see Pradittatsanee, 108–12.


6. According to the Blackwell Companion to Buddhist Philosophy, “[t]he Buddha portrayed in the canonical texts was preoccupied with one central problem: how to overcome dukkha […]” with this being “the soteriological aim at the heart of all Buddhist thought and practice.” Each practitioner works towards gaining the absolute truth, this being regarded as the attainment of enlightenment. Also, it is worth noting that enlightenment in the Buddhist context does not refer to the possession of divine knowledge or any conceptual knowledge as this would fail to liberate an individual’s mind from dukkha. Instead, Nhat Hanh further explains that enlightenment is held to be “[l]iberation” that allows the practitioner “to go from the world of signs to the world of true nature.” For details, please see Steven M. Emmanuel, “Introduction,” 5; Hanh, The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy and Liberation, 125.

The way to uproot *dukkha* is to study the true nature of one’s self, ideally, by practising insight meditation. When practising “insight meditation” (this term is transliterated from *vipassanā* which means “insight”) yields a fruitful result, the practitioner will be enlightened through insight into three fundamental Buddhist teachings: (i) the four noble truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*), (ii) the three common characteristics of existence (*tilakkhana*)—impermanence (*anicca*), suffering or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and emptiness (*anattā*); and (iii) interdependence (*patīccasamuppāda*), from which the principle of interrelatedness or interconnectedness is derived. At this point, we will see that these three fundamental teachings have been drawn upon in the in-depth analyses of the selected novels to show the potential of Buddhist perspective on the Self and one’s self in the racial contexts in the three previous chapters. In this chapter, the emphasis is given to Ozeki’s employment of the Buddhist principle of interdependence and interconnectedness to indicate the interrelation between human beings and the ecological environment in which they exist.

**The Interconnectedness and the Question of American Identity in *My Year of Meats***

Published in 1998, *My Year of Meats* is the result of Ozeki’s thirteen-year experience working as a documentary filmmaker. The novel raises questions about a contemporary existence in which people have lost their ability to penetrate the interdependence, interconnection, and interrelations that exist between humans and other beings. Ozeki discusses these concepts through the interwoven narratives of the

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8. Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy and Liberation*, 221–49; Gaytso, *The Meaning of Life: Buddhist Perspectives on Cause and Effect*, 35–51. *Patīccasamuppāda* is translated into many terms. For example, Thich Nhat Hanh refers to this principle as “Interdependent Co-arising,” “Interdependence” and “Interbeing”. In contrast, Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, uses the term “Dependent-arising” alongside an explanation for this usage. The interpretations given by both Hanh and Gyatso as to the principle can be divided into three levels. One level is concerned with the Buddhist twelve links of dependent arising as given in the Pali canon. The second and third level is applied to all beings and phenomena because all have some parts that depend upon another’s parts. It is the law of causality that leads to Buddhist teachings of duality and non-duality.

9. In this section, I will address the principle of interconnectedness by referring interchangeably to interrelation and interconnection. This is because the relation of events and the
female characters and their interrelated stories of meat. Regarding the title “My Year of Meats,” Ozeki notes that she intentionally put every word in the title. She collected the material for writing this novel from her own experiences when she worked as a documentarian. As she notes in her article on “My Year of Meats,” the title gives a nostalgic sense of the protagonist’s personal experience through the words “my year.” The publisher and Ozeki decided to use the word “meats” to make it sound neutral. This idea was to let the novel communicate with its reader the protagonist’s exploration of her own experience.

Although the narrative utilizes alternating multiple perspectives and multi-genre sources of information, the novel mainly revolves around a single year in the life of Jane-Takagi Little, a Japanese-American documentary filmmaker from the United States, and Akiko, a Japanese housewife in Japan. Ozeki opens the novel with Jane’s wavering decision about her job. The narrative maintains this focus throughout by exploring, in depth, Jane’s struggle in choosing between her responsibilities as a documentarian and her need for money. This need for money corresponds with her decision as to whether she will conform to capitalist ideals as represented by the BEEF-EX Company or if she will instead become a socially responsible journalist. Ozeki not only raises the concept of interconnectedness between her own self and other beings by linking all of the characters of the novel together but furthers this theme by suggesting that individuals must seek to resolve problems within contemporary society. This latter issue is presented as the benefit of an individual’s awareness of the interconnectedness of beings, which is generally considered a significant aspect of Engaged Buddhism.

Ozeki’s interpretation of the Buddhist notion of interconnectedness/interrelatedness in My Year of Meats though is actually based upon Buddhist philosophy of the Self and non-Self, is interested in the notion of causality and the interdependence of beings in a general sense, thus explaining the relation of an event

existence of beings, as is manifested in My Year of Meats, is mostly about the cause and the effect of events rather than their interdependent or interconnected relationship.


(as a cause) with another event (as a consequence). As a result, the interrelation of things is emphasized. Subsequently, we can say that one event is responsible for another event. If many events occur, it becomes harder to separate or isolate a single incident within this chain. In My Year of Meats, this interpretation is evident in the consequences of Jane’s first decision, her becoming a producer of “My American Wife,” a TV documentary series. In viewing the interpretation of interconnection in light of the notion of causality, in this section I argue that Ozeki uses My Year of Meats to depict the circle of interconnection between human choice, human decision, human actions, and their respective impacts. This is achieved through a discussion regarding the interrelation of industrial meat production and its impact upon human bodies, with Jane, as kind of moral compass.

As I have suggested, the explication of Ozeki’s interpretation of interconnection is demonstrated through the discussions of Jane’s choices, decisions, actions and spiritual growth during “a year of meat.” Jane’s narrative of her experience incorporates the problematic concept of “Meat is the Message,” a key idea of the “My American Wife” documentary. The job description received by Jane from her sponsor, the BEEF-EX Company, indicates that her mission is to disseminate the myth of America in the series. This need to dramatize the myth arises from the desire to boost the sale of American beef in Japan.12 Through Jane being conflicted between her responsibilities and her need for money, Ozeki illuminates the interrelation that exists between human actions and its impact upon one’s own life. This can be seen in the relationship between the irreconcilability of ethics within a capitalist system.

In My Year of Meats, Ozeki applies her perspective, as a documentarian, and her experience as an Asian-American, to the characterization of Jane. This results in the novel foregrounding Jane’s inquiry into the ethical issues pertaining to industrial meat production in the United States, questions that arise from her doubts regarding an idealized American national identity. The myth, as is propagated by the BEEF-EX Company, includes the characterization of All-American white middle-class wholesomeness as the quintessential attribute of American identity, with this then excluding the diversity of class, sexuality and race that is also present in the population.

The latter characteristics are components that Jane perceives to be inarguable parts of identity and national identity. These two disparate discourses of American national identity trigger Jane’s skepticism towards the issue of an authentic or “whole” American identity, with Jane’s subsequent investigation thus illuminating the interrelation of human actions and their consequences.

The Selfish or the Selfless: a Difficult Choice in A Capitalist World

In order to show how her choices affect her decisions, how her decisions stimulate her to take action and how her actions affect her life and the lives of others, Jane’s ideological transformation will be examined in this section. Through her experiences as a producer of the “My American Wife” documentary, changes in Jane’s attitude towards the responsibilities of documentarians during the year of meats opens discussions on two things: the perception of a personal self in Jane’s view and the interrelatedness of Jane’s self with others. Jane directly articulates her ideological transformation through her first-person narration by asserting that “[m]y Year of Meats […] changed my life. You know when that happens—when something rocks your world, and nothing is ever the same after?”13 In referring to her experience of making a show that concerns meats, she notes how “something” became a turning point in her life, a catalyst from which her worldview and her life began to change. By stating the year of meat as a duration, Jane notes that this period has allowed her to learn a number of real-life lessons about the interrelations between individual human choice and human life more generally. When Jane ultimately decides to accept the job offered by the BEEF-EX Company, her decision is driven by the perception of her own self as a single separate “self” who just needs to earn a living. This can be seen through the conflict that arises between Jane’s conviction as a documentarian and her job as a producer of “My American Wife.”

From the beginning of the novel, Jane is positioned as the moral compass of the narrative. Ozeki begins the work with Jane suffering a dilemma—having to choose between remaining an unemployed documentarian or becoming a “beef seller” for a capitalist company. Through these circumstances, Jane is lured into the mechanisms of

a corporate system, an economic mode of production represented by the BEEF-EX Company and its policy to sell beef. However, while she gives consideration to the benefits that she could potentially gain, Jane becomes gradually more doubtful concerning the veracity of her choice. Jane once tells us that, to her, “[d]ocumentarians are suckers for good narrative, since we have to wait patiently for them to happen and can’t just make them up from our imaginations.”14 In Jane’s articulation of the documentarian’s role, she not only stresses her belief that she must be a truthful reporter, she also employs the phrase “make them up from imagination” to associate what she is doing for “My American Wife” with the fabrication of information.

Moreover, despite the guilt that Jane feels in continuing in her job, upon her realization that she is pregnant her willingness to conform to the sponsor’s demands increases. She justifies this change of heart by declaring that: “it was up to me to provide for the child, and the only way to do that was to keep my job.”15 Here, Jane begins to imply that at this difficult time of her life, she chooses to perceive her own self as a separate entity, a result of her need to earn a living. Jane’s confession reveals that an inner conflict has arisen between maintaining her integrity as a documentarian and doing whatever she can to earn money. This is evident in her saying that: “[a]lthough my heart was set on being a documentarian, it seems I was more useful as a go-between, a cultural pimp, selling off the vast illusion of America to a cramped population on that small string of Pacific islands.”16 At this point of her life, although Jane accepts the offer to work for the capitalist organization, the fact that she calls herself a “cultural pimp” is indicative of the bitter conflict in her heart. She realizes that by deciding to work within a capitalist company, an entity focused entirely on profits, she has positioned herself as a “cultural seller,” defined here as a person whose job is to fabricate information for the purposes of promoting U.S. beef.17 In other words, her

15. Ibid., 274.
16. Ibid., 14.
17. This point is also briefly mentioned in Nina Cornyetz’s “The Meat Manifesto: Ruth Ozeki’s Performative Poetics” whereupon she discusses the characterizations of Jane and Joichi Ueno: “Representation = selling cultural illusions is literalized in the debut of characters as caricatures replicating reciprocal Japanese and American racist stereotypes.” For details, please see Cornyetz, “The Meat Manifesto: Ruth Ozeki’s Performative Poetics,” 212.
responsibility as a producer of the series is to promote a transatlantic myth of the beef representing the “heartland of America [in] the homes of Japan,” rather than communicating the truth as responsible documentarians are expected to do. The use of the phrase “heartland of American” here implies a constructed image, connoting an edible commodity ready to be served in “the homes of Japan”. It is this notion that Jane considers to be a deliberate misrepresentation of America national identity and the product the company are trying to sell.

