values, their own choices, and how their reading of others reveals more about who they are than they might suspect.

Song of Solomon (1977), Morrison's third novel, moves literally and metaphorically in and out of space and time. With the folktale of flying Africans and the history of one family's connection to that folktale at the center of the novel, Morrison constructs several spaces for the reader to come into a narrative of African and African American history and culture. In a style that will characterize Morrison's later novels, *Song of Solomon* begins *in medias res*, literally bringing the reader into a space with no points of reference for understanding what is happening. As a consequence, the reader, like the onlookers down below, bears witness to Mr. Robert Smith's leap into space from the top of Mercy Hospital without having much of a context for understanding the how and the why of his actions. Unlike the onlookers, however, the reader does not have the benefit of "word of mouth news"[10] to prepare them for the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent's decision to commit suicide. Yet, as with the first two novels, before Morrison introduces the reader to the male protagonist, Milkman Dead (Macon Dead, Jr.), she first establishes the hostile spaces to which black people had become accustomed. She also illustrates how they subverted the power of racist practices through the linguistic practices of renaming hostile spaces such as Doctor Street to Not Doctor Street and Mercy Hospital to No Mercy Hospital to document how they had been excluded. The reader also learns that it is the illiterate status of Milkman's grandfather that accounts for the family surname. In other words, at the same time that the reader learns about the immature 32-year-old Milkman whose cultural illiteracy makes him unable to adapt to his own community or historical moment, the reader also learns that his grandfather was illiterate and did not know that a drunken agent at the freedman's bureau had inscribed errors into the very papers that were supposed to declare his freedom from enslavement. Confusing the status of his father – dead – with the place of his birth – Macon – the history of Milkman Dead's family is almost presented as yet another "nigger joke." Morrison deftly weaves multiple stories into one grand narrative, moving in and out of the past and present, illustrating that a mature sense of identity requires an understanding of the interdependence of both.

As the novel unravels the story of Milkman Dead's birth, the story of his family and the history of his ancestors, the reader is lulled into a story of how intimate spaces can contain names with history, lives full of secrets and misunderstandings, and communities replete with what Morrison refers to as "unspeakable things unspoken."[11] With references to the familiar forms of black vernacular, and even elements of classical mythology that resonate

with many readers, Morrison brings the reader into intimate contact with strange people and unfamiliar events to reveal the various and sundry ways black people have survived oppressive spaces and unjust treatment through language, music, and cultural practices. Pilate, Milkman's aunt, is represented as a griot figure without a navel, who Macon Dead, Sr. (Milkman's father), considers strange, unkempt, and unworthy of his son's love. Yet she is the very person who has the key to the mysteries of his family history and his identity in the present. Though she lives outside the town in a space that intensifies her pariah status, she teaches her nephew to defy time and space and that "if you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it."[12] In essence, it is Pilate who enables Milkman to undertake an initiation journey into his family history, into the history of black people, and into a mature knowledge of how the people and places of his past and present are interconnected.

When we turn to Morrison's fourth novel, *Tar Baby* (1981), we discover the author's desire to take her readers to yet another understanding of space and time. Using a contemporary setting in the Caribbean with a young black woman with an almost postmodern sense of her racial identity, Morrison again disrupts familiar ideas about race, class, identity, and culture to provide some new ways of reading them. She begins *in medias res* once again and provides a view of a lush Caribbean setting into which a black male stowaway intrudes. But before Morrison elaborates on his intrusion, she delineates how colonial powers disrupted the serenity of this place by importing slaves, using them to clear the land and to reconstruct a man-made paradise. In language that is as lush as the landscape whose destruction she is describing, Morrison carefully reveals how this time it is the river, not a community of people, that is "evicted from the place where it had lived, and forced into unknown turf,"[13] but it is not a stretch to suspect she is connecting this eviction to the kidnapping of African people throughout the diaspora and to the ways in which black bodies have been rendered into service for colonial powers. Having established the setting, the novel then moves into the intimate space of the island winter home on the Isle des Chevaliers, where Valerian and Margaret Street have established a luxurious, yet unfulfilling life for themselves. The novel focuses, however, not so much on this couple as on the relationship between the niece of their servants, Jadine, and the intruder, Son. In a novel that takes on the gender politics of the late 1970s, Morrison invites her reader to construct meaning from some disparate pieces of information about the Streets, who have a wayward son, whom Valerian describes as a "cultural orphan;"[14] about Margaret, Valerian's vacuous wife, whose secret crime of child abuse interrupts the larger narrative of Jadine and Son's love affair; about the ongoing conflict between the indigenous peoples of the island and Sydney and Ondine; about the failed interracial love affair

between Jadine and her white lover in Paris that precipitates Jadine's return home to her benefactors; and about Jadine's ultimate decision to return to Europe after she cannot resolve the conflict between herself and Son. Morrison once again uses familiar elements of house and home, but she demands that her reader read these spaces in ways they may not have anticipated. The novel requires a rethinking about black identity in nationalist terms when Son questions Jadine's education at the Sorbonne, which was financed by the generosity and patronage of the Streets. It also requires a rethinking about Jadine's claims for her European education and her enlightened sensibilities, which offer her no way of appreciating Son's Southern roots or the Philadelphia roots of her aunt and uncle and other black people. The novel also invites readers to consider the claims of capitalism as it manifests itself in colonialist practices that keep the colonized in poverty even after the colonizers have departed. Readers cannot overlook the unpaid and poorly paid labor that has made the island paradise possible. Nor can they overlook how Morrison has lifted cultural dynamics from the familiar public and private spaces of her first three novels on the mainland of the United States and located them in the Caribbean to reveal how those dynamics might, in a different place, remain the same. Though the novel seems to anticipate easy readings of race, identity, and even class, Morrison complicates easy readings of all these terms as the assessment of Jadine and Son indicates near the end of the novel:

> This rescue was not going well. She thought she was rescuing him . . . He thought he was rescuing her . . . Each was pulling the other away from the maw of hell – its very ridge top. Each knew the world as it was meant to be or ought to be. One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands.[15]

Thus, *Tar Baby* ends with unresolved contentions and suggests that neither of these lovers has a monopoly on how to read culture, the text of Son's own life, or the text of how Jadine's life is connected to those of the community from which both have emerged. At a cultural moment in the late 1970s and early 1980s when questions of identity, multiculturalism, and diversity were beginning to be hotly contested, Morrison entered into the fray with a novel that took readers into familiar spaces of myth and folklore to ask more questions than it answered.

Toni Morrison's last three novels have often been referred to as a trilogy about excesses of love. *Beloved* (1987), the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about a formerly enslaved woman's attempt to kill all her children rather than see them enslaved in accordance with the Fugitive Slave Law, was clearly about excesses of mother love. Some readers have chosen to read Sethe's act

as an act of revenge to deprive her slavemaster of his property. The second in the trilogy, *Jazz* (1992) – the story of Violet and Joe Trace, whose marriage crisis results in his affair, the murder of his teenage lover, and Violet's attempt to deface the corpse of her husband's lover at the funeral – is clearly about excesses of romantic love. *Paradise* (1998) represents the third novel in the trilogy, the story of an all-black town that attempts to murder the women who have turned to a convent outside town for solace and female community. Here is Morrison's narrative about the excesses of religion or the love of God. The novels all move from the public sphere in which black people live, negotiate their lives with one another and with the larger white society, but each novel then moves inside to more intimate spaces. Each explores the ways in which black people's lives are simultaneously about race and not about race. Beyond the constraints of enslavement in the public spaces of plantations that have devastated Baby Suggs, Sethe, and the Sweet Home men, is the reality that black people had interior spaces of thoughts and feelings that few novels had explored. Shifting the view from the slavemaster and his deeds to the interior life of enslaved people, Morrison offers readers a new way to read the slave narrative. Moving back and forth in time, narrating the novel through the aesthetics of memory rather than the chronology of linear time, the reader enters into the emotional past of slavery without denying the reality of its more familiar brutal dimensions. As a result, the novel enables readers to consider enslavement from a new perspective of how black people were able to endure, to survive, when they did not own their bodies, their children, or anything but their own minds. Ironically, though Baby Suggs suffered from the "sadness [that] was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home . . . never having had the map to discover what she was like"[16] and though the same could be said for Beloved, the ghost who returns to haunt her mother and her house, Baby Suggs is also able to inspire the enslaved community with a psychic strategy for enduring a peculiar system that was designed to destroy them but did not: "You got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved."[17] Even after Baby Suggs dies, Sethe remembers her sermons in the clearing and tries to "listen to the spaces that the long-ago singing had left behind,"[18] for some clue as to how she is to carry on without her mother-in-law's sage wisdom and command that they sing healing into their circumstances.

