

Linda Abbandonato

"A View from 'Elsewhere'": Subversive Sexuality and the Rewriting of the Heroine's Story in *The Color Purple*

LINDA ABBANDONATO, a graduate student at the University of Southern California, is currently completing her dissertation, "Seductive Fictions," which explores fictional representations of female sexuality by authors from Elizabeth Gaskell to Alice Walker.

ALICE WALKER'S NOVEL *The Color Purple* begins with a paternal injunction of silence:

You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy. (11)

Celie's story is told within the context of this threat: the narrative is about breaking silences, and, appropriately, its formal structure creates the illusion that it is filled with unmediated "voices." Trapped in a gridlock of racist, sexist, and heterosexist oppressions, Celie struggles toward linguistic self-definition. She is an "invisible woman," a character traditionally silenced and effaced in fiction; and by centering on her, Walker replots the heroine's text. I want to show how Celie's story—the story of that most marginalized of heroines the black lesbian—challenges patriarchal constructions of female subjectivity and sexuality and thus makes representation itself a compelling issue for all women, regardless of their ethnicity or sexual orientation.¹ I begin by exploring the question of representation and considering *The Color Purple* in relation to feminist theoretical discourses on femininity. I then argue that by exposing and opposing a powerful ideological constraint, institutionalized or "compulsory" heterosexuality, the novel appropriates the woman's narrative for herself, in effect reinscribing "herstory."²

To substantiate my claim that *The Color Purple* is a conscious rewriting of canonical male texts, I propose a literary connection that is at once obvious and unlikely: the novel's epistolary form invites us to trace its ancestry all the way to *Clarissa*. Both novels represent a woman's struggle toward linguistic self-definition in a world of disrupted signs: Celie, like Clarissa, is imprisoned, alienated, sexually abused, and driven into semiotic collapse (see Castle's excellent analysis of Clarissa's collapse). *The Color Purple*, however, stands in a parodic or at least an irreverent relation to the monolithic *Clarissa*.

The comparison between two fictions so radically separate historically and culturally is appropriate, I think, because *Clarissa* fully endorses the bourgeois morality that *The Color Purple* attacks and because Samuel Richardson himself (at least as constructed in our literary histories) perfectly symbolizes white patriarchy: the founding father of the novel (by convention, if not in fact), he tells the woman's story, authorizing her on his terms, eroticizing her suffering, representing her masochism as virtue and her dying as the emblem of womanly purity. *Clarissa*, even if largely unread now, occupies a dominant place in literature: its myths and values are recirculated in many fictions, especially in the ideology of romances, with which women are most fully engaged as readers and as writers.

Buried beneath the monumental edifice of works like *Clarissa*, male-authored volumes that tell the woman's story "as an Exemplar to her sex," lie a mass of texts by women. The history of publishing is a record of female silencing; as many feminist critics have pointed out, women traditionally experienced educational and economic disadvantages and other cultural constraints that prohibited them from writing.³ When they overcame oppressive technologies of gender and took up the forbidden pen, the technologies of print could always be deployed against them. This may seem an overrehearsed, even an outdated argument, but the problems are still acute for women of color. Feminist attempts to revise the canon and address sexism in discourse are frequently marred by their failure to recognize heterosexism and racism; the counternarratives of femininity that emerge continue to erase women who are not white or heterosexual. Sojourner Truth's lament, "Ain't I a woman?" is insistently echoed in the contemporary writings of lesbians and women of color.⁴

Alice Walker too, in her nonfictional prose, protests the exclusion of black women writers from feminist revisions of literary histories (see esp. *Search* 231–43, 361–83); and in *The Color Purple*, she shows her heroine trapped in the whole range of possible oppressions. Celie's struggle to create a self through language, to break free from the network of class, racial, sexual, and gender ideologies to which she is subjected, rep-

resents the woman's story in an innovative way. Can a book like *The Color Purple* make any real difference to the hegemony of patriarchal discourses? Placed beside *Clarissa* on my bookshelf, *The Color Purple* symbolically suggests in its physical size the position and power of the "womanist" text within the canon: dominated by the weight, prolixity, and authority of masculine accounts of female subjectivity, it may nonetheless challenge and displace those "masternarratives."⁵