The conflicting opinions about diversity and non-diversity in American culture are introduced in the novel through the misrepresentation of the American image as proffered by the BEEF-EX Company. In considering Jane’s choices and her subsequent decisions, we can see that despite her identifying the misrepresentation of the image of the United States, Jane undertakes the job and takes on the proviso stated that “[THE] MOST IMPORTANT THINGS [of the series] IS VALUES, WHICH MUST BE ALL-AMERICAN.” The characterization of “All-American”, as described in a fax issued by Jane’s employer, suggest images of wholesomeness, attractive clean houses, exciting hobbies, and delicious meat recipes. These lifestyle markers, “attractiveness, wholesomeness, warm personality,” as overtly stressed by the BEEF-EX Company, highlight how investment in the construction of [the] “All-American image” means an investment in creating a perceived “value” for their commodity. Ultimately, it is this value that can be changed into profits.

Therefore, for the company, their investment has nothing to do with the authenticity of American identity or the ethical responsibilities of the media to their subjects or viewers. Nina Cornyetz raises a similar critique, noting that, “[…] the Japanese sponsors are interested only in the cultural myth that will best sell meat to the Japanese consumer by reproducing the stock images of American abundance.” This objective of the BEEF-EX Company leads Jane to the conflicted position of being a

18. Ozeki, My Year of Meats, 14.
19. Ibid., 17.
20. Ibid., 16.
21. Ibid.
mechanism of the capitalist company and a documentarian caring about the ethical responsibilities of the media. It is this choice, as presented at the outset of the story, which Ozeki uses to demonstrate the interrelation of human choice, human action, and their impact upon human bodies. Furthermore, in this regard, these interrelated aspects are positioned as an unavoidable and inevitable chain of cause and effects.

Through this novel, Ozeki suggests that the consequence of the BEEF-EX Company’s concept of capitalism can be seen through Jane’s resistance to the company’s policy and her inquiries into the true characteristics of American identity in terms of class, race, and sexuality. This conflict becomes more antagonistic when Kato, Jane’s boss from the Japanese TV company, emphasizes that Jane must exclude “undesirable things that are physical imperfections, obesity, squalor, and second class peoples.” Realizing that this diktat amounts to discrimination, Kato rationalizes his instructions about the “second class peoples” by asserting that “the reference to ‘second class peoples’ does not [italics in original] refer to race and class.” He defends this idea, and the criteria, by stating that the ideas are derived from marketing research that had been conducted in Japan.

However, by invoking this sanitized representation of the cultural aspects of American identity, deliberately constructed by excluding particular characteristics present in the US population, Ozeki raises questions about the responsibilities of the TV media. These questions, articulated through Jane’s conflicted decisions as a documentarian, provide two benefits. On the one hand, the skepticism given towards the toxicity of hormones in the American meat is designed to open up discussion regarding the relationship between the way food is produced and human life. This point is connected to the manifestation of the characters’ illnesses and infertility. On the other hand, while the content of the novel seems to foreground a myriad of political issues pertaining to gender, class, sexuality and race, at the heart of it, those inquiries or discussions are deployed as a means to illustrate the potential consequences of an individual’s “ignorance” of the interconnectedness between human and non-human beings seen primarily in Jane’s contemplative musings.

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23. Ozeki, My Year of Meats, 16.
24. Ibid., 17.
To exemplify how Ozeki deploys Jane’s inner conflict to open discussions regarding the relationship between meat production and human bodies, one can look at how Jane’s eventual decision stems from her comprehension regarding the interrelation of things. Upon encountering a number of people and witnessing their medical illnesses as well as her own fertility that have resulted from the contaminated meats, Jane is no longer able to blindly accept the mores of corporate capitalism. From this growing skepticism, regarding the misrepresentation of the American image, Jane tries to find a balance between her sponsor’s demands and her own beliefs. Jane describes the turning point in her ideology as occurring in the fifth month of the year of meat. Here, when considering the characteristics of the American wives’ families, Jane points to how “[t]he Martinez family would obviously break this mold.”

Through the first-person narrative, Jane looks at the attributes of the American family as designated by the BEEF-EX Company to draw attention to the inauthenticity of these characters. From this point in the novel, Jane’s rebellious actions allow Ozeki to present another and different representation of American national identity, which is suffused with diversity.

The first act of rebellion occurs when Jane decides to resist her sponsor’s demand and proceeds to film American families whose lives reflect the diversity of American culture—specifically in terms of class, race, and sexuality. Those families include Cathalina Martinez (Cathy) and Alberto (Bert) and their immigrant Mexican family living in Texas, Mrs. Helen Dawes’s poor but warm and lively family in Harmony town, Mississipi, and the family of a lesbian couple, Dyann and Lala, who are vegetarians due to their distrust of American meat. The recipes used by these three families, alongside those characteristics which had previously been regarded as those of so-called second-class families, are dismissed by Jane’s sponsor. In presenting these diversified aspects of race, class, and sexuality, Ozeki emphasizes the relationship between how meat is produced and the human body itself. She aligns Jane’s doubts regarding the safety of food through her interpersonal experiences with these families. Jane’s inquiry begins to incorporate an understanding of the toxic drugs, hormones, chemicals and poison residues found in meat, interweaving Jane’s story with those of family so thereby narratologically demonstrating the principle of interdependence.

25. Ibid., 73.
The first skeptical view on this matter emerges from the evidence exposed in the body of Mr. Purcell Dawes whose voice has changed and who has grown breasts because of diethylstilbestrol, an artificial estrogen injected into chickens. This develops into a major moral concern for Jane when she later comes upon the symptoms of premature thelarche in a five-year-old, Rose, at the Dunn & Son feedlot. While interviewing Mrs. Bunny Dunn about the effects of the hormones on her daughter’s body, Jane describes the feelings of the mother as “[a]ll the pain of her own freaky career seemed to hang in the gaps between her words and then spread like an oily wake, wide, in the silence behind them.” Thus, this scene shows the human predicament that is generated when human attempts are made to control and modify natural life in order to serve the capitalist economy. Bunny’s suffering is not only the result of her own concerns about Rose’s abnormal body but is also a guilt derived from the mechanisms of meat production. This illustration of the interrelation between food and human bodies appears repeatedly throughout the novel until it finally comes full circle. Ultimately, DES and Lutalyse, the hormones used in cattle, cause Jane to miscarry her baby while she is shooting an episode with Mrs. Bunny Dunn. It is this occurrence, and the realization of the relationship between the meat production and her own human body, that stimulates Jane to investigate the way DES hormones are used in the American meat market. This investigation pushes Jane towards realizing that human actions have an inevitable and unavoidable impact upon others.

The Transformative Self and the Realization of the Interconnectedness in Beings

Ozeki utilizes concerns regarding American national identity to illuminate the idea of interrelation in My Year of Meats. She appears to be pressing an understanding of America as a land of diverse races, classes, and sexualities. A strong example of this can be seen in an incident that occurs after the documentary episode on the Mexican family which, Jane thinks, “would obviously break this mold [the ideal middle-class white American].” For this episode, in presenting the full diversity of American culture, Jane fails to gain her sponsor’s support and begins to think deeply about what

26. Ibid., 324.

27. Ibid., 73.
“reality” is in relation to what American identity is. When preparing to film the Dawes family, Jane tries to impress the notion of interconnection between people upon the sponsor. She explains that “[…] people all over the world should try to learn about each other and understand each other, and that is what our television program is about, so I am here to ask you to share your faith with the people of Japan.”

In simultaneously attempting to keep her job while also maintaining the integrity and responsibilities required of her as a documentarian, Jane tries to persuade her sponsor to allow her to convey the full diversity of American communities.

Jane echoes this similar message of a black preacher in Harmony, Mississippi. This speech, as delivered by the preacher to his congregation, points to:

[...] how the world seems so big and strange, but really it’s just made up of countries, which are made up of states, which are made up of towns, which are made up of communities, which are made up of neighbors, which are made up of families, and so on.

Through this, the preacher emphasizes that nations are merely imaginary compilations of various smaller scale units. This depiction of the web of interconnection and the relatedness of all beings is presented at a timely moment; a moment prior to the African-American family of Miss Helen Dawes being excluded from “My American Wife” because they are black, obese, and poor. Most importantly for the sponsors however, the Dawes family do not cook beef, a product extolled by the BEEF-EX Company.

In my reading of My Years of Meats, I agree with Jennifer Ladino’s interpretation of Ozeki’s stance that the novel emphasizes “diverse communities and makeshift families.” However, in focusing on how interrelation is implicit in the narrative, I propose that the novel does not restrict itself solely to stressing the concept of diversity as embraced by Jane. On the contrary, I hold that Ozeki deploys Jane’s disorientation between the diversity and non-diversity of the United States to arouse the

28. Ibid., 123–24.
29. Ibid., 133–34.
reader’s skepticism towards a singular vision of American national identity; she forces us to question how their perception of American identity is shaped. Through this, we are liable to be stimulated into reconsidering the existence of our own selves in relation to the interrelated components of a multi-faceted reality. It is for this reason that the two discourses of American national identity as discussed in *My Year of Meats* are presented as merely two representations of reality.