By using an aesthetic narrative style that mirrors the improvisation of jazz, in the novel by that name, Morrison takes the reader away from the public spaces associated with the Harlem Renaissance with its literary salons, artistic productions, and white patronage to the private spaces of black folk trying to eke out a living after traveling from the South to the North. While

they are lured into reading the City as a new, open space for their freedom to flourish, they are, nevertheless, torn between "when to love something and when to quit . . . Word was that underneath the good times and the easy money something evil ran the streets and nothing was safe – not even the dead."[19] So the novel explores through a very improvisational rendering of the multiple readings of what happened, not only from the characters themselves, but even from the narrator. In fact, the narrator's distrust of her own reading of the events renders her unreliable and thus leaves the reader once again to fend for herself:

> I was so sure, and they danced and walked all over me: Busy, they were busy being original, complicated, changeable – human, I guess you'd say, while I was the predictable one, confused in my solitude into arrogance, thinking my space, my view was the only one that was or that mattered.[20]

By the time the reader finishes the novel, all she really knows is that a couple had a crisis, a young woman was married, the couple reconciled, and it all took place against the backdrop of one of America's most exciting artistic and cultural moments.

The excesses of religious love produce another kind of arrogance in *Paradise*. Black people who had once been excluded from white towns move west and form all-black towns, only to give in to a form of exclusionary practice of their own on the basis of an intraracial color line. The novel exposes the various ways in which this all-black paradise unravels because of the ways in which their religious and gendered orthodoxies break down into violent arguments about everything from the history of the town, to the meaning of the oven, its central edifice, to the character of the women who seek refuge in the convent on the outskirts of town. Again exposing the ways in which communities create pariah figures and then denigrate them and the spaces in which they reside as inferior, Morrison brings to bear the history of the state and the church in a novel that exposes racial and intergenerational hostilities. Even the familiar space of the church with all its sacred meanings gets deconstructed in this novel for the ways in which it exposes the hypocrisies and secrets of domestic space. At the wedding of two of the main characters, one of the two ministers present realizes the problem with the town of Ruby is that there were

> two editions of the official story: One that nine men had gone to talk to and persuade the Convent women to leave or mend their ways; there had been a fight; the women took other shapes and disappeared into thin air . . . Richard didn't believe either of the stories rapidly becoming gospel . . . But because neither had decided on the meaning of the ending and, therefore, had not been able to formulate a credible, sermonizable account of it, they could not assuage Richard's dissatisfaction . . . As for Lone, she became unhinged by the way the story was being retold; how people were changing it to make themselves look good.[21]

By the time the reader finishes this complex novel of racial history, a town's history, and a community of women's stories, there are more questions than the usual one of who is the woman referred to in the first line "They shoot the white girl first."[22] The reader realizes there are other larger questions such as what gave the men the right to believe they had read the lives of the women correctly, that the women were doing anything out at the convent besides listening to one another's stories, singing, and offering a healing touch to those whose lives had been brutal, torn, tragic. The reader realizes that while each of the three religious denominations named thought it had a monopoly on truth, none did. All are therefore implicated in the demise of the paradise they had once enjoyed. And, as is the case at the end of *Sula*, the reader is left to ponder just where the source of good and evil really does lie.

More importantly, however, all of Morrison's novels so far challenge the reader to move from familiar to unfamiliar interpretations of life and living. Rendering the novel through a lens of complex narrative aesthetics, she invites readers into the cultural politics of race, gender, class, age, and even religion to entertain new readings of the text of their own lives, the nation, and the global community. While the challenge of such complex renderings of relationships and history may be more than readers like or are accustomed to, the beauty with which Morrison pulls her readers into these spaces makes it all worthwhile and tempts them not to give up, but to "rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise."[23] Inside the space of her novels is a form of uneasy rest, therefore, encouraging readers to return to their lives with new ways of making meaning of them.

NOTES

1. Claudia Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum, 1984), p. 119. The first epigraphs at the beginning of this essay are from Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), p. 220; Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse on the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 257; and Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," *Black Women Writers 1950–1980: A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Anchor Books, 1984), p. 341. The views I am expressing in this critical essay are adapted from my forthcoming book, tentatively titled, "Spaces for the Reader: Toni Morrison's Narrative Poetics and Cultural Politics."
2. Morrison, "Rootedness," p. 341.
3. Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Plume, 1970 rpt. 1994), p. 205.

4. Morrison, "Afterword," *The Bluest Eye*, p. 210.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 211.
6. Morrison, "Rootedness," p. 345.
7. Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), p. 5.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
10. Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Knopf, 1977), p. 3.
11. Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* (Winter 1989): 1–34.
12. Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p. 337.
13. Morrison, *Tar Baby* (New York: Plume, 1981), p. 9.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 269.
16. Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1981), p. 140.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Morrison, *Jazz* (New York: Knopf, 1992), p. 9.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 220.
21. Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Knopf, 1998), pp. 296–297.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 318.

14

LOVALERIE KING

African American womanism: from Zora Neale Hurston to Alice Walker

Zora Neale Hurston's work in the woman-centered narrative, particularly *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), connects African American women's literary production in the second half of the twentieth century to African American women's literary production in the nineteenth century. Alice Walker epitomizes this connection in her acknowledgment of Hurston's significance in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), the volume prefaced by Walker's four-part womanist aesthetic.[1] Critics and other readers recognize Walker's resurrection of Hurston's exuberant spirit in Shug Avery of *The Color Purple* (1982).[2] Walker pays tribute to Hurston and other black foremothers who paved the way, even under the most difficult circumstances.[3] She acknowledges, as well, the efforts of her sisters in struggle in the mid-twentieth-century social movements: "Women have, over the last twenty years, really forged a community of readers, writers, and activists. That is what we're seeing. We're seeing that feminists and womanists have actually come of age, so that we are able to talk to each other."[4]

One happy offshoot of the social transformation that took place during this period was an unprecedented flowering of African American women's literature. What the growing body of literature lacked, however, was a means for assessing its value as art.[5] In "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977), Barbara Smith broke new ground, calling for the serious work of articulating a black feminist approach to black women's literature. Though Walker had published the title essay for her 1983 collection of womanist prose in 1974, it was in "One Child of One's Own" (1979) that she invoked Virginia Woolf's famous essay to point to the failure of white feminists to give serious consideration to African American women's art. Responses to Smith and Walker's combined call to fill this void in literary criticism would ultimately spawn a small cottage industry and launch numerous academic careers.[6]

Walker's womanist aesthetic takes shape in the context of addressing this issue, and its implications have been far-reaching.[7] It is less a means for judging the value of black women's art than it is a framework for imagining the

black female subject in the process of achieving *wholeness*. Madhu Dubey finds that, "Walker's womanist ideology affirms a psychological wholeness that is communally oriented and is explicitly opposed to the self-sufficient individuality of bourgeois humanist ideology."[8] In *Katie's Canon*, womanist theologian Katie Cannon uses Walker's definition of womanist as "a critical, methodological framework for challenging inherited traditions for their collusion with androcentric patriarchy as well as a catalyst in overcoming oppressive situations through revolutionary acts of rebellion."[9] In "Womanizing Theory" (1998), Clara Juncker describes Walker's articulation of a womanist aesthetic as an attempt to womanize theory: "Walker deconstructs Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* and his theory of aggressive misprision with the harmonious chorus of women writing/inviting/rewriting women in 'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens.'" Her autobiographical, poetic, elliptic and multivocal discourse . . . signifies, moreover, her difference from dominant cultural theoreticians and theories."[10] Though Walker's aesthetic has been labeled by some as both polemic and essentialist, ultimately, and for our purposes here, it serves as the basis for the womanist cosmology that becomes increasingly evident in Walker's novels.