Walker gives several definitions for the term *womanist*, which is, of course, her coinage: "A black feminist or feminist of color. . . . Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. . . . A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually" (*Search* xi). I choose the phrase *womanist text* in preference to *woman's text* (i.e., a book written by a woman) to stress that the problem of representation cannot be resolved simply by the inclusion of more women writers in a male-dominated canon. While it is important for women to tell their stories, to gain a voice in literary and theoretical discourses and thereby achieve a certain empowerment, the ideological constraints on representation must also be considered. Put bluntly, how can a woman define herself differently, disengage her self from the cultural scripts of sexuality and gender that produce her as feminine subject? In *Alice Doesn't*, Teresa de Lauretis distinguishes between "woman" as an ideological construct and "women" as historical subjects and argues that women experience a double consciousness in relation to their representation in film: seduced into identification with woman, they are yet aware of their exclusion, of their nonrepresentation in that construct. If women are always constituted as objects (of desire, of the gaze) or as other, if "female" is always the negative of the positive value "male," women find themselves situated in a negative space, neither participating in patriarchal discourses nor able to escape from them. When Lauren Berlant describes Celie as "falling through the cracks of a language she can barely use . . . crossing out 'I am' and situating herself squarely on the ground of negation" (838), she attributes Celie's situation to saintly self-renunciation; but I propose a dif-

ferent explanation. Celie's burden in building a self on a site of negation is shared by any woman who attempts to establish an identity outside patriarchal definition. If women are constituted as subjects in a man-made language, then it is only through the cracks in language, and in the places where ideology fails to cohere, that they can begin to reconstruct themselves. Luce Irigaray points out that "if [women] keep on speaking the same language together, [they're] going to reproduce the same history. Begin the same stories all over again" (205). She urges women to "come out of [men's] language." But it is no easy task for women to authorize themselves as women, to disengage their feminine identity from the ideological masternarratives that inscribe it. Feminist discourse itself is inevitably corrupt, deeply implicated in the sexism of language and in patriarchal constructions of gender. As de Lauretis argues, women's theories of reading, writing, sexuality, and ideology are based "on male narratives of gender . . . bound by the heterosexual contract; narratives which persistently tend to reproduce themselves in feminist theories." The challenge facing feminists is no less than to "rewrite cultural narratives, and to define the terms of another perspective—a view from 'elsewhere'" (*Technologies* 25).

I suggest that *The Color Purple* offers that "view from 'elsewhere.'" It succeeds partly because Celie's sexual orientation provides an alternative to the heterosexual paradigm of the conventional marriage plot: her choice of lesbianism is politically charged, a notion I develop later. For the moment I want only to point out that the novel is also lesbian in the much broader sense implied by Adrienne Rich's concept of the "lesbian continuum," which spans the whole spectrum of women's friendships and sisterly solidarity. Walker's own term *womanist* is clearly influenced by Rich; and in this womanist text, the eroticism of women's love for women is at once centralized and incorporated into a more diffuse model of woman-identifying women.

Another way in which *The Color Purple* offers a view from elsewhere is through its displacement of standard English. Aware that "*the master's tools can never dismantle the master's house*" (Lorde 99), Alice Walker has fully confronted the

challenge of constructing an alternative language. The significance of her achievement here has been overlooked, partly because critics often insist on confining the novel to the genre of realism and thus evaluate the Southern black vernacular solely for its authenticity. Indeed, Walker herself disingenuously describes her role as that of a medium, communicating on behalf of the spirits who possessed her (*Search* 355–60). She seems to intend this myth of creative inspiration literally, and it is attractive because we certainly experience the novel as filled with voices that address us directly. With Celie we undergo a metamorphosis of experience, aligning ourselves fully with her vision of the world since she insists on being taken on her own terms. Her language is indeed so compelling that we actually begin to *think* as Miss Celie—like Shug, we have her song scratched out of our heads—because by participating in her linguistic processes, we collaborate in her struggle to construct a self. For various reasons, then, we are distracted from the extreme skill with which Walker exploits her formal and linguistic resources, and thus we underestimate the degree to which the text is language as performance. There is a clue, however, in what is commonly perceived as a flaw in the novel—the sequence of letters from Nettie, which invariably disappoint readers. If signifying is "a form of meta-communication, where the surface expression and the intrinsic position diverge" (Cooke 15), we can regard *The Color Purple* as an elaborate act of signifying, since the apparently impoverished and inarticulate language of the illiterati turns out to be deceptively resonant and dazzlingly rich. By incorporating Nettie's letters into Celie's text, Walker illuminates the contrast between Celie's spare suggestiveness and Nettie's stilted verbosity. Thus the expressive flexibility of the black vernacular, a supposedly inferior speech, is measured against the repressed and rigid linguistic codes to which Nettie has conformed; the position of standard (white) English is challenged, and Celie's vitality is privileged over Nettie's dreary correctness. Nettie has been imaginatively stunted, her language bleached white and her ethnicity virtually erased. Always the Other Woman, one who lacks an identity of her own, she is cast in the preposterous role of a