These two images of America, as presented through the perspectives of Jane, who has first-hand experience in the United States, and Akiko, who is presented as a Japanese wife perceiving the illusory image of America through “My American Wife,” indicate that authenticity, “truth” or what is believed to be “reality” is variable. Indeed, it is this truth that reminds Jane of the importance of her responsibilities as a person working in the media. As is implied through Jane’s narrative, the mythology of America as a land of freedom and wholesomeness is merely a representation and quite possibly a misrepresentation. We are persuaded by Jane, through her first-person narrative, to believe that her endeavors have intended to present as authentic a picture of American communities as possible.

Nevertheless, after Jane receives Akiko’s message detailing her belief about the benefits of eating meats and the gender diversity in America, Jane comes to fully realize the significance of her responsibility as a documentarian to the audience. Jane explains that “[m]aybe my shows weren’t much as documentaries, but I had believed in them. And Akiko’s fax brought my audience, and my responsibility, into sharp focus. It was clear to me that I couldn’t continue to celebrate beef. I had to tell some truths about meats, even if it meant getting fired.”

This reasoning allows Jane to realize that the image she has attempted to create is at odds with the truly multi-faceted nature of American culture. Jane finally sees the physical web of the interconnection among her decision, her actions, and the consequences. The above quotation demonstrates Jane’s strong determination to maintain her moral integrity, a desire that emerges from her grasping the interrelation that exists between her “self” as a documentary producer, Akiko as a receiver, and the cause and effect of the messages that she chooses to show to the viewer. In addition, the fact that Jane mentions “some truths” also suggests that

she identifies that the knowledge about meat she is going to provide for her audience is just a representation of the truth, not the entirety of the truth. Therefore, in terms of Ozeki’s discussions as to the representation of American identity, Jane provides a succinct summary whereupon she tells us that “[i]n the Year of Meat, truth wasn’t stranger than fiction; it was fiction.”32 This point is directly linked with the discursive discussions given towards “truth/reality/authenticity” that intertwine within the novel.

Cornyetz notes that “[t]ruth, deceit, and authenticity become slippery terms that invade or deconstruct one another.”33 She further asserts that the slippery concept of truth also pertains to Jane’s search for selfhood in terms of her American identity. Although I agree that “truth” is employed to add nuance to Jane’s search for her identity as an American, I hold that the use of this discussion is put forward to highlight the importance of the interrelation or interconnection of beings. To illuminate this point, and as is implied in the novel, each retold “reality” is merely a story conveyed from a certain viewpoint. In other words, it is not “reality” itself. Thus, so-called “truths” are merely representational realities. This idea is evident in Jane’s contemplation that: “[t]ruth lies in layers, each of them thin and barely opaque, like skin, resisting the tug to be told. As a documentarian, I think about this a lot. In the edit, timing is everything.”34 Ozeki is evidently playing with the word “lies” in this statement. Jane’s message conveys that the truth within the delicate layers of documentary are interrelated to one another. While one reading points to the term “lies” being used to compare with “truth” in this rhetorical context, it might also be interpreted as referring to the so-called truth that can be used to create multi-layered lies or illusions.

With Jane mulling over this point, the truth, as represented by a documentarian, necessarily lacks authenticity because it can ultimately only be a constructed truth. This conclusion can also be seen in Jane’s confession as to the distortion of the story concerning Lara and Dyann: “And so I continued, taking out the stutters and catches from the women’s voices, creating a seamless flow in a reality that

32. Ibid., 425.
34. Ozeki, My Year of Meats, 210.
was no longer theirs and not quite so real anymore.” The distorted episode, that which focused on Lara and Dyann, is compromised by Jane in order to make it more in accordance with her sponsor’s demand. Moreover, Jane’s realization as to the construction of reality suggests that different representations can exist of one experience. In other words, disparate depictions can be produced of the same thing by different people and at different times, with this resulting in many “truths/realities” becoming apparent. This point opens an inquiry into whether an absolute fixed or true identity of Americans exists or not.

The invocation of this inquiry is demonstrated with regard to the image of America as a land of freedom and diversity. For example, in the novel Jane criticizes the real-life case of Rodney Dwayne Peairs, a story in which Peairs shot a Japanese exchange student, Yoshihiro Hattori, upon the latter ringing Peairs’s doorbell to ask for directions. In the novel, such xenophobia can be read as pointing to two primary topics. Firstly, it is presented as an act that becomes controversial because of cultural misunderstandings. Monica Chiu views this violence as resulting from “a national obsession with the self, with an American identity,” while the Japanese media “exaggerated American’s dependence on guns.” This point is also addressed in the novel when Jane comments that after she has researched into the case she finds that “we [Americans] are a grisly nation.”

The idealized America presented in “My American Wife,” the land of freedom as Akiko perceives it, and the nation being obsessed with violence which Jane mentions, present different discourses of “America.” This dichotomy is a good example of Ozeki’s skeptical view towards “truth” and “reality.” Here, “truth” or “reality” is merely a fragment of the interconnected network of the existence of beings. It can thus be said that, in My Year of Meats, there is no authentic American-ness. Instead, there are only various discourses of American national identity, the validity of which depend on each discourse’s aims and context. Secondly, the xenophobia is another concrete consequence of humans seeing themselves and others as separate entities rather than as part of an interlinked chain.

35. Ozeki, 214.
37. Ozeki, My Year of Meats, 107.
By drawing attention to the destructiveness of xenophobia, Ozeki demonstrates the significance of the ability to grasp the interrelation that exists among other beings. This is done explicitly through the episode of the disabled girl, Christina Bukowsky. Christina is the daughter of Mrs. Eleanor and Mr. Dale Bukowsky who, when riding a bicycle near a Wal-Mart parking lot, is run over by a delivery truck. The accident leaves Christina paralyzed from her neck down, unable to recover from her injuries. Despite the unlikelihood of full recuperation, her stoic parents refuse to lose hope and ask the townspeople to voluntarily take care of Christina. Each sitter brings food, reads books or shares their experience with the unresponsive girl. To Jane, this project constitutes an obvious meaningful project that shows the powerful benefits of interrelationships. She tells us that Eleanor stresses the heart of the project: “[…] if you couldn’t actually carry the Thing You Love Best into the living room, it was okay to just bring a photograph. It was all about compassion, Mrs. Bukowsky figured. Compassion: “com” (with, together, in conjunction with) plus ‘passion.”

Ozeki emphasizes “compassion” over materials. It leads us to penetrate the web of interconnectedness between lives beyond the immediate. Although the girl is still required to sit in a wheelchair following the continual assistance and compassion from the townspeople, by the time that Jane interviews and films the family, Christina is lively and strong enough to live her own life.

Through this story, Ozeki is effective in depicting the power of interrelation. Here it seems that Ozeki deploys a brief but direct mention of a Zen teaching regarding the notion of oneness which stresses the interdependent nature of beings. To briefly explain, the notion of oneness is linked to the principle of interconnectedness or the principle of dependent co-arising. It is generally expounded that when one thing arises, the other thing arises, and when this thing ceases to be, the other things cease to be. When a person has an insight into this natural law, that person becomes part of the oneness. In correspondence to this principle, Ozeki incorporates a scene wherein the cameraman earnestly does his job with complete sympathy for Christina, not merely because it is his duty. Jane expresses that: “[w]hen a cameraman gets under the skin of

38. Ozeki, My Year of Meats, 160.
his subject like that, the resulting images are zen in their oneness.”39 Here, Ozeki uses the word “zen” in a playful way. In one sense, it is used to describe the way in which her Japanese crew and the girl’s face radiate harmonious happiness. In another sense, it is an image that reflects the value of friendship in the sense that each individual of the group lets his/her “self” be part of each other’s self: the happy self. All of these interrelations become Jane’s direct experience and influence her decision to maintain her own professional integrity as a documentarian.

At this point, we can see how the exploration of the opposing discourses that exist regarding the diversity and non-diversity of American culture transforms into an ideological discussion about the interrelationship between truth, reality, and authenticity. As examined above, if those discussions suggest the impossibility of authenticity or an absolute truth/reality, questions remain as to the human perception of the self through the ostensible questions that arise about American identity. Ozeki raises the idea about the origin of each individual’s choices in life by contemplating seriously about “ignorance” in relation to her year of meat. This is given through Jane’s perspective:

[…] So how to tell the story?

Information about toxicity in food is widely available, but people don’t want to hear it. […]

Coming at us like this—in waves, massed and unbreachable—knowledge becomes symbolic of our disempowerment—becomes bad knowledge—so we deny it, riding its crest until it subsides from consciousness. […] But I needed a job. So when My American Wife! was offered to me, I chose to ignore what I knew. “Ignorance.” In this root sense, ignorance is an act of will, a choice that one makes over and over again, especially when information overwelms and knowledge has become synonymous with impotence. […]

[…] Ignorance becomes empowering because it enables people to live. Stupidity becomes proactive, a political statement. Our collective norm.40

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39. Ibid., 165.
40. Ibid., 393–94.
This powerful moment of clarity emphasizes Jane’s moral transformation following her year of ideological exploration. Near the novel’s dénouement, Jane thinks deeply in order to reconsider what stimulated her to originally accept the job. Ozeki articulates, through Jane’s voice, that in an era of information-overload, Jane herself (and perhaps others too) deliberately chose to ignore knowledge simply to feel free to do what she knew was not right. Thus, ignorance in this context is used as an excuse. It is, in fact, not real ignorance. The idea brought about by this conclusion is directly related to inquiries that pertain to ethical concerns in the media and moral concerns in general. That ignorance is relevant to observation, and is influenced by the multiple genres of information available, with this then producing disparate ideas of truth, is explored by Cheryl Fish. Fish notes that “Ozeki […] has worked as a documentary filmmaker and continues to be heavily influenced by this genre. Through the process of documenting and presenting multiple layers of evidence—even as her protagonist Jane is skeptical about the distinctions between reality and one’s perception of it—truth might be exposed.”41 From this stance, Ozeki is fully aware of the nature of truth/reality/authenticity as discussed above and is implicitly proposing through her work a means through which one might look for truth in terms of politics, rather than via philosophical issues.