One of Walker's earliest written articulations of her womanist aesthetic appears in her 1981 review of Jean Humez's *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Cox Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress* (1981). She writes that she could "imagine African American women who love women (sexually or not) . . . referring to themselves as 'whole' women . . . as 'round' women . . . who also have concern, in a culture that oppresses all black people . . . My own term for such women would be 'womanist'."[11] Walker further explains that the term would need to express the "spiritual and the concrete and it would have to be organic, characteristic, not simply applied. A word that said more than that they choose women over men . . . than that they choose to live separate from men." The word would also affirm "connectedness to the entire community and the world."[12] She defended her choice of terms to Audre Lorde, pointing out that her use of "womanist," rather than "black feminist," was "a necessary act of liberation to name oneself with words that fit." She pointed to Lorde's own celebration of that position in works such as *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982). In addition, "womanist" offered more room for changes, "sexual and otherwise," and was more "reflective of African American women's culture, especially Southern culture."[13] The idea of an inherent, or built-in, flexibility becomes increasingly evident as one considers Walker's work in the novel *vis-à-vis* her articulation of a womanist aesthetic through her art.

Using the format for a typical dictionary entry, Walker sets out her womanist aesthetic as the preface for *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. The

first component of the definition invokes the black vernacular and provides details about the womanist attitude:

> Womanist 1. From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*. (xi)

Walker's first three novels, set primarily, though not exclusively, in the South, evidence her commitment to reclaiming and valorizing the rural Southern black vernacular, specifically that of Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama. This is most pronounced in *The Color Purple* (1982) where Celie composes her letters to God and Nettie in her own familiar idiom, in a way that does not "feel peculiar" to her mind. Though Walker includes the straightforward statement that a womanist is a "black feminist, or feminist of color," the qualities associated with the womanist are not confined to racial, gender, or other categories. The womanist subject is at once precocious and determined, someone whose thoughts and actions place her "ahead of the game," perhaps even in the position of visionary. She is direct and assertive, a person who willingly and aggressively takes responsibility for her own life, and who claims the right to full existence.

Walker's definition of the attitude exhibited by the womanist subject is broad enough, and flexible enough, to invoke Maria Stewart's boldness in making political speeches to men *and* women long before society deemed it proper for a woman (let alone a black woman) to do so.[14] Thus, while we must continue to credit Walker for having set down the terms for a womanist aesthetic, her acknowledged debt to certain foremothers, who served as trailblazers, is as apparent as is her own influence on a growing body of women's literature and criticism worldwide. The most obvious of these is Zora Neale Hurston, whose exuberant spirit is easily recognizable in Walker's definition of the womanist attitude. Along with Hurston, Walker directly invokes Harriet Tubman, escaped slave and Underground Railroad conductor, in setting out her definition; and she also draws from a documented legacy of African American women who exhibited the kind of courageous, willful, audacious, *womanish* behavior that Walker includes as part of her definition. Implicit in Walker's description of the womanist approach to life is the spirit of women such as Rebecca Cox Jackson, Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Sojourner Truth, who went against the grain and challenged prevailing

notions about what women (who were also of African descent) could and could not do.[15] One is reminded also of Harriet Jacobs's agency in her direct challenge to legal and social structures that made it permissible for a white man to demand her total submission to his will.[16]

That Walker was *theorizing* womanism long before she officially entered the neologism into literary history is also clear.[17] More than a decade before Walker spelled out her womanist aesthetic, the character of Ruth Copeland exhibited aspects of the womanist attitude in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970). Precocious and womanish as a young girl, Ruth clearly exhibits the attributes of the potential womanist subject, the kind that will survive *whole* in subsequent works. Likewise, the title character of *Meridian* (1976) epitomizes the courageous, willful behavior of the womanist subject, though critics disagree as to whether she becomes a fully realized subject. Meridian Hill, whom we might consider a projection of Ruth's potential into the immediate future, exemplifies the spiritual resolve of real women like Ruby Doris Robinson-Smith and Fannie Lou Hamer. We first encounter Meridian in the immediate aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, which serves as the present moment of the story. She is *staring down* a tank (and the white men who operate it) in a small Mississippi town in order to integrate the local freak show. In another willful act, she brought the bloated body of a drowned black child to a city council meeting to convince them that integrating the public swimming pool was the right thing to do. Years before, she had the audacity to refuse the responsibility of motherhood in giving her own child up so that she could attend college. Compared to the type of virginal young ladies the college sought to mold, however, Meridian seemed outrageous (94). Her womanist resolve led her easily into the Civil Rights Movement, though when the Movement began to move away from nonviolence, she found it difficult to embrace the idea of killing for the revolution without first contemplating the implications to her soul. Walker recasts Meridian's contemplative nature in exemplary characters throughout her subsequent novels.

In her Pulitzer Prize-winning third novel, *The Color Purple*, Walker achieves a previously unrealized depiction of the womanist approach to life in the character of Shug Avery. Like Meridian Hill, Shug Avery is comfortable choosing an alternative to mothering. She leaves her children to pursue a career as a blues singer, an act considered scandalous by many. She expresses a free, open, fluid sexuality that is not bound by prefixes, which serves as further evidence of her willful, audacious, and even courageous approach to life. Sofia also displays the womanist attitude in refusing to allow Albert (her future father-in-law) to define her out-of-wedlock pregnancy in negative terms. Her life experiences mandate that she fight back when Harpo tries to dominate her, and she even survives the horrible series of circumstances set in motion when she rebuffs the white mayor's wife's offer of a job as her maid.

As the primary subject/narrator of *The Color Purple*, Celie must develop the womanist attitude, which Shug and Sofia already possess when she first encounters them, in order to undergo successfully the womanist process of transformation. Centered on the reciprocal relationship between Celie and Shug, *The Color Purple* begins with Celie as adolescent mother and victim of her stepfather's lust and ill-treatment. Celie is subsequently turned over to a husband who continues the abuse. The stunted relationship between Alfonso and Celie's mother, as well as that between Celie and her husband, mirrors the dysfunctional and tragic Copeland marriages from Walker's first novel. However, the womanist process, which Shug's appearance incites, propels the reciprocal relationship that rescues Celie from a fate similar to those Mem and Margaret suffered. In communion with Shug, Sofia, and/or Celie, other characters – Mary Alice, Eleanor Jane, Albert, Harpo – begin to exhibit signs of the womanist mindset.