black missionary who attempts to impose the ideology of her oppressors onto a culturally self-sufficient people. Nettie's story perfectly illustrates the way society construes women as subjects (or as subject-objects, in de Lauretis's phrase): neither represented within the white mainstream nor able to construct a selfhood outside it, Nettie is internally divided, experiencing her subjectivity as otherness.

Celie, by contrast, refuses to enter the linguistic structures (and strictures) of white patriarchy, commenting that "only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind" (194), and so retains a discourse that is potentially subversive. We might compare Walker's technique with Irigaray's linguistic playfulness, fragmented phrases, and poetic cadences, which are similar in purpose, though not in style, to the suppleness, the sharp wit, and the compression of the black vernacular: each mode of expression represents both resistance to the hegemonic discourse and the deliberate use of linguistic non-conformity to position the self outside the dominant system. In *The Color Purple* the dialect is both naturalistic and symbolic, and if we try to confine the work to realism, we may easily miss the complexity of Walker's womanist aims. Her purposeful transgression of generic boundaries has also been perceived as a lack of artistic control, although it is entirely consistent with current feminist practice; and some of the criticisms directed at Walker imply a covert form of racism—an assumption that black novelists should (or can) write only in the realistic vein established by Richard Wright.⁶

By adopting the crazy quilt, the craft of her foremothers, as the structuring principle of her fiction, Alice Walker places herself within a tradition of black female creativity. This differently crafted, quilted novel, is also differently sexual: its formal structure allows many playful variations on a sexual theme. Some designs emerge clearly, but the overall pattern is extremely complicated; themes and relationships are introduced and inverted or turned, like a piece of fabric, inside out, so that the pattern can be traced a new way. Triadic combinations proliferate: characters are constantly realigned in an intricate network of configurations, apparently in a continual state

of metamorphosis until the final utopian vision, the brave new world of the ending.⁷

The novel moves freely through time and space, juxtaposing the African motifs with the African American, thus supplying a dialectical commentary on the two cultures. Comic reversals of expectation are part of the scheme: for example, the Christian missionaries, striving to impose monogamy on the Olinkas, inadvertently reinforce polygyny because the Olinkas believe (quite rightly, as it turns out) that Samuel is married to both Corinne and Nettie. The treatment of incest is particularly interesting: although in one part of her design Walker reveals the full horror of father-daughter rape, she weaves in complications, twisting her narrative thread in ways that challenge the taboo. And if the incest taboo is subverted in this novel, so too is that other taboo homosexuality. I suggest that the great twentieth-century cultural narratives of sexuality and socialization, Freud's oedipal theory and Lévi-Strauss's theory of kinship systems and the exchange of women, are played out in the drama of Celie's life. The two theories center on the incest taboo and mesh together precisely. Both also explain, and have been used to reinforce, our system of "compulsory heterosexuality." As I have suggested, Celie's lesbianism is politically significant, subverting masculine cultural narratives of femininity and desire and rewriting them from a feminist point of view.

Let us consider briefly how those narratives explain and reinforce heterosexuality, both in the construction of societies through kinship systems and in the enculturation of individuals within those societies. Lévi-Strauss describes the exchange of women as "the system of binding *men* together" (emphasis added), thus defining marriage as a social contract between men and viewing the kinship system as a means of reinforcing male power through the circulation of women. Lévi-Strauss concludes that the incest taboo is "the supreme rule of the gift," designed to ensure exogamy (481). Compulsory heterosexuality thus becomes the basis on which society operates and the exchange of women the condition whereby the patriarchy flourishes. Women are prevented from becoming subjects in an economy where they are exchanged as objects, and homosexual