The last section of the novel is dedicated to Jane’s attempts at offering an apology to every “American Wife” against whom she has worked. Here Jane grasps the fact that her self is interconnected with other beings’ selves. For example, Jane calls Mrs. Suzie Flower to apologize after she avoids talking to her for so long after shooting her family for the first episode of the series and manipulating the fact about her broken family for a commercial purpose. Jane’s reluctance to contact Suzie following the initial filming is due to Jane’s guilt over her actions: “[s]till, the worn fabric of her life tore like tissue under the harsh exposure of my camera; I [Jane] watched it happen, took aim, exposed her, then shot her in the heart.”42 Through Jane’s regret, as pertains to all of the wives she dealt with in the show, Ozeki seems to signify that the so-called truth is


42. Ozeki, My Year of Meats, 211.
merely a representational one and that the sincerity and good intentions of those who construct this kind of truth is the most important factor. Because “truth” as Ozeki presents it here is a composite entity and depends upon its causal elements to establish the “truth.” Based upon this suggestion, Ozeki stresses that one’s comprehension of the interconnectedness of beings is more significant. She implies that it is inevitable for individuals to make mistakes in one’s life if “ignorance”, as Jane articulates it, is still deep-rooted via personal choice, the choice which is normally made as a consequence of how an individual sees his/her self and how they view the non-spiritual world.

As I have discussed above, Ozeki depicts the physical, ideological, and even spiritual interrelations of Jane’s direct experience of her year of meat. The literal presentation of the interrelation between meat and humans gives way to the inquiries that concern the authenticity of American national identity. Alongside this, and in supporting these questions, Ozeki illustrates the web of interconnectedness between humans, animals, and environment through Jane’s interrogation regarding the toxicity of adulterated meat. Ozeki makes her ideas about the interrelation between human action and human life more concrete through the relationships that form, and become strained, between Jane as a documentarian, the characters that become the subjects of her documentary, and the viewer. The narrative, as presented from multiple perspectives but with an emphasis on the characterization of Jane, is also deployed to stimulate the reader into thinking about the problems caused by human attempts to control the lives of animals, especially when such animals are seen as mere commodities. The reader is further provoked into thinking about how information is disseminated through corporate of economic networks. The notion of interrelation as emerges in *My Year of Meats* is not overtly discussed in terms of the traditional Buddhist philosophical meaning, but as a Buddhist-inspired theme. It manifests itself as the interrelation of human choice, decisions, actions and their consequences according to the natural law of causality. These ideas are the repercussions of the Buddhist philosophical explanation of the Self that are reflected through human’s concerns regarding the relation between one’s self and the ecology. In her second novel, *All Over Creation*, Ozeki develops these ideas found in *My Year of Meats* in order to draw upon even more profound issues about human identity which are closely related to a person’s awareness of the interconnectedness between beings.
The Interconnection of Human, Consumption, and Ecosystem in *All Over Creation*

As with *My Year of Meats, All Over Creation* (2002) originates from Ozeki’s curiosity about the safety of food and the idea that “you are what you eat” which illustrates the interrelation between human life and the non-human world, the idea which corresponds with the idea of interconnectedness. It is from this idea that Ozeki illustrates the cause and effect of human actions through the link between food produced by human and human’s well-being. This is to pose questions about human responsibility and its relation to what is going on in the world. One of the most disturbing themes in this work is, as Ozeki has noted in an interview “changes on the farm and on the planet” that lead to a “loss of biodiversity.” Alongside *My Year of Meats*, the major themes presented in *All Over Creation* pertain to the interconnection of human decisions, human choice, human action and their consequences in relation to human life and nature, and this is examined in *All Over Creation* through the thematic issue of genetically-engineered food crops. In this novel, while maintaining the same interpretation of interconnectedness as corresponds with the law of interdependent relation (the Buddhist explanation of the existence that this exists because that exists and vice versa) first proposed in *My Year of Meats*, Ozeki interweaves her ideas about the interrelation between potato farming and humans with her concerns regarding the loss of biodiversity in nature.

In *All Over Creation*, she links a number of different opinions regarding genetically-engineered food crops with the Buddhist principle of interconnectedness in an attempt to rouse the reader to consider human responsibility to other lives, regardless of whether they are human, animal, or plant existences. This is exemplified in *All Over Creation* through the discussions given to Cynaco’s NuLife® potato, a genetically created potato patented by the Cynaco Company. Here, Ozeki introduces ecological concerns about the dissemination and use of the product. This is primarily achieved by presenting the dialogues of three parties. The first group, the capitalists, are represented by Elliot Rhodes, a representative from the Duncan & Wiley Company, a PR firm

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43. Eleanor Ty, “‘A Universe of Many Worlds’: An Interview with Ruth Ozeki. (Interview),” 162.

working for the Cynaco Company. The corporation view plants as a commodity rather than a life form and perceive plants as something humans have a right to control. The second group, the farmers of Liberty Falls, are represented by Will and Cassie Quinn, a couple who consent to grow Cynaco’s NuLife® potatoes because they have come to believe the advertisements and claims made about the potatoes’ advantages. Lloyd Fuller, a fundamentalist, and a group of activists calling themselves the “Seeds of Resistance”, represent the third group. These environmentalists operate as part of a group working in different countries to oppose genetically-engineered food. This last party is presented as figures that recognize the interconnection of various beings. The encounters between these three parties demonstrate contrasting perceptions regarding the sanctity of and control over life. Because this question closely relates to the individual’s perception to the existence of one’s self, this novel provides us the opportunity to observe the protagonist’s transformed perspective on the existence of her self and others’ selves through the first-person narrative.

In linking these divergent beliefs, Ozeki situates the narratives of all of the characters as expanding from the life of Yumi Fuller, a Japanese-American woman who runs away from her potato farming hometown in Idaho for twenty-five years. The novel’s plot, presented non-linearly, spans from 1974 to 1999 and is narrated through multiple alternating perspectives and features Yumi’s life as the narrative focus. The ultimate aim of this plot device is to depict her life journey and to highlight the eventual realization as to the interconnectedness of things. The narratives of the convergent characters in All Over Creation come into focus when Lloyd encounters life-threatening problems. Lloyd’s situation invokes Cassie Quinn, Yumi’s childhood friend who has voluntarily taken care of Yumi’s parents for more than twenty years and who is now the neighbourhood farmer of the Fullers’ farm, to contact Yumi and tell her to come home. In flying from Hawaii with her three children, Yumi finally returns to face her childhood memories and to reunite with her dying father and her mother Momoko, who it is revealed has been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. It is at this juncture that the three opposing opinions regarding genetically-modified potatoes become intensified, with Lloyd allowing the “Seeds of Resistance” group to park their camping car, Spudnik, on the premises of the Fullers’ farm. Therefore, I argue that the interplay between human beings and the political issues pertaining to genetically-engineered potatoes in this novel allows Ozeki to suggest ideas about human responsibility and its connection with
the world’s ecological system. In addition to this, Ozeki further suggests through the main character that each individual’s cooperation has a potential impact upon the protection of the environment.

The Destruction of Life and Human Attempts to Control Nature

In *All Over Creation*, the principle of interconnectedness between humans and nature is intermittently presented to highlight how the biodiversity of the environment is an indispensable characteristic of the natural world. She raises questions regarding human attempts to control life. This is achieved by looking at the causes of the loss of diversity in nature, seen through the confrontation of the homogeneous idealized nature supported by the “Seeds of Resistance” activist group and the idea that nature must be controlled as held by the capitalist organizations. Ozeki objectifies the effect of the patented seeds through Cassie and Yumi’s bodies, with this demonstrating the physical interconnection of nature and human bodies. In doing so, Yumi’s fertility and Cassie’s infertility are deployed as palpable evidence as to the interrelation of nature and human bodies. Through this, the interrelation of food production and human beings, as focused on by Ozeki in her first novel, becomes transformed into the more generalized topic of the interconnectedness of nature and human beings in *All Over Creation*.

While Ozeki represents Yumi’s reproductive cycle as the existence of fertility—evidenced by her fourteen-year-old boy Phoenix, six-year-old girl Ocean, and baby Poo—Cassie’s infertility is presented as the result of the application of pesticides in potato farming over at least two generations. In spite of her health, Cassie and her husband, Will, consider using Cynaco’s NuLife potato seeds, a product implanted with the Terminator DNA. Will tells Cassie that “[i]t’s interesting. They genetically engineer the plant with a natural pesticide built right in. The beetles eat the leaf and die. They say you can reduce chemical inputs by more than half.” ⁴⁵ However, when discussing the safety of these seeds. Will confesses that it is unknown if the seeds are truly safe. He less than confidently admits to Cassie that “they say it’s safer than pesticides.” ⁴⁶ In attempting to avoid the use of pesticides, the couple come to believe in the quality of

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⁴⁶. Ibid., 98.
the commercialized seed from its associated advertisements and claims. In this brief conversation, Ozeki hints how dangerous these potatoes are for the consumers (even if the insects will die) and, in a more explicit way, notes the potential of the patented DNA killer to damage the ecological system of potato farming.

To strengthen these doubts about the safety of genetically-modified seeds, Ozeki foregrounds Lloyd’s opinion about this kind of patented technology: “Corporations have words to make this sacrilege sound legitimate. They call it a ‘Technology Protection System.’ They claim it is necessary to protect their ‘investments,’ their ‘intellectual property rights,’ and their novel seed patents.”47 While Lloyd asserts that making dangerous seeds legitimate is equivalent to making an immoral issue legal if it serves someone’s benefit, to the Quinns this point is not important. For the Quinns, such seeds serve their needs well because the seeds are easy to nurture and do not require the use of pesticides. This contrast not only exemplifies the implicit conflict about the safety of food, but it also raises questions about the effects of commercialization. From Lloyd’s perspective, the novel points to how agribusiness has had a great influence upon the conventional ways of natural agriculture. Here, agribusiness has become a driving force for human beings to find new ways to control life. From this, genetically-engineered technology has emerged as playing an important role in contemporary worldwide agriculture.