Lissie, of *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), is Walker's neologism made flesh. She is living history, exemplifying the womanist spirit of knowledge. She is Shug Avery magnified, responsible, outrageous, audacious, contrary, and whole. She embodies the womanist attitude as a result of having acquired the wisdom that comes with experiencing life from a variety of perspectives through multiple incarnations through time. Interestingly, Walker chooses the name Lisette for the French woman who exhibits the womanist attitude in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992). Everything about Lisette's association with Adam – the fact that he is married, black, and American, the fact of her intentional out-of-wedlock pregnancy, the way she raises their son, and even her attempts to reach out to Adam's wife, Tashi – suggest that she is audacious, willful, and courageous. Prior to volunteering for what Walker refers to as female genital mutilation, Tashi had exhibited similar proclivities in her relationship to Adam and, generally, by daring to operate outside the narrow constraints of societal conventions. Tashi experiences a rebirth of her womanist spirit after she kills M'Lissa, her village *tsunga*.

Finally, Magdalena is the budding womanist in *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998). In this novel, Walker sends a family of fake missionaries to Mexico to live among a group of natural Indians.[18] Mr. and Mrs. Robinson are upwardly mobile, black middle-class, agnostic anthropologists, who pose as missionaries in order to qualify for the funds they need for field research. Unable to see the natural lifestyle of the Mundo in terms other than static and impoverished, Mr. Robinson tries to free them from their ignorance.[19] Eventually, he takes on the role of fake priest, and becomes "sucked into the

black cloth" as Manuelito, the Mundo Indian who is Magdalena Robinson's soulmate, tells him. With this arrangement, Walker sets up a startling contrast between the natural (what is revealed to the Mundo through thousands of years of observing nature) and the artificial (what has been codified and handed down in written form). Manuelito asks Mr. Robinson point blank: "Did you really think we did not know we should love one another; that the person across from us is ourself? That stealing is bad; that wanting what other people have is hurtful to us? That we are a part of the Great Spirit and loved as such?" (148). Such questions reduce the drama surrounding the biblical story of the Ten Commandments to melodrama. Mr. Robinson's teaching of an ideology that he does not himself embrace, however, is the ultimate sign of disrespect for the Mundo and their natural way of life. The point is brought home in the act that provides the central conflict for the Robinson family.

Angered and frustrated by his daughter's womanish behavior, Mr. Robinson attempts to control Magdalena by beating her severely with the belt that was a gift from soulmate Manuelito. In effect, he drives Magdalena's budding womanism underground. In the afterlife, Manuelito explains to Mr. Robinson that the Mundo had bestowed the name Mad Dog on Magdalena because they recognized her as embodying the wisdom the mad dog realizes as a result of being separated from its mind. The Mundo practice such temporary separations, through herbal means, so as to avoid the kind of artificial life into which Mr. Robinson had fallen. They see in the mad dog the potential for gaining the wisdom not found in logic. After her father beats her in order to suppress her womanist proclivities, Magdalena buries her natural, audacious, willful spirit beneath layers of self-destructive fat. She will not forgive her father, and thus, like him, she exists in a state of static spiritual development for the rest of her corporeal existence. In the afterlife, Magdalena and her father receive another chance to achieve *wholeness*.[20] More than her five previous novels, *By the Light of My Father's Smile* reveals the womanist process in an almost pragmatic manner.

The second component of Walker's womanist aesthetic describes the womanist *vis-à-vis* her relationships with others and with herself, stresses connectedness over separatism, encourages an acceptance of a collective past as it is exhibited in the many hues of the African diaspora, and celebrates a legacy of resistance to oppression:

2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."[21]

Walker's womanist is in touch with her own fluid sexuality, which she shares at her discretion and pleasure with women and/or men. The womanist embraces and openly expresses her sexuality in relationships with others. In *The Color Purple*, Walker gives us the Celie/Shug/Albert triad. Though Walker posits sexuality as a *good thing*, relationships can be sexual or not sexual. Celie and Albert learn to coexist as friends without interacting sexually. Lissie provides a veritable history of human sexuality in *The Temple of My Familiar*. Nevertheless, she and husband Rafe continue to enjoy a close intimate relationship even after he no longer desires her sexually. They form a triad with Lissie's lover, Hal. Tashi's story represents the importance of unencumbered sexuality via negativa in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Though she is unable to experience sexual joy after her voluntary circumcision, Tashi does not condone her husband's affair with Lisette until after she has killed M'Lissa. It is Lisette who willingly accepts her role in the triad, who expresses her sexuality freely, and thus better exemplifies this aspect of the womanist. Walker begins her Acknowledgments at the end of *By the Light of My Father's Smile* by thanking the spirit of Eros, for the novel celebrates the erotic. The novel's central conflict arises as a result of Mr. Robinson's attempt to suppress his adolescent daughter's burgeoning sexuality.[22]

Though Walker's process is supposedly de-centered, the quest for personal and communal *wholeness* is the one aspect of the process that is most apparent in all six of her novels.[23] In this project, she employs recurring motifs of the spiritual journey or questing self, rebirth and transformation, the universality of pain and suffering, and a holistic view of life that brings her idea of connectedness into full relief. At issue is the condition of the soul, and it is not simply a matter of the individual soul. She or he who achieves wholeness, or who aspires to achieve *wholeness*, bears the responsibility for showing others the way, *for lifting as they climb*. One imagines a chain, or a continuum, of humanity with each leading the next.

In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker represents this idea in Grange's relationship to Ruth, and in Ruth's resolve to someday lead the way. Set in rural Georgia, the novel spans some sixty years from the early 1900s to the 1960s. Grange Copeland's journey comes packaged in three

phases: He lives his first "life" as a tragic sharecropper turned brute, his second "life" as a southern migrant in the hostile North, and his third "life" as the somewhat enlightened and regenerated worldly guide for his granddaughter, Ruth. Grange envisions for Ruth the possibility for "joy, laughter, contentment in being a woman . . . Survival was not everything. He had survived. But to survive *whole* was what he wanted for Ruth" (298).[24] The degeneration of Grange's soul, charted in the first part of the novel, gives way to a regenerative process in the second part, which leads Grange to the point of giving up his life for Ruth's sake.

The difference between Meridian Hill's spiritual development in *Meridian* and that of Grange Copeland is obvious, for Meridian's soul is never in the degenerated condition of Grange's. Indeed, Meridian Hill seems to move – spiritually and temporally speaking – from the point where Ruth is situated at the end of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. In her developing consciousness, Ruth points out certain weak aspects of her grandfather's spiritual development. She also recognizes the task ahead of her. Near the end of the novel she tells Grange, "I'd be bored stiff waiting for black folks to rise up so I could join them. Since I'm already ready to rise up and they ain't, it seems to me I should rise up first and let them follow me" (275–276). Ruth's words are manifested in Meridian's exemplary life as a willful and courageous civil rights worker, who ultimately serves as a spiritual guide for others.

Importantly, the questing subject of *Meridian* is a black woman, and the primary setting is still the American South. For most of her journey, Meridian, an avid civil rights worker, ponders the question of whether she would kill for the revolution. The question invokes the moment when the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement gave way to the more aggressive Black Power Movement. It is in her incessant pondering of this question about taking a life that we understand her soul to be highly evolved. Indeed, some critics see Meridian as destined for sainthood in her devotion to her calling, and certainly in her suffering; however, as Walker knows from experience, dedicated civil rights work was often physically and emotionally debilitating. People who live with the constant anxiety of being attacked develop nervous conditions and suffer a variety of physical ailments, including the loss of hair and weight.[25] If Meridian's physical suffering qualifies her for sainthood, then there were many others who would also qualify. Meridian actively rejects the role of Christian martyr when she says that Jesus Christ and Martin Luther King Jr. should have refused death as an option and simply left town. She follows her own advice and leaves town, but not before preparing the way for Truman Held, who takes Meridian's place in the community.

Truman will, in turn, light the way for former wife Lynne, who will light the way for the next seeker, and so the chain goes.