desire becomes taboo, like incest, because it disrupts the terms of the social contract. Naturally, this system can only operate smoothly so long as sexual nonconformity is kept invisible. An important project of feminism, then, is to make the invisible visible: to topple the dominant ideology by placing the unorthodox and the marginalized at the center of the discursive and cultural stage. Thus feminist theory constructs homosexuality as a powerfully subversive threat to the social order: Eve Sedgwick, for example, takes up René Girard's notion of "triangular desire"—which in turn develops Lévi-Strauss's theory of the exchange of women as a form of bonding between men—and argues that homophobia functions to suppress recognition of the homosociality on which patriarchal domination depends. Irigaray's coining of the word *hom(m)osexualité* plays on a pun to suggest a similar concept of society as founded on a masculine economy of sameness, so that homosexual relations must be forbidden: "Because they openly interpret the law according to which society operates, they threaten in fact to shift the horizon of that law" (193).

Psychoanalytic accounts of enculturation also rest on the prohibition of incest, as enforced through the castration complex; in the oedipal plot, the phallus becomes the coveted marker of sexual difference and desire. Lacan's famous diagram of the identical doors labeled "Ladies" and "Gentlemen" suggests the different ideological worlds that the subject enters according to gender; although gender, like the signs on the doors, is no more than an arbitrary and fictional construct, subjects who wish to function within the symbolic order must pass through one of those doors (147–59). The successful inscription of subjects as masculine or feminine, as "ladies" or "gentlemen," depends on acquiescence to the Law of the Father and on suppression of the polymorphously perverse drives of infancy; in the process, heterosexuality is reinforced as a cultural institution. An important objection to the oedipal scheme is that it predicates female sexuality on a masculine paradigm, thus effacing the very subject of femininity it claims to investigate. Women are effectively excluded from being desiring subjects or from having their sexuality theorized except through a distorting masculine

lens. Consequently the lesbian remains outside the framework of representation, becoming, in effect, unrepresentable (for further discussion see de Lauretis, *Alice and Technologies*; Cixous and Clément 62–132). Feminist critiques of the oedipal theory have challenged its inasculine economy of desire and exposed its inadequacy as an account of female sexuality. Adrienne Rich, for example, wonders why the female child should redirect her libidinal activity from the original object of desire, the mother, to the father and concludes that heterosexuality is a political institution into which women are conscripted ideologically, by force and through the censorship of alternative models of sexuality.⁸

But what happens when the taboo is broken and women refuse to be co-opted into a system of compulsory heterosexuality, refuse in effect to become objects of exchange between men? Or, in Irigaray's words, "[W]hat if these 'commodities' refused to go to 'market'?" (196).

This is, of course, the question posed by *The Color Purple*, which reduces the system of compulsory heterosexuality to its basic level, making it abstract. The representations of male tyranny are in one sense reductive or crude and in another sense emblematic, their implications far-reaching. The specific systems of oppression that operate in Celie's life symbolize the more or less subtle operations of patriarchal power in the lives of women everywhere.

Compulsory heterosexuality enforces Celie's subjugation and erases her subjectivity. Celie graphically represents this situation when she begins her story by placing "I am" *sous rature*. Trapped from the start into complicity in the shameful secret of incest, Celie makes a timid plea to God: "Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (11). But how can Celie be given a sign when she *is* a sign, a mere object of exchange between men? The God she conceptualizes is a cruel father whose identity merges ominously with Pa's; when asked whose baby she is carrying, Celie tells the lie that is the truth: "I say God's. I don't know no other man or what else to say" (12).

When Celie marries Mr. —, this man with no name becomes part of the system of male oppression, joining God the Patriarch and Pa in

an unholy trinity of power that displaces her identity. The marriage negotiations take place entirely between the stepfather and the husband: Celie is handed over like a beast of burden, identified with the cow that accompanies her. Physically and psychologically abused by stepfather and husband alike, Celie is denied a status as subject. Her sexuality and reproductive organs are controlled by men, her children are taken from her, and her submission is enforced through violence. In her terrified acquiescence to such blatant male brutality, Celie symbolically mirrors Everywoman. Fear of rape, for example, is so habitual that it has become naturalized and conditions women automatically; when it circumscribes their movements, we call it Common Sense, and our judicial system holds women who lack it accountable for male violence. Celie bleakly represents the plight of her more privileged sisters, who are victimized by social tyrannies like antiabortion legislation, the kidnapping of children, and state intervention in the family and in individuals' sexual orientation.