To challenge the propaganda disseminated by agribusinesses, Ozeki presents the capitalist organizations as the source of ecological catastrophe. The novel foregrounds prevailing ecological concerns by focusing on the distinctive differences between the characterization of the capitalist characters and the activism of the “Seeds of Resistance” group. As representatives of the capitalist companies, the characters of Duncan and Elliot are presented as caricatures, immoral villains who are indifferent to people’s suffering and care only about their profits. Elliot Rhodes, presented as a selfish and manipulative man, is called “Erodes” by the “Seeds of Resistance” group whereas Duncan is depicted as being powerful, cynical, intelligent, and determined, a big boss with ruthless convictions. Despite these divergent personality traits, both characters become angry whenever objections to their plans arise. Ozeki explicitly provokes a

47. Ibid., 302.
cynical interpretation of the job description for the public relations company in question through the perspective of Geek, a member of the environmental activist group. He describes the jobs of Duncan & Wiley, workers of the “PR firm that spins for Cynaco” as “specializ[ing] in damage control and crisis management, only they call it ‘solution imaging’ and ‘media intervention’ and ‘constituency building.’ Obfuscating crap. These days it’s all about building fake grassroots organizations as fronts for the corporations and participating in stuff like this Potato Promotions Council.” Geek’s comments here emphasize the notion that such firms merely create illusory images or constructed illusions pertinent to the usefulness of promoting the sale of genetically-modified potato seeds.

To further clarify the point about the illusory constructions, Ozeki establishes a detailed inquiry into the construction of language. For example, we see Momoko fumbling with putting labels on furniture to help her remember the words for them. While watching her mother, Yumi considers the reliability of language, asking: “[…] what if she’s losing her words? What do they matter? The names of things are arbitrary constructs, mere social conventions, as easily changed as the rules of a child’s game, and why should one encryption of reality, mine, be more valid than hers?” This indicates that Ozeki deliberately uses Momoko’s disease as a plot device to discuss the topic of language to indicate the real function of language which is merely part of the world of signs. It is also at this point that Yumi first seriously considers the realities and illusions that pertain to the existence of things in life and their relation to the influence of language. Through this contemplation, Ozeki implicitly stresses a suspicion regarding the reliability of the information provided by the capitalists’ and the activists, with facts here presented as mere media hype. This attests to the fact that the novel does not attempt to confirm to the reader whose version of information, the capitalists’ or the activists’, is correct but rather to use the destabilizing of that information’s reliability to arouse people’s ecological consciousness regarding genetically-engineered food crops.

Aside from the political clashes which arise towards the use of genetically-modified potato seeds, by drawing upon the notion of interconnection through the

48. Ibid., 179.
49. Ibid., 175.
perspectives of Lloyd and the environmental activists, Ozeki draws attention to a number of ecological concerns, mainly those that pertain to the loss of biodiversity among natural plants. For Lloyd and his wife, the seeds they sell have been collected from across the world, a deliberate attempt to help enhance the diversity of natural plants. In contrast, Lloyd views the dominant characteristic of the Terminator seeds as being “a sterile seed [produced from a] cleverly programming [of] a plant’s DNA to kill its own embryos,” with this being equivalent to “…breaking the sacred cycle of life itself.”

Lloyd further asserts, in relation to the catalog of the Fullers’ Seeds, that “[…] anti-exoticism is Anti-Life […]. I have come to believe that anti-exotic agendas are being promoted by these same Agribusiness and Chemical Corporations as yet another means of peddling their weed killers.” By repeatedly comparing the selling of the Terminator technology seeds with the dissemination of pesticides, Ozeki challenges the credibility of the seed propaganda as disseminated by the capitalist organizations.

To convince the reader that careful consideration, and perhaps skepticism, needs to be given towards the matter of genetically-modified food, Ozeki reiterates the potential drawbacks of the genetically-engineered seeds and the interconnection among the existence of beings. For example, when Geek explains to Frankie about how agribusiness can cause eternal damage to the ecological system of potatoes, he says that “[w]e only have maybe a dozen kinds left in commercial production here, because engineers have decided that potatoes all have to be the same size. Diversity is inconvenient to mechanized farming. This is what happens when agriculture becomes agribusiness.”

This speech has two functions; firstly, it offers insight into the concept of agribusinesses and, secondly, informs the reader that, for Geek at least, the loss of diversity in nature means that nature is dying. If nature is indeed dying, this could lead to a catastrophe for humankind. This is connected with Geek’s ideas, once explained to a young member of his group, Frankie, regarding the similarities between a software program and peas: “Each one is a complex software program, and so are we. And the

50. Ibid., 301.
51. Ibid., 67.
52. Ibid., 125.
really wild part is, we’re all interactive!” This notion indicates that if a pea, as part of nature and as closely related to humankind, is changed in either a positive or negative way, the existence of human beings will be concurrently affected. In other words, this is another version of the general explanation of the principle of interconnectedness.

The Interrelation of All Beings: A Solution to the End of All Lives

Via this invocation of the notion of interconnection, the novel suggests that to allow any life form to grow naturally is preferable to controlling it. This can be seen through Momoko’s and Lloyd’s attitudes. When Geek asks Lloyd for permission to give away the seeds that Momoko and Lloyd have collected, Momoko tells Lloyd in broken English that “[i]t is good way,” to distribute them to other growers. Lloyd replies, “But they’re ours. We have to keep them safe!” In response, and shaking her head, Momoko asserts, “No. Keeping is not safe. Keeping is danger. Only safe way is letting go. Giving everything away. Freely. Freely.” This conversation analogously suggests that the more people try to control nature, the more that nature is in danger. This also corresponds to a scene where Yumi is a teenager and Lloyd is overprotective of her. Although Lloyd acts this way out of love, it results in Yumi running away from home. This idea that danger can be caused by an attempt to control life is implicitly associated with the Cynaco Company’s policy to have the absolute right to possess the potato seeds, as a life form of nature. With the company holding patent, all farmers are forced by the corporate system to buy seeds only from them. This causes the limitation of potato breeds, along with the genetically modified seeds’ ability to weaken other lives in the soil. The company’s devious plot to get rid of other breeds of potato seeds may allow them to control nature. With that authority, they indirectly destroy the diversity of the ecological system and gain profit in the process. Through these themes, the novel argumentatively suggests that human attempts to control the natural world possibly entail negative effects rather than positive ones.

In underscoring the negative effects of human attempts to control nature, I suggest that Ozeki’s deployment of the idea about beings’ interconnectedness in All

53. Ibid., 124.
54. Ibid., 358.
Over Creation is quite direct. Despite her attempts to avoid positioning herself as a proponent of the notion, Ozeki’s stance is gradually revealed within the novel. She successfully describes the challenges regarding genetically-engineered plants. The focus of the novel is given over to stimulating the reader into questioning the safety of genetically-engineered food crops and the responsibility of humans in relation to this. To achieve this purpose, she deploys the principle of interconnectedness, with this being underlined in the descriptions of Yumi’s character and in the other characters’ attitudes toward the relations between beings. The following section elaborates how the notion of interconnection is demonstrated in the novel, through both direct and indirect presentations. Thus, the direct presentation is mainly evidenced through the expressions of Momoko and Geek, whereas the indirect presentation can be found in the implications that emerge through the description of Yumi.

Firstly, in terms of the direct presentation of the principle of interconnectedness, Ozeki continuously draws a web of interconnection between human life and plants through her descriptions of plants. An example of this can be seen in Geek’s speech to Yumi:

[…] you teach literature, right? So what you are sitting on here at Fullers’ Seeds is a library containing the genetic information of hundreds, maybe thousands of seeds—rare fruits and flowers and vegetables, heritage breeds many of them, and lots of exotics. These seeds embody the fruitful collaboration between nature and humankind, the history of our race and our migrations. Talk about narrative!55

Here, Geek’s illustration of the web of interconnection of all beings, as highlighted in the narrative of seeds, points to two facts. The first fact is seen when Geek explains that we may find “the genetic information of hundreds” of seeds, “maybe thousands of seeds”, with this implying that the existence of one thing is inseparable from the existence of an immeasurable number of other things. Secondly, Geek hopes that Yumi, as a lecturer of literature, is capable of seeing the interrelation among different but interconnected entities of life. In highlighting Momoko and Lloyd’s lifelong endeavours to collect seeds from different parts of the world, Geek tries to explicate how such seeds

55. Ibid., 162.
can be associated with “the collaboration between nature and humankind”. Following this, Geek stresses that the origins of exotic seeds are meaningful, mainly as they represent the reason as to why the existence of nature and humankind are interconnected. He says: “They’re saving these plants from extinction. It’s such crucial work! We’ve got to help them stop the genetic erosion of the earth’s ecosystem.”

Through this, Geek emphasizes that maintaining the biodiversity of nature is very important and is the responsibility of human beings. To conclude this point, we can see that in deploying the principle of interconnectedness, Ozeki purposefully draws an analogy between seeds and human life through Geek and Momoko’s voices in the novel. Here, strong emphasis is given to the interdependent relation between nature and human beings.

In regard to the indirect presentation of the notion of interconnectedness, the novel draws attention to the association between the characterization of Yumi and nature. The idea about the interconnection of nature and human beings is also underlined via the use of pervasive metaphorical descriptions and imagery connoting the ways in which human beings both treat seeds and should treat seeds. In respect to this, Ozeki designates Yumi to have a number of functions within the novel: (1) she is a representative of the American individualist, (2) she stands as a metaphor for nature, and (3) finally, she is a messenger conveying Ozeki’s opinions regarding human responsibility. As an American individualist, Yumi’s perspective on her individuality reflects her perception of her self as a separate entity. By means of this, Ozeki presents the importance of understanding Yumi’s self, a self which is interconnected with other lives, to show why humans have to be responsible for the ecological system.