In *The Color Purple*, the chain becomes a circle of reciprocity that begins with the central relationship between Celie and Shug, when Shug arrives to serve as Celie's guide in her quest. That their relationship is reciprocal is clearly illustrated when Shug explains how and why she came to compose a song to Celie. The reciprocal relationship between Celie and Shug radiates outward to form an ever-widening cooperative community that includes Sofia, Albert, Harpo, their children, Mary Alice, and, ultimately, Eleanor Jane. The primary setting is rural Georgia, with Walker once again raising the taboo subject of physical and sexual violence within the black community. Epistles (Celie's letters to God, Nettie's letters to Celie, and Celie's letters to Nettie) comprise the narrative. Walker's growing optimism is reflected in her decision to cast the story as a romance, allowing for Celie's happy ending and, in a sense, giving the dead sharecropper wives of her first novel a chance for subject status.[26] (Celie's story also resembles the subgenre of African American literature known as the freedom narrative, in its movement from slavery to freedom, and in some of its built-in plot devices.) It is Shug Avery who gives voice to a universal relatedness: "one day . . . it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all." She likens the feeling to satisfying sex. Celie echoes Shug in directing her final letter: "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God. Thank you for bringing my sister Nettie and our children home" (286).

In her next novel, Walker expands the universal consciousness that Shug and Celie express. The cooperative community that Walker imagines in *The Temple of My Familiar* appears boundless, extending to all of creation, the condition of the soul more significant than ever, her womanist ideas given full rein. *The Temple of My Familiar* continues Walker's discourse on the communal quest for wholeness, culminating in a realization of oneness, an ideal unity among the living. There is no self and other, only the self and the familiar. In *Anything We Love Can Be Saved* (1997), Walker writes of a "central dream" in which she

> saw that our essential "familiar" is our own natural, untamed, "wild" spirit and that its temple is the cosmos, that is, freedom. This dream came complete with temple, familiar, Lissie and Suwelo, and the understanding that I was writing a "romance" (that is to say, a wisdom tale, memory, adventure) that was less about the relationships of human beings to each other than about the relationship of humans (women, in particular) to animals, who, in the outer world, symbolize woman's inner spirit. (118)

Walker extends and expands her idea of connectedness to depict relationships that transcend time, geographical space, and even the human form. She explains that she understood upon reaching *Temple*'s final chapter that "Hal had been instructing Suwelo about how to live – with women, with children, with other men, with animals, with white people. Con Todos!" (119). The "central dream" of *Temple*, Walker tells us, is about "our collusion with the forces that suppress and colonize our spirituality" (118). In *Temple*, Suwelo epitomizes the colonized mindset, most notably in his attitude toward his wife, Fanny Nzingha, and in his approach to the American history that he teaches for a living. Arguing that *Temple* signifies on Western metaphysical dualism, Ikenna Dieke asserts that in Walker's *The Temple of My Familar* that:

> For Alice Walker, artistic creativity is nothing but a deliberate act of giving form to a vision of the underlying or hidden links in the great universal chain of being . . . From the predominately Gothic vision in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, to the somewhat Camusian pastiche in *Meridian*, to the vision of the great gender divide-and-conquer in *The Color Purple*, Walker moves into *The Temple of My Familiar* and creates a salutary vision of reality, which points toward a monistic idealism in which humans, animals, and the whole ecological order coexist in a unique dynamic of pancosmic symbiosis. (129)

Meridian's sense that killing would irreparably harm her soul, and Shug Avery's acknowledgment that all of creation is connected are both implicit in *Temple's* vision of universal symbiosis. Even in Walker's first novel, the cyclical nature of oppression depicted in the multigenerational family saga connects it to Walker's more recent novels. For example, Grange Copeland's final acts in Walker's first novel serve a disruptive function that parallels Tashi's killing of the village *tsunga* in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.

By killing the *tsunga*, Tashi (as representative African woman) symbolically breaks the tradition that stood between her and *wholeness*. Walker uses the subject to illustrate the continuum (through time and space) of physical and spiritual damage that a single harmful act sets in motion. An addendum to *The Color Purple* provides the information that the Johnson family (Samuel, Corinne, Adam, Olivia) and Nettie arrived at Olinka the same day that Tashi's sister Dura, apparently a hemophiliac, bled to death after being circumcised by M'Lissa. Tashi had greeted them in tears. Hence, Samuel's fundamental question, which Adam remembers, "Why is the child crying?" (161). The question evokes the memory of Tashi's tears and questions the psychic well-being of the community that produces the crying child. Samuel's question conjures up the image of the toddler, Brownfield Copeland, spending his days alone and un-nurtured while his sharecropper parents

enrich the landowner through their unrequited labor. We are reminded of the adolescent Celie, bleeding from her stepfather's rape, forced to groom her rapist even as the blood oozes down her legs. With Samuel's question, Walker lets no one "off the hook"; anyone who turns an apathetic eye or ear is complicit.

Possessing the Secret of Joy gives us the character M'Zee, or Carl. M'Zee is Lisette's uncle, a psychologist who feels that in witnessing Adam's and Tashi's suffering, he is being brought home to himself. He sees in them a self he has often felt "was only halfway at home on the European continent." In other words, he shares Tashi's (Walker's character from *The Color Purple* who reappears in this novel) suffering: "Harm to one is harm to the many" (84). Adam realizes too late in his marriage that he had always considered Tashi's suffering as "something singular, absolute" rather than part of a "continuum of pain" (165). Tashi's spiritual freedom is connected to the symbolic act of killing her *tsunga*, an act for which she resolutely accepts her death sentence. The letter Tashi composes to long-dead Lisette the night before her scheduled execution is a preview of the tone and style of narration for Walker's sixth novel, *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. In that novel, spirits (or angels) tell the story and work out in the spiritual realm those issues that remained unresolved at the time of their physical death.

Pierre, the son of Adam and Lisette, raises the question of connectedness another way in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. He ponders whether the Marquis de Sade's "cruelty to women is somehow lodged in the collective consciousness of the French . . . like the zest of Rabelais, the wit of Molière" (138). Similarly, as the title character of *Meridian* considers the central question of whether she is willing to kill for the revolution, she wonders how killing for the revolution will affect the music of succeeding generations of African Americans. The question invokes the history of African American music. If the spirituals expressed the suffering of enslavement, and the blues grew out of the Southern rural experiences of Jim Crow apartheid, what kind of music would come from the collective and eager embrace of violence? How could Meridian/Walker have foreseen the birth of "gangsta" rap?

Walker's womanist process advocates separatism as a temporary solution for the sake of healing. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Tashi speaks of "The secret place *I* come to heal myself" (84). Womanist wisdom suggests healing the self before attempting to heal others. Though her first novel came long before Walker set out the terms for the womanist process, one notes the limited progress Grange Copeland made toward healing himself during a period of separation from his Southern community before he was able to assist his granddaughter. Meridian Hill's frequent retreats give her the space for rejuvenation so that she is able to carry on her activist work. Shug

Avery understands fully the idea that occasional separations are a must for her continued resilience. Even Celie realizes that it is in everyone's best interest that she exit rural Georgia soon after she finds the cache of Nettie's letters that Albert has kept from her for years. Walker demonstrates via negativa that Tashi's attempt to retain a connection to the Olinka, regardless of circumstances, proved detrimental to her well-being.

The idea of temporary, occasional separation for the sake of health comes packaged in completely different terms in *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, however, for here the separation takes place internally. The Mundo take an *herbal separation from their minds* once a year to avoid falling into the complacent belief that logic explains everything.[27] Manuelito explains that the separation allows them to take in the knowledge they need to maintain their natural lifestyles. Magdalena, at puberty, existed in such a state before the beating. Mr. Robinson's soul cannot rest until he understands and acknowledges fully the harm he inflicted directly to Magdalena and, indirectly, to Susannah. Walker connects Mr. Robinson's negative turn to his fake practice of Christianity.