Celie's vernacular is used to poignant effect in the double negative of "I don't have nothing." Her connection with her sex is severed; doubly silenced, by father and by husband, Celie sends dead letters to an absentee God, and the only "sign" she eventually gets—the discovery that her real father was lynched—shatters an already eroded identity and precipitates her semiotic collapse. Her attempt to make sense of her new family history breaks down into the negative tautology of "Pa not Pa" (as Berlant has also argued).

This is a puzzling moment in the text. Why does Walker set up incest at the beginning and then reinscribe family relations halfway through? And what is the effect on the reader of discovering that "Pa not Pa"? At one level, I would argue, the revelation makes no difference at all: Celie was still raped, and by a man who was in every respect socially, if not biologically, her father. But suggestions of incest recur too insistently for the question to be dismissed so easily. What, for example, do we make of the marriage of "Sister Nettie" and "Brother Samuel" or of his claim that "we behave as brother and sister to each other"? Shug and Celie, sisters in spirit, become lovers in the flesh. Albert complains that Shug

loves him like a brother—but Celie responds, "What so bad about that?" Shug has an affair with a boy who subsequently becomes "like a son. Maybe a grandson." Time and again, the incest taboo is symbolically dissolved as the different categories of social relations, family and sexual, are intertwined.

Perhaps this focus on incest is an honest and courageous attempt to situate sexuality where it belongs: in the heart of the family. If the family is the site of sexual repression and taboo, it is also the place where sexuality is engendered, in the fullest sense.⁹ Yet, the Pa-Celie sexual relation, though initially presented as an actual violation of a primary taboo, turns out to be not literal incest but a social and symbolic equivalent. The novel seems to delve into the oedipal drama to unravel and then reweave the complexities, and the discovery that "Pa not Pa" confronts Celie with another contradiction. The Pa who is not Pa is yet—irrevocably—Pa. Her history has been shattered, and she cannot connect with the revised version sent by sister Nettie.

It is her love for Shug that enables Celie to bury her sad double narrative of paternal origins and construct a new identity within a feminine domain. In an earlier scene in the novel, Celie tells her story to Shug, breaking the father's injunction of silence and discovering a sister-lover, compassion and passion combined. Significantly, that first erotic encounter involves both women in a reciprocal mother-infant exchange: "Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth. . . . Way after while I act like a little lost baby too" (109). The anaclitic satisfaction represented here suggests a symbolic return to the preoedipal stage, an idealized state of innocent eroticism; it is, in Foucault's words, about "bodies and pleasure."¹⁰

Subsequently, when disconnected from her *nom-du-père* by the discovery that her paternity is indeed a legal fiction, Celie is rescued from an identity crisis by Shug, who tells her, "Us each other's people now"; the two women have mothered each other and now elect to be woman-identified women. Implicit here is an escape from patriarchal law. In breaking the taboo against homosexuality, Celie symbolically exits the master narrative of female sexuality and abandons the

position ascribed to her within the symbolic order. Instead, she chooses a mode of sexuality that Freud describes as "infantile"; but perhaps the value of that term should be reassessed. Shug, for example, is enviably infantile: as polymorphously perverse as a child, she pursues her pleasures without guilt or repression. Her sexual pluralism reminds us that sexuality is the site not only of regulation but of subversion; as Carole Vance argues, sexuality remains, in the end, "flexible, anarchic, ambiguous, layered with multiple meanings, offering doors that open to unexpected experience. The connection of both sexual behavior and fantasy to infancy, the irrational, the unconscious, is a source of both surprise and pleasure" (22). It is this highly disruptive potential—sexuality's ability to resist the ideological laws that operate through its very terrain, to survive and flourish in "aberrant" forms despite the cultural imposition of a norm—that Shug's erotic behavior suggests; she embodies and embraces the notion of *jouissance* as a liberating power.