An example of the metaphorical association that is made between plants and human beings can be found in Yumi’s expression of her own self: “That’s what it felt like when I was growing up, like I was a random fruit in a field of genetically identical potatoes.” Here, Yumi articulates her own existence as being alien among the people of the potato-farming town of Liberty Fall. Yumi further tells us, in relation to her identity, that: “Honestly, I never liked potatoes much. I preferred rice, a taste I inherited

56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., 4.
from my mother, Momoko, and which, in a state of spuds, was tantamount to treason.”

In comparing herself to “random fruit” among potatoes, Yumi, as the only Asian American girl in her town, positions herself as an outcast of the predominantly Anglo-American community. Thus, in the second quotation, she metaphorically articulates her identity through her preference for rice, as “inherited from my [her] mother”. This indicates that she acknowledges her difference from others, presenting herself as an exotic seed among the potatoes. As a result, being obsessed with her difference in such a community where the negation of diversity is pervasive, she eventually runs away from her parents. This narrative and character development emphasizes the presentation of Yumi as an individualist whose life is deployed as both a reflection of a self-centred worldview and as a metaphor for nature.

In my view, Ozeki presents Yumi as an American individualist, primarily as this is one of the best ways to illustrate the drawbacks of the inability to see the interconnection among things when living one’s life. In regard to this, I consider Yumi’s perception of her “self” as the crucial point through which the notion of interconnection penetrates the overall content of All Over Creation. Being characterized as a Japanese-American woman whose exotic Asian looks capture other people’s interest, Yumi not only chooses to be positioned as an outcast in the community but later flees from her watchful community in order to find a place that better suits her multicultural nature. It is somewhat unsurprising that Yumi eventually settles in Hawaii. From Yumi’s perspective, her American individualist identity is reiterated through her rebellious actions. For example, at the age of fourteen, she performatively declares her individualism by having a secret sexual affair with Elliot Rhode, a history teacher at her school. From this, she undergoes an abortion and runs away from home. Yumi and Lloyd’s conversation regarding the abortion raises a number of points:

“What gives you the right?” he asks. “What gives you the authority to take an innocent life?”
“It’s legal now!” you [Yumi] cry.
“That’s not a law, that’s a license to commit murder!”

58. Ibid.
59. Ibid., 201.
Here, the dialogue identifies how Yumi attempts to justify her decisions and actions as legitimate. Nevertheless, Yumi’s choices are not those of a prodigal teenager. At this point, Yumi was a teenager, growing up during the 1960s—a time when conventional values were often rejected by a younger generation, primarily in the search of some kind of freedom. Thus, one can interpret Yumi’s actions as resulting from her sense of alienation, derived from being the only Asian American girl in the community, her sense of rebellion as drawn from that which already existed at the time and the fact that Yumi is herself of teenage rebellion age. In other words, the teenage Yumi can be seen to be merely trying to take control of her life. She does not allow her parents to stand in her way, seen in her asserting the righteousness of her choices and actions in accordance with the law. Following this, Yumi’s life for the next twenty-five years is based on her cravings, notably neglecting to consider anyone else’s feelings, including the well-being of her own children. Looking at Yumi’s decision and actions in this way, she seems the ultimate individualist.

**In Harmony of Humans and Nature**

Yumi’s flaws allow Ozeki to open up discussions on the moral concerns pertinent to human attempts to control life. With regard to the above conversation, Yumi is presented as an inexperienced young girl who is seduced by an immoral teacher. As such, Yumi comes to represent those people who advocate the legitimization of immoral matters without giving careful consideration to the eventual consequences. When Lloyd mentions about “the authority to take an innocent life,” he implies that we need to carefully consider our choices before taking action, a result of the fact that our actions will always involve and affect the lives of others. Apparently, his opinion in this context marks a sharp line between legitimacy and morality. Moreover, the moral implication left here is the ripples that will occur should individualist people, like Yumi, penetrate the interrelation between themselves and the lives of others. This subsequently invokes a question as to the level of danger if such moral issues are legislated by law. It is these interrelated issues that are regularly implied throughout the novel.

These debates about what can be viewed as a “right” action are not only raised to highlight the danger that emerges from the inability to perceive the interconnectedness of all lives. Indeed, the characterization of Yumi as an individualist
also provides Ozeki an opportunity to ignite debates about the two ideologies of individualism and interconnection. Yumi’s character contributes to the encounter between the activists’ attempts and the ideas of individualism. For instance, in the last part of the novel, Geek tries to justify to Yumi why people have tried to do whatever they can to protect the world. Sitting in Momoko’s garden, Geek describes the planet being damaged by human technology:

Now picture the whole planet as a garden, teeming with millions upon millions of flowers and trees and fruits and vegetables and insects and birds and animals and weevils and us. And then, instead of all that magnificent, chaotic profusion, picture a few thousand genetically mutated, impoverished, barren, patented forms of corporately controlled germplasm. […]

 […] Is this progress? I don’t think so. It’s bullshit […]

Geek’s explanation indicates that the best way to maintain nature and a healthy order of the world is to keep the interrelation of beings as natural as possible. This contrasts with Yumi’s thoughts and her preoccupation with her own cravings. In response to Geek’s impassioned speech, Yumi becomes speechless and simply replies that “[w]e do what we can—”.

Geek’s response to Yumi’s answer seems to directly affect Yumi’s sense of self for the first time in the novel. Geek, in an outburst against her reaction, unleashes his anger:

“Do we? Really?” […] “I don’t see you doing much of anything. Look at you, all wrapped up in your neat little stories, blaming your daddy and refusing to take responsibility for your life, spinning all these justifications for your addictions and the crappy way you treat your kids and bombs that go off in the night—spending your time feeling cynical and sorry for yourself while the whole fucking world is going to hell in a handbasket!”

The vitriol aimed towards Yumi’s irresponsible actions, actions that impinge upon herself and others around her, shocks her into realizing how selfish she has been.

60. Ibid., 409.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.
Ozeki not only uses Yumi’s sense of self to reflect the danger of not being able to grasp the interconnection among beings, Yumi is also held as a metaphor for the biodiversity of nature through the notion of interconnection, with this then underscoring the ecological consciousness of the novel. In an early section of the novel, Ozeki associates Yumi with nature through a symbolic situation. The omniscient narrator tells us that while her friends played different roles in Liberty Falls Elementary School’s yearly Pilgrims’ Pageant, Yumi always played the role of the Indian princess. Her dialogue—“Noble Pilgrims […] my people and I welcome you to our land. […] Pray, take our seeds and plant them”—conjures the sense that Yumi is a metaphor for a nature that is willing to embrace all of the people on its land. Here, Ozeki establishes a sense of the interconnection that exists between the main character and the main theme of the novel.\(^\text{63}\)

While stressing the importance of the ability to appreciate interconnection, Ozeki alsoprovokes a debate regarding the question of whether life should be controlled in pursuit of profit. Ozeki reiterates contradictory ideas on this question through the characterization of Yumi. Although Yumi is compared to a bad seed by the townspeople, at a metaphorical level the novel illustrates her as a viable seed. The contradiction of Yumi comes into sharp focus in the section entitled “the promiscuity of squashes.” When Yumi asks Momoko what the mixed-looking vegetables growing among a zucchini, squash, acorn, and butternut are, Momoko says:

“Maybe is a little bit suke, and little bit Delicata, and little bit […] whatchamacallit. Sweet Pumpkin.” She handed it back and pointed to Ocean and Phoenix, who were fixated on the screen. “Like them. All mixed up.”\(^\text{64}\)

Through this quotation, it can be read that the novel associates the squashes with Yumi’s reproduction. In this section of the narrative, the context describes how Momoko has dedicated much of her time to pollination in order to allow them to survive, with this implying that if some particular seeds are promiscuous by nature, simply letting them be is the best way for them to survive. This section of the novel

\(^{63}\) Ibid., 7.

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 118.
provides an explanation as to why the life choices made by Yumi can probably be viewed as justifiable to her. The nature of squashes is described here in terms of it being a “well-known fact that squashes are among the most promiscuous of garden vegetables […]”65 This “well-known” fact offers us another perspective on life. While it is a controversial notion that Yumi’s nature regarding her sexual behavior is comparable with the squashes’ nature, one could argue that to allow someone to lead their life freely, no matter whether their actions are right or wrong, is the best way to maintain the diversity of culture and nature of life.

This notion as to not judging the way in which others live their own life seems to be left as an open question for the reader. Ozeki reaffirms this through the conversation held between Cassie and Yumi regarding Elliot Rhodes’s and Geek’s manipulation of people. Cassie starts with expressing her opinion about Elliot: “He’s a liar, Yummy, but it’s worse than that, because he doesn’t even know he’s lying. He manipulates people.”66 The reason Cassie sees that Elliot does not know he is lying is because Elliot never justifies his actions. For twenty-five years, until 1999, Elliot’s choices in life are based on finding ways to evade responsibility for his wrongdoings, not having to explain his choices or the maximisation of his profits. This contrasts with Geek’s actions. Cassie thinks that Geek’s mistake is forgivable because “[a]t least Geek has an honest belief. I don’t see Elliot believing in much of anything, except maybe himself.”67 Cassie’s view on Elliot’s selfishness posits that although we cannot give an absolute answer as to the righteousness of people’s beliefs or ideologies, perhaps an individual’s honest belief can affect whether their mistakes are forgivable by others. In this case, Geek’s standpoint in opposing genetically-engineered food is undertaken with the intention to raise people’s ecological consciousness. Through Geek’s need to disseminate the notion, publicly and privately, of the interrelation between nature and human beings, Ozeki emphasizes the Buddhist notion of interconnectedness pervasive in the novel while stimulating the reader’s inquiry into the safety of the genetically-engineered crops.