Walker's valorization of connectedness (the opposite of separatism) allows her to trace a continuum of pain and suffering and continue the development of her idea of the universal. She also illustrates through plot, theme, and narration how harmful acts become part of the individual or collective psyche and come to bear on ensuing generations. Yet, the focus is on healing, rather than blame. Healing begins with accepting responsibility.[28] The Brownfields, Alberts, and Alfonsos of the world must accept responsibility for their own deeds regardless of what has come before, just as Mr. Robinson's ignorance of *the natural way* is no excuse for the psychic harm he inflicts on Magdalena in *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. Magdalena must, in spite of the beating, take responsibility for her own soul's well-being and give her father the unconditional love that her mother had shown toward him.

This aspect of the womanist is expressed in Walker's third component, from *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* which also emphasizes sensual pleasure:

> Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*. (xii)

Like female subjectivity, sensual pleasure and unconditional love find little healthy expression in Walker's first novel. Nevertheless, their profound absence speaks volumes and makes it ripe for exploration on that basis. The sharecropper existence, as Walker portrays it, is fraught with pleasure denying hardship. The pleasures young couples take in each other, in being with

each other, and in their experience of the natural world, are soon casualties of the sharecropper life. Though the space of Josie's club offers some possibility for the experience of sensual delights, time and again it becomes, like its owner, a misused space. In Josie we see an early manifestation of Magdalena Robinson (*By the Light of My Father's Smile*) in the sense that the way each woman expresses (or does not express) her sexuality is directly related to unfinished business with her father. Both Grange Copeland and his son misuse Josie, Grange as an escape from the brutal reality of his sharecropper life, and Brownfield as revenge for his father's abandonment. Grange's wife, Margaret, commits suicide after her husband abandons her (first emotionally, and then physically). Grange's degenerate offspring, Brownfield, subsequently kills his wife, Mem, whose name is from the French for "same," which underscores the cyclical nature of Copeland family violence. Brownfield even tries years later to destroy Ruth's chances for a meaningful life. Margaret, Mem, and even Josie, clearly end up as victims, which leaves Ruth as the novel's only potential expression of a womanist subject.

In *Meridian*, sensual pleasure and erotic love take a back seat to the important work of the Civil Rights Movement and Meridian's own spiritual journey. Meridian's pleasure manifests itself spiritually as ecstasy (57), though Walker notes that critics have tended to overlook the "whole sublayer of Indian consciousness" in Meridian, in which one recognizes an appreciation of natural things, including trees, birds, and the desert.[29] In *The Color Purple*, this aspect of Walker's womanist process is most evident in Shug Avery. Shug, the artist, is earthy; she celebrates the sensual and treats the world to music that comes directly from her soul. Her music invites dancing, and it is important to remember that Shug's concept of God/Goddess (the *philosophy* of connectedness or relatedness at the core of *The Color Purple* and which Walker expands in subsequent works) is consistent with her healthy embrace of all the sensual pleasures. Shug Avery expects and allows herself the orgasms that Hurston's Janie Crawford was able to achieve only after she extricated herself from an outdated narrative about African American women's sexuality. She is a fitting personal (hands-on) guide in Celie's experience of sensual pleasure.

Lissie is Shug's highly developed counterpart in *Temple*, and, like Shug, she shares the stage with other women and men, including Zedé, Carlotta, Fanny, Arveyda, and Hal. Significantly, most of these characters are artists. Tashi, of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, is also an artist, but Tashi is alienated from the sensual pleasures as a result of her circumcision. Her husband, Adam, finds in Lisette a friend and lover who deliberately and lovingly fulfills the missing aspect of his relationship with Tashi. Lisette gives birth to the deeply sensitive Pierre, who dedicates his life to the fight against the practice of

female circumcision. It is Pierre who tells Tashi that "the greatest curse in some African countries is not 'son of a bitch' but 'son of an uncircumcised mother,'" (274).

Walker best develops the third component of her definition in *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. Manuelito and his Mundo clan are a natural people, the folk, who celebrate the sensual pleasures. They live their lives in accordance with nature's cycles. For the Mundo, music is so important that they believe one who makes the transition from the physical world to the spiritual world while singing will experience "self-assurance on the path of death" (148). Subtitled, "A Story of Requited Love, Crossing Over, and the Sexual Healing of the Soul," *By the Light of My Father's Smile* is first and foremost a thorough enactment of that part of Walker's womanist aesthetic concerned with embracing sensual pleasure and expressing love for self, others, and all things, unconditionally. This last aspect is reflected in Magdalena's need to love her father despite the harm he inflicted on her. Mr. Robinson (and the traditions upon which he relies for support) does as much harm toward driving Magdalena's healthy sense of herself underground as Alfonso and Albert did toward driving Celie's sexuality and self-esteem underground in *The Color Purple*. Manuelito serves as Mr. Robinson's spiritual guide, leading him gently toward the enlightenment he needs in order to reconcile with Magdalena.

According to Manuelito, the Mundo had allowed the Robinsons to stay and interact with them because Mr. Robinson was always making love to his wife, a sign of the quality they treasured as a natural acceptance of sensual pleasure and a natural appreciation for women. Essentially, the Mundo came to realize after thousands of years how closely their routines were tied to the cycles of the moon, and how closely women are connected to the moon and its rhythms. They are in synchronization with nature, and thus, part of everything. Manuelito explains that a "woman's tides, her blood tides connect with moon," and during a certain period, women just do not want to be bothered. Manuelito recalls that his mother, "during such times, would actually throw things" at his father (208–209). Since the Mundo "love to make love," this is a gloomy time for them. They also recognize by the condition of the moon when a woman is most likely to become pregnant, and since they cannot afford many children, they are careful during that time. This simple remedy to unwanted pregnancy and the economic hardship that comes with it places the responsibility on both men and women, and it makes absurd the kinds of violent responses we see in Mr. Robinson, as well as in Josie's father (*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*).[30] The Mundo believe that woman is neither the purveyor of some original calamity nor of a gender subordinate to man. Her ability to create life should cause celebration, not incite fear and violence. This, among other reasons, is why they barely tolerated the missionaries who came to them with the story of Original Sin, which they see as anti-woman. They use the cycles of the moon not only for birth control, but also to help them (men and women) to coexist harmoniously. In the afterlife, Manuelito explains to Mr. Robinson the Mundo belief that the "cathedral of the future will be nature . . . In the end, people will be driven back to trees. To streams. To rocks that do not have anything built on them" (193). Thus, in her sixth novel, Walker brings to the surface the Native American consciousness that lay beneath the surface in *Meridian*.

The fourth component of Walker's womanist process is comprised of a single straightforward statement that has, nevertheless, invited much critical analysis:

> Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (xi–xii)

To enhance our understanding of the last component of Walker's womanist aesthetic, it is important to consider the other three components, as well as how Walker enacts her womanist project in her own fiction. The first component set out the proper womanist attitude or approach to self-actualization. Though it specified that a womanist is a black feminist or a feminist of color, the qualities Walker delineates for the womanist are qualities that anyone might exhibit. Walker has demonstrated this time and again in her fiction. The second component focuses on relationships, and here Walker tries to avoid the self-and-other split that drives Western dualism. This becomes increasingly explicit in her novels and is probably best developed in *The Temple of My Familiar* and *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. The third component invites the unbridled expression of love of all living things, an appreciation for the natural world and its cycles, and the experience of sensual pleasure. The focus on connectedness, both in her articulation of womanism and in her representation of it in her novels, would indicate a tendency toward inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness.[31] Her attention to illuminating the limitations of Western dualism and the binary oppositions that undergird it would be grossly undermined by her own failure to avoid setting up her own false dichotomies. The differing views of critics suggest, however, that the matter is up for debate.