Celie's initiation into eroticism is linked with her growing sense of self and her capacity to see wonder in the world. Taught by Shug, whose religious practice is to "admire," Celie metamorphoses into a Miranda, taking childlike delight in the brave new world to which her latent sensory responses have been awakened. If homosexuality involves narcissism, as Freud believes, we see its positive and empowering effect on Celie. In loving Shug, Celie becomes a desiring subject, and in being loved by Shug, she is made visible to herself as an object of desire. In contrast to the repression that Celie has experienced in accepting her social position as a "mature" woman in a phallogocentric culture, her "infantile regression" is an act of radical rebellion. By choosing "deviancy," "immaturity," and the "sickness" that lesbianism signifies in a system of compulsory heterosexuality, Celie enacts a critique not of the oedipal theory itself but of the sexist socialization that it insightfully yet uncritically represents.

In a hostile review of the novel, Trudier Harris describes Celie as "a bale of cotton with a vagina" and dismisses Celie and Shug's love affair as a "schoolgirl fairytale," thereby missing the radical political implications of the shift from vagina to clitoris that the lesbian relationship involves. In

Freud's theory the clitoral orgasm is notoriously immature; and within the culture, I would suggest, the notion of the mature vaginal orgasm still predominates, since it is a necessary myth within our compulsorily heterosexual society. For a long time Celie's clitoris remained "undiscovered"; and while real women in heterosexual relationships undoubtedly have lovers more skillful and sensitive than Mr. — (even if his being signified in this way does mischievously imply that he is the archetypal male), the ideological construct woman still seems to be experiencing orgasm without reference to her clitoris. Think of representations of sexuality in popular films, for example. In the typical love scene, the camera shows a couple commencing missionary-position sex and, eight seconds later, moves in to a close-up of the woman's face to reveal that, miraculously, she is in the throes of orgasm, her mouth wide open, perhaps to suggest that place where the camera is forbidden to go. At this climactic point, the scene dissolves from the screen in an act of self-censorship, and we are left with the dominant image of the desirable woman in our culture: passive, available, and obligingly able to reach instant vaginal orgasm. If film directors know about the clitoris, or about active female desire, film censors are surely involved in the conspiracy to keep such knowledge inadmissible.

What this practice suggests is that the ideology of popular culture subjects women to a mild form of psychological clitoridectomy, and perhaps for the same reason that real clitoridectomies are performed: as Kathleen Barry argues, they ensure that women will not form erotic attachments to one another (193). I would suggest that the erotic zone of the clitoris *has* to be censored in social constructions of sexuality, since its mapping on the female body would allow women to "just say no" to the coveted male organ.

So, for Celie, the discovery of the clitoris (and of the possibility of sexual fulfillment with a woman) is accompanied by a whole range of other discoveries that relegate man to the margins of a world he has always dominated. The most significant of these is a reconceptualization of God the Patriarch. Describing her feminist redefinition of God, Shug makes an explicit connection between spiritual and sexual *jouissance*.

My first step from the old white man was trees. . . . Then birds. Then other people. But one day . . . it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. . . . In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it. It sort of like you know what, she say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh.

In answer to Celie's shocked protest, Shug maintains, "God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did." And shortly afterward she echoes the title of the novel by observing, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (178). This is a moment of epiphany for Celie, and we might notice her appropriately detumescent metaphor when, in severing the connection between "man" and "God," she observes that "[n]ext to any little scrub of a bush in my yard, Mr. —'s evil sort of shrink." Phal-locentrism has collapsed: the transformation of God from the "old white man" to a new form of otherness, the ungendered creator of the color purple, is one of the major metamorphoses of the novel.

Finally, what is meant by that richly allusive symbol, the color purple? Clearly, in part, it represents the wonder of the natural world, to which Celie's eyes have been newly awakened: "I been so busy thinking about him I never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?)" (179).

The color purple is encoded within the novel as a sign of indomitable female spirit. For example, Celie makes red-and-purple pants for Sofia (who has survived a brutal beating by the police that leaves her "the color of eggplant"): "I dream Sofia wearing these pants, one day she was jumping over the moon" (194). Consider also Walker's definitions of *womanist*, which are represented by the color purple. One of those definitions, quoted in part earlier, is embodied by Shug: "A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. . . . Sometimes loves individual men, sexually or nonsexually" (*Search* xi). Another definition refers to female *joie de vivre*, or exuberance; and in her fourth and final definition, Walker states suggestively, "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender."