65. Ibid., 115.
66. Ibid., 323.
67. Ibid.
It seems that, for Ozeki, the purposes of the novel are to raise questions about the genetically-modified food and to entice the reader to reconsider the effects of human choice, human decisions, and human action, primarily as they are all interconnected with our responsibility towards the environment. The idea derives from the principle of dependent co-arising, the original Buddhist teaching which is transformed and explained as the principle of interconnectedness in “Socially Engaged Buddhism.” This is evident in Yumi’s contemplation regarding the responsibility of humans:

He [Geek] was right, we are responsible. Intimately connected. We’re liable for it all. I had to take responsibility for myself and my kids, but also for Geek and Elliot, and for Charmey and Lloyd, too, and yet at the same time I realized I was powerless to forecast or control any of our outcomes.

But maybe that was the trick—to accept the responsibility and forgo the control? To love without expectation? This moment reveals that Yumi finally grasps the fact that the hardest thing for human beings to do is to accept our responsibility. Here, Ozeki implores the reader to be responsible for the consequences of our choices, decisions, and actions. Yumi’s transformed perception of her self becomes apparent when she is finally able to appreciate what human beings should do and how they should love. In collaboration with this illustration of the web of interconnection demonstrated through Yumi’s contemplation of her responsibility, Ozeki implicitly proffers the reason as why an individual should be responsible to protect nature. She reads Phoenix’s letter saying that “[...] I [Phoenix] understood why I’m doing all these political actions. It’s because I gotta make sure there’s some nature around for you when you grow up [...]” This shows that because Phoenix understands the interconnectedness of all beings in the life-world, he assumes responsibility for undertaking these political actions and to raise people’s ecological consciousness.

Moreover, in regard to the matter of human responsibility in All Over Creation, I believe that Ozeki emphasizes each individual’s cooperation as having a

68. Ibid., 410.
69. Ibid., 416.
potential ripple effect upon the enhancing of the ecological system. For instance, in the part entitled “Full Circles”, Momoko explains to Yumi that a “[g]rown-up plant is seed, too. Like those ones [a cluster of tall purple flower balls].” She [Momoko] points to the flowers and says, “Those ones are only flowers now, but they gonna be seeds.” […] “Everyone gonna be seeds.” In this elucidation about the life cycles of seeds, the notion of interconnectedness is once again implied. It tells us about the importance of every individual seed, noting that one day it will become a flower. This illustration also conjures an interpretation of interconnection that points to the way in which causes unify with effects. Besides this, the novel also indirectly proposes the advantages of cooperation among individuals, seen for example in the projects of the “Seeds of Resistance”, especially in the computerized seed-library database. In regard to this, the group, in explaining the policy and process of their project, informs Lloyd that:

The idea is to invite growers across the country to become members of the virtual Garden. They’ll register with the Web site, adopt whatever seeds they’re interested in, then grow them out and offer them back to other Garden members through the online catalog.

[…]

Other members can contact growers by e-mail and request seeds. It’s awesomely simple, because it will take care of itself—it really takes advantage of the nonhierarchical networking potential of the Web. We sent out a huge mailing to your entire customer list and all our friends and contacts, directing them to the site.

Here it is shown how the policy encourages each grower to both accept and distribute seeds by contacting other growers via e-mail, with this demonstrating the way in which each individual within the cyber community can support each other and maintain the social network of the virtual Garden project. Through this fictional project, Ozeki creates the ideal world of nonhierarchical interconnected beings where human beings, animals, and nature exist harmoniously. It is in this utopian project that the presentation of the world challenges the old anthropocentric worldview.

70. Ibid., 332.

71. Ibid., 356.
As discussed above, we can see that *All Over Creation* has demonstrated how humankind is an indispensable part of the interconnected web of all beings and how we, as humans, can take part in sustaining healthy ecosystems. In order to interweave those ideas, Ozeki employs the notion of interconnection to cultivate the reader’s ecological consciousness. By means of the collaboration between the permeating messages as to the notion of interconnection, the consequences of the capitalist concepts, and the metaphorical descriptions of the seeds scattered throughout the novel, Ozeki uses the novel to continually reiterate the interrelation between humans and nature. It is in this task that Ozeki not only points to political issues that accompany the safety of genetically-modified food and its consumption and the trustworthiness of disseminated information which is reflected through the novel’s title, *All Over Creation*, but she also stresses the associated spiritual matters regarding the responsibility of humans as beings existing among the interconnected selves of all beings in the universe.
Conclusion

This thesis focuses on the presence of the Buddhist philosophy of the Self, particularly the concept of interconnectedness, an approach to the notion of self which includes the personal self, the racial self, and identity in the novels of Charles Johnson and Ruth Ozeki. The objective of this thesis has been to investigate how that Buddhist philosophy of the Self contributes to the understanding of the self and identity in the two writers’ novels. Throughout this work I have looked at Charles Johnson’s and Ruth Ozeki’s novels as part of the strand of Buddhist American literature which emerged after the Second World War, most of which investigate the topics about the meaning of life, the way to liberation, and the relation between humanity and ecology. Johnson’s and Ozeki’s novels raise similar matters and questions regarding metaphysics and ethics as their predecessors’ works did, but the novels centre more specifically on an understanding of the Self as an origin of human’s suffering (dukkha).

While writers such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg started from a thought that Buddhist enlightenment, known as nirvana, could be attained with drugs, sexuality, and hallucination, Johnson and Ozeki know that it must be attained by the regular practices of “insight meditation” (zazen). This difference has also been pointed out in Darin Pradittastsanee’s research into the Beat poets’ search for liberation (as mentioned in the introduction) and in Gary Storhoff’s analysis of Johnson’s works. Storhoff explicates that, “From Johnson’s perspective, this acquiescence to sensuality and self-indulgence would lead to a distinctly unenlightenmented form of life, for immersion in sensual pleasure is a toxic life. […] The “attached” person, attached to his or her own

1. In Buddhist philosophy, there are various approaches to the Self and every approach is interrelated.

2. According to Darin Pradittatsanee’s research on “In Search of Liberation: Buddhism and the Beat Writers” which explores poems written by Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, the finding show that, except Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac’s and Allen Ginsberg’s perception of Buddhism began from an idea that one could attain liberation with drugs, sexuality, and hallucination. This finding is based upon the analysis of Kerouac’s *Mexico City Blues* (1955) and Ginsberg’s poems written from the 1940s to the 1960s. However, Pradittatsanee notes that from 1972 Ginsberg’s poems show an improved understanding of Buddhism which was the fruits of his meditation practice. See Pradittatsanee, *In Search of Liberation: Buddhism and the Beat Writers*. (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 2007).
desire, is vulnerable to suffering.”

Seemingly, both writers view that literature and Buddhism can be compatible, indeed they see literature as possibly proposing an alternative way to reflect upon one’s life and view the world. From the analyses of their works, I contest that Johnson and Ozeki regard literature as not merely an art form dedicated to story-telling but an art form dedicated to philosophical discussion.

Subsequently, they lead their readers to examine their own lives and to then consider the epistemological and ontological question of what the self is.

In finding the answer to that question, Johnson and Ozeki apply the Buddhist principle of dependent co-arising, also known as the principles of interdependence and interconnectedness, as an approach. Johnson and Ozeki, like other Buddhists, consider these two concepts the ultimate understanding of Shakyamuni Buddha’s teachings and they are aimed at the cessation of dukkha. Payutto notes of the Buddhist perspective of the Self: “Buddhadhamma [the Buddha’s teachings] looks at all things in terms of integrated factors. There is no real self (or essence) in all things. When all of the elements composing one’s being are divided and separated, no self remains.” This perspective is the fundamental approach which both Johnson and Ozeki use to reflect upon life and the world as evident in their characters’ transformed perspectives.

The analyses of the selected novels in the previous four chapters show that the immersion of the Buddhist philosophy of the non-Self and the principle of interconnectedness in North American novels provides an alternative perspective for the contemplation of one’s self and identity. To be exact, it defies the individual subject’s expectations of the self and identity which they have believed to be static, fixed, and permanent. From my analyses, the novels written by Charles Johnson and Ruth Ozeki offer that the Self, one’s personal self, and identity share the same characteristics which can be explained with the Buddhist doctrine of the Three Common Characteristics of Existence. They are transient because they depend upon their interdependent, transformative, and non-self nature. Because the existence of one being cannot arise


4. Ibid., 11.

without the existence of other beings and vice versa, Buddhist philosophy views that the Self is, in fact, empty of any intrinsic essence of the self. The Self, which we perceive as “I”, exists because of the interconnectedness in beings. Johnson and Ozeki use this explanation of the Buddhist non-Self as a fundamental perception which all protagonists must discover before they move on to understand other things. Therefore, as I have explored in this thesis, both writers demonstrate that the “right view” (the understanding of the Self which exists because of the existence of other beings) will lead to personal spiritual liberation as discussed in Chapter One, and an understanding of one’s personal self and identity in Chapter Two. Apart from the presentation of the beneficial effects of the understanding of the Self on a personal level, the analyses of Chapter Three and Four also show that both writers illuminate the relation between a metaphysical understanding of the Self and one’s ethical practices. In Chapter Three, Johnson emphasizes an understanding of the interconnectedness in beings as a source of one’s compassion for others, while Ozeki proposes a deep ecological view which underlines one’s understanding of the interconnection between one’s self and environment in Chapter Four.

In Chapter One, the search for the metaphysical meaning of Andrew’s and Nao’s selves in Oxherding Tale and A Tale for the Time Being reveal Johnson’s and Ozeki’s proposed perspective of the self, whose nature is non-self and interdependent with other casual factors. The way in which the two novels convey this message starts from superficially different problems and show that the protagonists’ sense of self at each moment is illusive. It transforms in the current of time. This perspective of the self is demonstrated through the plots which transform from an emphasis on physical freedom to become concerned with spiritual freedom. Johnson and Ozeki use the Buddhist natural law of interdependence within the novels as the key to spiritual freedom. The idea about freedom inherently discussed in the two novels corresponds with Buddhist ideas regarding positive feelings such as peace, happiness, and freedom (*sukha*). The Buddha postulates that there are two kinds of *sukha*: material and spiritual. While the material *sukha* is achieved only by possessing things, “depending on external causes to fulfill desires”, the spiritual *sukha* is not.