Dorothy Grimes writes that the analogy is "apparently intended to capture the texture and intensity of *womanist* as opposed to *feminist*."[32] Consistent with her charge that Walker's model is idealist and essentialist, Tuzyline Jita Allan offers that "even with the filter of metaphor, the last statement fails to conceal the deep lines of division drawn here between black and white feminists. Walker sets up (black) womanism and (white) feminism in a binary

opposition from which the former emerges a privileged, original term and the latter, a devalued, pale replica."[33] Maria Lauret believes that the final component of Walker's definition *absorbs* the white feminist (lavender) "into her project and *radicalises* it to the point of no return."[34] This last idea would be in keeping with Walker's focus on connectedness. Purple, a more intense color than lavender, is not merely the result of adding black to lavender. It also symbolizes the place of those black women in American society who, like Celie, must find a way to resist multiple oppressions related to race, class, gender, and sexuality, and to survive whole. Obviously important is the relationship between this particular component of womanism and the title of Walker's best-known novel, *The Color Purple*. Linda Abbandanato points out that purple is "encoded within the novel as a sign of indomitable female spirit."[35] The audacious, self-loving, overtly and fluidly sexual Shug Avery utters the important insight that explains the connection between the concept of God/Goddess and the presence of the color purple in nature.[36]

In an early assessment of Walker's work, Barbara Christian noted her attention to the recurring motif of the "Black woman as creator" and how the black woman's "attempt to be whole relates to the health of her community."[37] A womanist is pro-woman, not anti-man. Against a binary world view, Walker uses her novels to resist the implication of Western dualism that man should dominate all of nature, including woman. Ultimately, she constructs a womanist cosmology, which is most apparent in her fourth and sixth novels. The communal relationships Walker depicts, particularly in her last three novels, transcend time, space, the physical realm, and even the species we call human – which includes its own subcategories. Whether Walker's womanist aesthetic is flexible enough to include her hopeful vision of wholeness for an ever-expanding community is clearly a subject for the kind of critical debate that makes Walker cringe.[38]

NOTES

1. The title essay for this volume had been published almost a decade earlier, in 1974.
2. Walker tells us that she not only knew people in her own life with the nickname Shug, but she also found a character named Shug in Hurston's work (Walker, "Anything We Love Can Be Saved: The Resurrection of Zora Neale Hurston and Her Work," *Anything We Love Can Be Saved* (New York: Random House, 1997), p. 46. In her Dedication to *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . .* (1979), Walker describes Hurston in terms that she will later use to articulate her womanist aesthetic (1–5). In "Alice Walker's Life and Work: The Essays" (*Alice Walker*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), Maria Lauret offers a comparative examination of Walker and Hurston and their works. She suggests that Walker's definition

of womanism "presents less a political analysis of black women's oppression, let alone a programme to end it, than a depiction of a positive role model" (18–19).
3. See Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Company, 1983).
4. Sharon Wilson, "A Conversation with Alice Walker," *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Kwame Anthony Appiah, (New York: Amistad, 1993), pp. 319–325.
5. Smith demonstrated the need for this new approach by first reviewing the glaring omissions of black women's work in studies of American literature, American women's literature, and African American literature. She pointed out that even black women critics failed to take into consideration the connections among "the politics of black women's lives, what we write about, and our situation as artists" (133). Next she offered a black feminist assessment of Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) to further demonstrate that a black feminist approach might lead to additional insights about a given text. Walker's infamous challenge to Patricia Meyer Spacks and white feminists in general in "One Child of One's Own" is included in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, pp. 361–383.
6. Walker's articulation was only a small part of an ongoing and evolving project that included the work of critics such as Hazel Carby, Barbara Christian, Deborah McDowell, and Mary Helen Washington, to name only a few. Tuzyline Jita Allan locates Walker's "'womanist' ethos" in "the middle ground between McDowell's not-so sanguine expectations and Carby's hearty historicization." It "embodies both the frustration and the promise of black feminist criticism" (Tuzyline Jita Allan, "Introduction: Decoding Womanist Grammar of Difference," *Womanist and Feminist Aesthetics: A Comparative Review* [Athens: Ohio University Press, 1995], p. 5).
7. See, for example, Joseph Ajibola Adeleke, "Feminism, Black Feminism and the Dialectics of Womanism," *Critical Essay on the Novel in Francophone Africa*, ed. Aduke Adebayo (Ibadan: AMD Publishers, 1996); Ikenna Dieke, ed., *Critical Essays on Alice Walker* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999); Ana Maria Fraile-Marcos, "'As Purple to Lavender': Alice Walker's Womanist Representation of Lesbianism," *Literature and Homosexuality*, ed. Michael J. Meyer (Amsterdam: Rodolpi, 2000), pp. 111–134; Clara Juncker, "Womanizing Theory," *American Studies in Scandinavia* 30.2 (1998): 43–49; Maria Lauret, *Alice Walker* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); and Meera Viswanathan and Evangelina Mancikam, "Is Black Woman to White as Female Is to Male? Restoring Alice Walker's Womanist Prose to the Heart of Feminist Literary Criticism," *Indian Journal of American Studies* 28. 1–2 (1998): 15–20.
8. Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 4. The emphasis on the collective community in her work connects Walker to writer and activist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and her insistence in the late nineteenth century that black people could ill afford to indulge in America's notion of the rugged individualist. Other connections lie in the attention both give to representing the qualities of the true man (or natural man in Walker's case) alongside the qualities of the true (or natural) woman, and in the relationship between art and activism.
9. Katie Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 23.