But most daringly significant is the use of the color purple to encode the specifically feminine *jouissance* experienced by Celie. Associated with Easter and resurrection, and thus with spiritual regeneration, purple may also evoke the female genitalia; indeed, Walker makes the color connection explicit in "One Child of One's Own" by provocatively describing a black woman's vagina as "the color of raspberries and blackberries—or scuppernongs and muscadines" (*Search* 374). In that essay Walker complains that white women feminists "cannot imagine that black women have vaginas. Or if they can, where imagination leads them is too far to go" (373).

What I want to suggest is that in *The Color Purple*, in her representation of the unrepresentable, Walker dares us to arrive at the place where "imagination . . . is too far to go."

Notes

¹ In *The Heroine's Text*, Nancy Miller defines the "euphoric text" as built on a "trajectory of ascent" and ending with the heroine's integration into society. Miller confines her study to eighteenth-century novels, but her model provides a useful contrast to *The Color Purple*, demonstrating how Walker's novel subverts the conventional plot by rewriting the story of seduction within a lesbian framework.

In emphasizing the relevance of Celie's story for all women, I do not mean to deny the specificity of her oppression as a black lesbian. Indeed, any blanket reference to women as a category is in any case controversial; my paper does suggest briefly that in feminist discourse this usage tends to reinforce the marginalization of "minority" groups, but I should also note that some feminists would like to abandon the term altogether. Kristeva claims that "to believe that one 'is a woman' is almost as absurd and obscurantist as to believe that one 'is a man'" ("La femme, ce n'est jamais ça," *Tel quel* 59. 3 [1974]: 19–24; qtd. in *Moi* 163); Monique Wittig provocatively declares, "Lesbians are not women" (110).

² The term *compulsory heterosexuality* originated with Gayle Rubin: her influential essay "The Traffic in Women" synthesizes readings of Freud, Lacan, Marx, and Lévi-Strauss to account for our enculturation into the sex-gender system. See also Adrienne Rich. The term *herstory* comes from Alice Walker's feminist prose (see esp. *Search*).

³ Classic feminist texts that deal with the problem of silencing include Virginia Woolf's *Room of One's Own*, Tillie Olsen's *Silences*, Patricia Meyer Spacks's *Female Imagination*, Elaine Showalter's *Literature of Their Own*, and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic*.

⁴ See, e.g., Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith's anthology *Some of Us Are Brave* and Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back*. Several essays collected in Showalter's *New Feminist Criticism* also focus on writing by black women and lesbians: Barbara Smith's "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," Deborah E. McDowell's "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," and Bonnie Zimmerman's "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism."

Printing presses geared toward "minority" groups have been set up recently: for example, the Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. But in *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers: Adventures in Sex, Literature, and Real Life*—a title so provocative that it invites speculation about men's place in black feminism—Calvin Hernton describes the male speaker's misogyny at a meeting set up to establish a new African American publishing company: "[The speaker] went into a tirade against black women writers . . . claiming that they had 'taken over' the publishing world in a conspiracy against black male writers" (xv). Note also Trudier Harris's allegation that Alice Walker became a media favorite by "waiting in the wings of the feminist movement and the power it had generated long enough for her curtain call to come" (155). Guilty of success, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker bear the brunt of such animosity; compare the personal and critical hostility directed at the flamboyant Zora Neale Hurston, who eventually "disappeared" under its pressure.

⁵ "Masternarratives" is, of course, Fredric Jameson's term, though he uses it more generally to denote the hegemonic discourse of the ruling class and intends no specific reference to gender.

⁶ I refer to the conventional assessment of Wright as a realistic writer, though it seems to me that this, too, is misplaced, that his works are, rather, surrealistic. Molly Hite discusses the critical blindness that has resulted from applying conventions of classic realism to *The Color Purple*.

The feminist tradition of transgressing generic boundaries can be traced at least to Woolf's *Room of One's Own*, which inscribes its feminist social and cultural criticisms within an incisively ironic narrative framework. The strategy is most notably continued in the work of the French feminists, particularly Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Catherine Clément; the issue here is a renegotiation of the relation between the personal and the impersonal, or the alleged objectivity of academic discourse. Disrupting generic boundaries is connected with disrupting gender boundaries: feminist writers use subversive narrative strategies to infiltrate and reshape ideological fictions of femininity.

⁷ For discussions of quilting in Walker's work, see Barbara Christian; Lindsey Tucker; Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Charlotte Pierce-Baker. See Showalter's "Piecing and Writing" for a critique of the revival of feminine crafts as tropes in feminist fictions and theory.