Aiming to offer a perspective to alleviate *dukkha* caused by race and race relations, Johnson and Ozeki dissociate the two kinds of happiness by presenting the material *sukha* as a factor that causes the protagonists’ *dukkha*. Because material *sukha*
is subject to eternal change, unfulfilled desires leave an individual only with dukkha. Andrew’s desire for freedom which, he believes in the first place, must be achieved by money, and Nao’s desire for freedom which, she believes, can be reached by death are presented to the reader as the sources of their suffering. Johnson and Ozeki illustrate how the material sukha, viewed by the protagonists as the opposite feeling to dukkha, is a consequence of the protagonists’ misperceptions of the Self. The novels suggest that the root cause of dukkha is not sukha or dukkha themselves, but the dualistic views which originate from the misperception of the Self.

The perception of dukkha as presented in the novels can be divided, at least, into two categories. Firstly, there is the dukkha which refers to negative feelings or states of mind originating from a person’s inability to penetrate the interconnectedness among all beings. Secondly, there is the dukkha which is used to describe the constant change of all sentient beings according to the law of interdependence. The issues pertaining to the first dukkha are deployed as the forces driving Andrew and Nao to chase after what they want, while the second dukkha, emerging in the second half or at the end of the novels, is mentioned merely as a sign to illustrate the true nature of all beings’ existence. I identify the collision between the protagonists’ “wrong view” and “right view” regarding the existence of beings and the impact of these on Andrew’s and Nao’s lives.

Johnson and Ozeki regard the insight into the interconnectedness in all beings as the “way” to the cessation of dukkha. In spite of the fact that Johnson’s and Ozeki’s ideas regarding the protagonists’ awakening moment come from the same traditional concept of enlightenment (being free from dualistic views and attaining the state of nirvana), they apply the interpretations of enlightenment to suit their purposes within the different contexts in their novels. Hoping to offer a potential solution to the political conflicts which have arisen from racism in North America, alongside an antidote to dukkha that is caused by racialist thoughts, Johnson offers an explanation of the “true nature of one’s self” which is interwoven with a Hindu ideology about the social responsibilities of an individual and the concept of enlightenment (moksha), in Oxherding Tale. In comparison with this, Ozeki’s A Tale for the Time Being is mainly concerned with globally social problems that have imposed negative senses like hopelessness, alienation, or hollowness upon people. To deal with these feelings, Ozeki applies Dōgen’s explanation regarding the existence of beings and time in A Tale for
The Time Being to stimulate the reader to reconsider the real meaning of life and how one should live one’s life.

The common purpose of Oxherding Tale and A Tale for the Time Being is to reveal that, without the “right view” on the true nature of the Self, an individual can experience dukkha. Conversely, they demonstrate through their novels that, with the “correct” understanding about the existence of beings, delusions of sukhā and dukkha will be dispelled and dukkha can be alleviated, by means of one’s compassion for others or metta. All of this is directed to indicate the danger of dualistic views, then point out that one has to acknowledge the flow and flux of one’s self and identity in order to appreciate peace in the here and now.

Ideas regarding the nature of self and identity are also scrutinized in Chapter Two, but with regard to a specific aspect of one’s personal identity. The analyses of Johnson’s Faith and the Good Thing and Ozeki’s The Face: A Time Code demonstrate that Johnson and Ozeki interweave the Buddhist perspective of the Self with the protagonists’ self-exploration to search for the meaning of life in relation to their personal selves. Similar to Oxherding Tale and A Tale for the Time Being, the approach they employ conveys that everything labelled as a self or identity is in fact merely a compounded self and points to dualistic views on race as the origin of dukkha. The origin of each self at each moment is conditioned by other things, so nothing can be labelled as a self, identity, certainty, or permanence.

In conveying this message, Johnson and Ozeki apply the Buddhist concept of dependent co-arising in demonstrating the nature of the Self. Both writers illuminate that theory by applying the three inherent characteristics of existence—(1) suffering (dukkhatā) which is the subsequence of fluctuating conditions between the feeling of satisfaction and suffering which refers to constant changes in the condition of its existence; (2) the state of impermanence (aniccatā); and (3) the state of having no real self (anattatā). Johnson and Ozeki illustrate the teaching about these characteristics to demonstrate how the dualistic views, held by Faith and Ruth, have contributed to their suffering. Through this, the two novels indicate that the personal self and identity which both Faith and Ruth are looking for are interdependent entities composed of every experience from their past and which become their present selves. Therefore, the novels present that the good thing or one’s personal identity manifest themselves “now” in the present moment.
Faith and the Good Thing suggests that in finding a way to liberate one’s self from dukkha, a person’s wisdom (which here means his/her understanding of the nature of life) is more important than faith. Johnson offers this idea by deploying a dialectical method in this philosophical novel. In order to integrate his proposed perspective on the illusion of the fixed and permanent “good” thing, Johnson’s two folkloric characters, the Swamp Woman and Kujichagulia, are used to put forth questions about the notion of the fixed self, which is represented through other characters’ ideas of the Good Thing. Johnson uses the quest for the Good Thing to paradoxically illustrate that one’s selfhood, which a person thinks of as a form of personal identity, actually does not exist. Rather, the so-called selfhood might be discovered if a person is capable of seeing his/her true nature as something conditioned by experience. Through this understanding, therefore, such a selfhood is actually not lost or hidden anywhere else but present in the here and now without fixed form. In regard to this, Storhoff observes that “[...] no one thing has its own unique identity; no one thing becomes what it is because of its essential nature or its will, its own self-determining drive for actualization. Each thing depends utterly on an infinitely complex network of correlated and interdependent entities.” As such, it is an individual’s misperception of his/her self and identity that distracts them from the discovery of the nature of their “personal self.”

This message is also conveyed in Ozeki’s The Face: A Time Code. Ruth’s experiment of looking into her face for three hours leads her to understand that “real” identity never exists. The reflection upon her complexion and her memories of the past result in an understanding of her self and racial identity. Ruth’s realization of the present self and identity as the result of her past experience and memories makes her understand that the permanent and static personal self and racial identity do not exist. Rather, they are processes which result from accumulative life experiences in the flux and flow of time. The Buddhist perspective of the Self in relation to the comprehension of one’s self and identity do not only emerge in the first two chapters of this thesis. This idea is also pinned down as a fundamental concept of the novels as I have discussed in Chapter Three and Four. Johnson and Ozeki escalate their explorations to notions of freedom, racial identity and racial reconciliation in contemporary society, and the

relation between the human and non-human worlds. These two chapters illuminate clearly that Johnson and Ozeki fully recognize the magnitude of the understanding of interdependence and interconnectedness in all beings.

In Chapter Three, the perspective on the personal self and racial self in Johnson’s *Middle Passage* and *Dreamer* is still based upon Buddhist interdependence and interconnectedness. Both novels indicate that an understanding of the interdependent nature and interconnectedness in all beings associates with one’s ethical practices, which is demonstrated in Rutherford Calhoun’s transformed self and his perception of self and racial identity in *Middle Passage*, and in the fictitious Martin Luther King Jr.’s insight into the interconnection of every being which generates his compassion and loving-kindness for others in *Dreamer*. In these novels, Johnson fictionalizes African-American history to illuminate an interplay between his ideas regarding the self and identity and African Americans’ traumatic history. He implicitly proposes that to achieve racial reconciliation, one has to realize that one’s present self is always a part of the process of one’s evolving self over time, each present self is a result of accumulative past experiences. As such, what Johnson proposes for his readers (based upon one’s comprehension of the nature of the Self and interconnectedness) is to acknowledge the past as part of their present day, including its history of slavery and racism.

My analysis in Chapter Three suggests that Johnson seems to imply that he has contributed his philosophical stances as a philosophical writer to point to a way to alleviate suffering from perennial racial problems, especially for African Americans. What is left is the reader’s responsibility to scrutinize the proposed way he has offered, probe the question of what the self is, and reflect upon his proposed ideas in order to cooperatively help make the “dream” of the “united” states of America come true. In a similar manner, in Chapter Four, Ozeki emphasizes an individual’s ability to see the interconnectedness in all beings as an antidote to contemporary social and ecological problems in *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation*. Ozeki demonstrates the ramifications of ecological catastrophes which affect people’s lives through the story of Jane’s life (the one year of her documentary project) and the story of Yumi’s life (surrounded by people who suffer the effects of GMO potatoes). Both offer a clear understanding of how human life and the human world is interconnected with the non-human world. At the same time, she illustrates the web of interconnectedness in both
novels by creating storylines in which people from different walks of life and places are interconnected and in the interrelationships of these characters. All of these raise an awareness in her readers of the human responsibility to cooperatively help build a better and more harmonious world.

These novels demonstrate the importance of Buddhist thinking to postwar American literature. Since its first introduction to North America in the nineteenth century, Buddhist philosophy has been applied by American writers and poets in their writings as a means to investigate how an individual can liberate oneself from dukkha. Buddhist philosophy is still recognized as a potential worldview to counter cultural and social ills—most recently, the American Booker prize winner George Saunders deployed a series of Buddhist ideas in his acclaimed novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), giving Abraham Lincoln a Buddhist sensibility in a book which considers, among other themes, the divisions of race. Because Buddhist doctrines focus upon the notion of the Self, the perennial question of the natural focus for Buddhist-influenced American writings, Johnson and Ozeki, while practising Buddhists, also demonstrate a particular North American sensibility in their articulation of the self; to quote Whitman, for them the self is “large ... [and] contain[s] multitudes.”

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Primary Texts


Secondary Texts


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