10. Clara Juncker, "Womanizing Theory," p. 46.
11. Alice Walker, "Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson," *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, pp. 71–82.
12. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, p. 81.
13. Alice Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, p. 81.
14. See Richardson "Preface," *Maria W. Stewart* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. xiii.
15. All these women breached societal expectations of their behavior so as to live the fullest possible lives. This is not to suggest that these women identified as feminists; however, Walker's adjectives for the womanist attitude would apply to their assertive behavior in challenging conventions related to gender. Born free in 1795 in Horntown, Pennsylvania, Rebecca Cox Jackson was a charismatic itinerant preacher who later founded a community of Shakers in Philadelphia that was predominantly black and female. Among other things, the dual-gender concept of deity initially attracted Jackson to the Shaker faith. Her literary legacy includes the spiritual autobiography, *Gifts of Power*. See Jean Humez, "Rebecca Cox Jackson," *African American Women in America*, Vol. 1, ed. Darlene Clark Hine (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1993), pp. 626–627. Born free but very poor in Cape May, New Jersey on February 11, 1783, Jarena Lee's family was forced to hire her into service when she was only 7. It was around 1811, as a member of Philadelphia's Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church that Lee felt called to preach. She faced instant resistance from the founder and minister in charge, Richard Allen, who believed the Methodist discipline precluded women from becoming preachers. Some eight years later, however, she would gain Allen's endorsement as a preacher, but only after her own bold and spontaneous demonstration of her ability to exhort (see Jualynne E. Dodson, "Jarena Lee," *African American Women*, vol. 1, ed. Clark Hine). Born free near Philadelphia around 1790, Zilpha Elaw was drawn to Methodist evangelism at an early age. After marrying, bearing a child, and moving to Burlington, New Jersey, she continued her religious devotion; it was during a Methodist camp meeting in 1817 that she fell into a "trance of ecstasy." Following that event, she began to offer prayers for others at public meetings as an itinerant preacher, and eventually – after the death of her husband – she moved to Philadelphia to begin her ministry. Elaw would later brave the dangers inherent in carrying her messages into the slave states. Her memoirs contain revealing information about how women were received as public speakers in early nineteenth century America (see Gayle T. Tate, "Zilpha Elaw," *African American Women*, vol. 1, ed. Clark Hine). Sojourner Truth is the well-known nineteenth-century formerly enslaved woman who became an abolitionist and women's rights activist. Born in slavery as Isabella Bomefree around 1799 in Ulster County, New York, Truth is best remembered for her challenging speeches. See Nell Irvin Painter, "Martin R. Delany," *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Leon Litwack and August Meier (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 149–171.
16. See Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1861, rpt. 1987).
17. Consider, for example, the resistance Barbara Christian expresses in "The Race for Theory" (1987; *Within the Circle*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell [Durham: Duke University Press, 1994], pp. 348–359). In response to the mandate that black feminist critics articulate a theoretical framework in which to situate African American women's literature. Likewise, Katie Geneva Cannon (referencing an essay by Hortense Spillers) asserts that we need to be aware of entangled power relations within society whereby "certain people whether by accident, design, providence, or the most complicated means of academic currency exchange high-handedly dictate the specific disciplinary aims, setting the parameters as well as the agenda, for each field of study" (24). In Walker's womanist aesthetic the privileging of so-called high theory becomes another offshoot of Western dualism.
18. We learn in this novel that "Indian," rather than a politically incorrect term for Native Americans, is derived from the Greek words meaning "in God."
19. The fact that the Robinsons are anthropologists evokes the history of Hurston's own experiences as an anthropologist, who lived among the folk and collected a wealth of folk materials.
20. Here, Walker again holds out hope for those women and men who, in her previous novels, were not allowed this achievement in their corporeal lives.
21. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Preface, p. xi.
22. Walker seems to be strongly indebted to Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 53–59.
23. See John O'Brien, "Alice Walker," *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Kwame Anthony Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), p. 33, or Walker *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, p. xi.
24. Madhu Dubey concludes that the novel's "heavy reliance on psychological realism collapses its alternative notion of a whole identity into the humanist model of full individuality . . . Its strict adherence to the formal elements of realism obstructs the novel's ideological aim of liberating a radically new vision of community and political change, as well as of black identity" (*African American Women Novelists* 112).
25. Real-life examples of Meridians exist in women such as Ruby Doris Robinson, Anne Moody, Fannie Lou Hamer, Gloria Richardson, and many others.
26. See Molly Hite, "Romance, Marginality, Matrilineage: *The Color Purple*," *The Color Purple*, Model Critical Interpretations Series, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2000), pp. 89–105, who argues that the romance serves as the most likely structural paradigm for assessing the merits of *The Color Purple* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (92).
27. Walker discusses the usefulness of temporary mental excursions in an early interview in Claudia Tate's *African American Women Writers at Work*, 179. If one considers Captain Falcon's articulation of Western dualism – featuring the bifurcated Mind that cannot but enact the Self and Other split – in Charles Johnson's prizewinning novel, *Middle Passage* (1990), this idea makes perfect sense.
28. Walker points out in the Afterword to *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* that the violence she depicts in the novel, such as the killing of Mem by her sharecropper husband, is based on real examples of oppressed persons taking out their rage on one another in her childhood community of Eatonton, Georgia. Walker wanted to illustrate the futility of their actions. The very real fact of Brownfield's oppression by the dominant society in no way excuses his oppression of Mem (343, 345).
29. Claudia Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum, 1983).
30. Certainly Magdalena's awakening sexuality recalls Janie Crawford's expreience of pleasure under the pear tree, and the pleasing smell of basil and other spices

Mattie Michael experiences during her *seduction* in Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982).

31. Tuzyline Jita Allan asserts that Walker's womanism is essentialist because she defines a womanist as a black feminist or feminist of color, which "excludes white feminists whose creative vision approximates the womanist ideal . . . or who might choose to incorporate aspects of womanism in their writing . . . . It also assumes that by virtue of being black or nonwhite, a feminist is necessarily womanist" (*Womanist and Feminist Aesthetics* 93). Madhu Dubey, in addressing Walker's full definition, concludes that "womanism . . . may be interpreted as an attempt to integrate black nationalism into feminism, to articulate a distinctively black feminism that shares some of the objectives of black nationalist ideology. Taking the term 'womanist' from a black folk expression, Walker distinguishes her ideology from white feminism" (Madhu Dubey, "'To Survive Whole': The Integrative Aims of Womanism in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*," *African American Women Novelists*, p. 107).
32. Dorothy Grimes, "Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* and Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*: A Senegalese and an African American Perspective on 'Womanism'," *Global Perspectives on Teaching Literature: Shared Visions and Distinctive Visions*, ed. Sandra Ward Lott *et al.* (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1993), p. 66.
33. Tuzyline Jita Allan, *Womanist and Feminist Aesthetics*, p. 6.
34. Maria Lauret, "Alice Walker's Life and Work: The Essays," in *Alice Walker*, p. 21.
35. Linda Abbandonato, "Rewriting the Heroine's Story in *The Color Purple*," *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and K. Anthony Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), p. 306.
36. One might also consider Walker's description of African American women's vaginas in "One Child of One's Own" as the color of raspberries and blackberries (which Abbandanato recalls) as well as her suggestion that white feminists have problems envisioning them.
37. Barbara Christian, "Alice Walker: The Black Woman Artist as Wayward," *Black Women Writers: 1950–1980*, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Anchor, 1984), p. 457.
38. In an interview, Walker explains her dislike of critics: "Criticism is something that I don't fully approve of, because I think for the critic it must be very painful to always look at things in a critical way. I think you miss so much. And you have to sort of shape everything you see to the way you're prepared to say it, instead of the way it reveals itself to you. Amen," (Sharon Wilson, "A Conversation and Alice Walker," *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Kwame Anthony Appiah, p. 320).

15

KEITH BYERMAN

Vernacular modernism in the novels of John Edgar Wideman and Leon Forrest

Recent work in African American literary studies has attempted to define an "Afro-modernism," an aesthetic position that participates in the project of modernity while not being subsumed by or subordinated to the "high" modernism of the early twentieth century. While Houston A. Baker has identified this practice as "mastery of form/deformation of mastery,"[1] Richard Powell and others have defined it as a "blues aesthetic,"[2] clearly linking it to the African American vernacular tradition. While these are highly useful constructions, they are not quite adequate to much of modern and contemporary black writing. These theorizations have created a "difference from" high modernism when at least some artists – Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Ralph Ellison are clear examples – have chosen to position themselves within the tradition of T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and William Faulkner. At the same time, they have also made use of the vernacular tradition, but this should not be surprising, since many of the "high" modernists themselves, whether in poetry, fiction, or the visual arts, found the vernacular to be an important resource. The two authors under consideration here, John Edgar Wideman and Leon Forrest, are part of this grouping. While Fritz Gysin, in an earlier chapter in this volume, locates them within the context of postmodernism, they have both explicitly positioned themselves as modernists, at least in some aspects of their work. It is therefore useful to explore that identity as one means of grasping their connection to black postmodernism.

"Modernism" has been one of the most fluid terms of critical discourse. It is often associated with a specific period, a set of ideas and values, a collection of artistic practices and products, or a list of names. Michael Levenson, in his introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, has wisely chosen to suggest some characteristics rather than a strict definition of the movement: "the recurrent act of fragmenting unities (unities of character or plot or pictorial space or lyric form), the use of mythic paradigms, the refusal of norms of beauty, the willingness to make radical linguistic experiment, all often inspired by the resolve (in Eliot's phrase) to startle and disturb the