⁸ For an opposing view, see Cora Kaplan, who objects to Rich's concept of "intellectual" lesbianism as a political solution, arguing that it has produced among feminists a new source of sexual shame and guilt: "Any pleasure that accrues to women who take part in heterosexual acts is therefore nec-

essarily tainted; at the extreme end of this position, women who 'go with men' are considered collaborators . . ." (52). Note also Paula Webster's argument that by privileging lesbianism, feminist discourse has constructed an alternative sexual hierarchy that creates new prohibitions and reduces women's "relationships with eroticism to issues of preference and purity . . ." (387).

⁹ Michel Foucault argues that "the family is the most active site of sexuality" and that incest is "constantly being solicited and refused . . . a thing that is continuously demanded in order for the family to be a hotbed of constant sexual incitement" (109).

¹⁰ One could argue that if Celie symbolically returns to a preoedipal state, her subversive language, with its poetic pulsions and absences, can be connected with Kristeva's concept of the semiotic chora.

Works Cited

- Baker, Houston A., Jr., and Charlotte Pierce-Baker. "Patches, Quilts and Community in Alice Walker's 'Every Day Use.'" *Southern Review* 21 (1985): 706-21.
- Barry, Kathleen. *Female Sexual Slavery*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1979.
- Berlant, Lauren. "Race, Gender and Nation in *The Color Purple*." *Critical Inquiry* 14 (1988): 831-49.
- Castle, Terry. *Clarissa's Ciphers*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982.
- Christian, Barbara, ed. *Black Feminist Criticism*. New York: Pergamon, 1985.
- Cixous, Hélène, and Catherine Clément. *The Newly Born Woman*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986.
- Cooke, Michael G. *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1984.
- de Lauretis, Teresa. *Alice Doesn't*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984.
- . *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage-Random, 1978.
- Freud, Sigmund. "On Narcissism: An Introduction." 1914. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. and trans. James Strachey. Vol. 14. London: Hogarth, 1957. 67-102.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.
- Girard, René. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. Trans. Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1965.
- Harris, Trudier. "On *The Color Purple*, Stereotypes and Silence." *Black American Literature Forum* 18 (1984): 155-61.
- Hernton, Calvin C. *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers: Adventures in Sex, Literature, and Real Life*. New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1987.
- Hite, Molly. "Romance, Marginality, Matrilineage: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Zora Neale Hurston's

- Their Eyes Were Watching God.*" *Novel 22* (1989): 257–73.
- Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. *All the Women Are White, All the Men Are Black, but Some of Us Are Brave*. New York: Feminist, 1982.
- Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981.
- Kaplan, Cora. *Seachanges: Culture and Feminism*. London: Verso, 1986.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Trans. Margaret Waller. New York: Columbia UP, 1984.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1977.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Trans. James Hurlle Bell et al. 2nd ed. 1967. Oxford: Beacon, 1969.
- Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." Moraga and Anzaldúa 98–101.
- Miller, Nancy K. *The Heroine's Text*. New York: Columbia UP, 1980.
- Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics*. London: Methuen, 1985.
- Moraga, Cherrie, and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. New York: Kitchen Table, 1981.
- Olsen, Tillie. *Silences*. New York: Delacorte, 1979.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Representation." *Women—Sex and Sexuality*. Ed. Catharine R. Stimpson and Ethel Spector Person. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980. 62–91.
- Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women." *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. Ed. Rayna R. Reiter. New York: Monthly Review, 1975. 157–210.
- Sedgwick, Eve. *Between Men*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985.
- Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977.
- , ed. *The New Feminist Criticism*. New York: Pantheon, 1985.
- . "Piecing and Writing." *The Poetics of Gender*. Ed. Nancy K. Miller. New York: Columbia UP, 1986. 222–47.
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer. *The Female Imagination*. New York: Knopf, 1975.
- Tucker, Lindsey. "Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: Emergent Woman, Emergent Text." *Black American Literature Forum* 21 (1988): 81–97.
- Vance, Carole S., ed. *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. Boston: Routledge, 1984.
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Washington Square, 1983.
- . *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1983.
- Webster, Paula. "The Forbidden: Eroticism and Taboo." Vance 385–98.
- Wittig, Monique. "The Straight Mind." *Feminist Issues* 1 (1980): 103–12.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, 1963.