Race, Religion, and Language: The Epistolary Mode in *The Color Purple*

In a preface to her *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker comments, “I would have thought that a book that begins ‘Dear God’ would immediately have been identified as a book about the desire to encounter to hear from the ultimate ancestor” (i). This thought is problematic, principally because the book actually begins with a different statement, presumably uttered by Alphonso: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (1). This statement does direct the novel on the path of religion and spirituality. Additionally, however, it also incites Celie to engage in a correspondence which ultimately includes social discourse with equal import. I strive to expand Walker’s conception, not to disregard it. There would be no need to, for critic Trudier Harris fulfills this duty as it is. Lamenting the “canonization” of *The Color Purple*, Harris writes, “Alice Walker had been waiting in the wings of the feminist movement and the power it had generated long enough for her curtain call to come.” Harris goes on to attribute the influence of literary reviews to the novel’s misguided popularity. She argues, “the novel's popularity . . . has created a cadre of spectator readers . . . [for whom] the book reinforces racist stereotypes . . . the novel has been so much praised that critics, especially black women critics, have seemingly been reluctant to offer detailed, carefully considered criticisms of it” (155).

Harris questions if the novel’s language shatters or reinforces southern black stereotypes. I fear that in speculating the effects “the language” has on critical and casual
reception of *The Color Purple*, those who feel their understanding of race relations inverted and unsettled by the novel—Harris and the students, to whose comments in class discussion she cites—neglect that somebody had to organize this language in the first place—Walker. The author had a methodology in addressing race, gender, and as she would stress, religion while penning *The Color Purple*. This methodology expresses itself principally in the novel’s epistolary mode. To inspect how the miscommunication between author and audience derives—where the topics of race, religion, and gender become skewed—the epistolary nature of the novel merits special attention. I would like to examine specific cases where the novel’s epistolary form offers unique opportunities for the narrative to grow thematically, and what would happen to these opportunities if the novel were, say, a standard first person retrospective or memoir from an older Celie. It should soon become apparent that Harris’s despondency for Walker is not permissible.

Commenting on Celie’s voice, Harris writes, “While it makes Celie articulate, it has simultaneously encouraged silence from black women” (156). Harris offers Celie’s voice as the source of fear among readers—that her voice resonates so well critically, pedestrian readers cannot find the gumption to vocalize their reservations about the novel. I am not sure Celie is thoroughly “articulate” from cover to cover. Lauren Berlant has explained, “*The Color Purple* opens with Celie falling through the cracks of a language she can barely use. Her own limited understanding, her technical insecurity, and her plain sense of powerlessness are constructed in contrast to the powerful discourses that share the space with her stuttered utterances.” (837) When Celie reproaches Mr. _______ for the years he has deprived her of Nettie’s correspondence, she counters him with one statement to which Berlant certainly would include as a “powerful discourse”—“It’s time to leave you and enter into the Creation, And your dead
body is just the welcome mat I need” (199). Similarly, in her continually successful effort to overcome Mr. ________, Celie declares, “The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot” (206). By this point, Celie bears full armor against the oppression of men. Rather than “shut up and git used to it,” Celie has, through an unorthodox education, come to bear an articulate, verbal artillery.

Celie’s voice progresses as the action moves from her murky teenage years, through the tribulation of her adulthood, toward what Harris labels a “contrived ‘happily ever after’ ending” (160). I will stress now and later that the *denouement* is deceivingly optimistic—though the collected correspondence cuts out with Celie and her peers in a moment of strength and optimism, their story is not necessarily rid of all trial. Making her case against the growth of Celie’s voice, Harris elaborates, “I do have objections to the unrealistic presentation of the path, the process that leads to such a triumph [as Celie’s]” (156). Celie’s communicative growth demonstrates not a victory over oppression, both sexual and racial, but an opportunity—she now has the tool of the written—and spoken—word, coupled with a rare moment where “White people busy celebrating they independence from England.” “Most black folks don’t have to work” (287), and there are no patriarchal bonds holding Celie and her kin down. This is not an affirmed triumph, but a question—can Celie use her new tools of industry and language to sustain independence? The central role of this question becomes more apparent as the role of the epistle further unravels.

Celie’s chronicle is at once a confessional diary, a formal prayer, and a log of her life. She engages in an epistolary correspondence with God in the intensity of a frightful calamity. The lingering thought, “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” depicts the paradox Celie faces—the fact that she may not consult an individual other than God is
simultaneously the source of fear in her situation and the only means, if just psychologically, out of her situation. She allows herself but one outlet, writing, through which she may relieve her anxiety. That outlet, however, is the principle discipline in which her society has failed to train her. Especially this early in the novel, Celie’s correspondence is the translation of events in the public sphere into ideas and emotions in the private sphere; it is the translation of secular disruption into religious meditation. Because Celie is, as Berlant mentioned, “falling through the cracks of a language,” emotion takes precedence over clarity at the novel’s outset. Critic King-Kok Cheung favors the lack of clarity in Celie’s writing. Citing “Dasenbrock's defense of "unintelligibility" in multicultural texts” Cheung argues only a text like The Color Purple can, “expose the layers of silence that have threatened to choke the colored protagonists and raise the voices that have run the gamut (and gauntlet) of interethnic differences” (162).

Initially, Celie’s epistles come across as formal prayers. Very early she wonders, “Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (1). In her initial entry, Celie appears to seek divine intervention in her situation. As her journey into adulthood progresses, she is steadfast in acknowledging God as her audience. In her twelfth installment of the correspondence, she playfully addresses God with simply “G-o-d” (19). Celie never fails to address God at the outset of each letter. Nevertheless, further into the reading Celie treats God as a distant being in the body of her text. In the uncertainty of Sofia’s captivity, Celie imagines, “God coming down by chariot, swinging down real low and carrying ole Sofia home” (91) She envisions God “looking like some stout white man work at the bank.” Celie is consistently comfortable in directly addressing God, though at this moment neglects to communicate with him in the second person. The prospect of a higher being may intimidate Celie, even after years of “correspondence.” On the other hand, Celie may not treat these epistles with the same
sincerity found in her earlier entry. She may address “God” simply for the sake of tradition. By the novel’s conclusion, Celie once again treats God as intimately as before: “Thank you for bringing my sister Nettie and our children home” (285). The variation of attitude Celie has with God throughout the novel is relevant to her characterization. She distances herself from God while coping with the increasingly colder reality of her universe. Yet, with the arrival of the novel’s conclusion, she finds renewed strength and is once again able to directly confide in God.

Cели’s linguistic and spiritual growth are both indicative of the force which the novel’s epistolary mode carries. Each letter is an immediate reflection of Celie’s emotional and intellectual status. The Celie who completes the epistolary collection is certainly of a communicative ability beyond that of the fourteen year old Celie. In her mature years, Celie offers profound wisdom and commentary of a pleasantly surprising nature. Upon describing the turbulence of her relationship with Shug, Celie adds, “But sleep remain a stranger to this night” (251). A novel written as a memoir by an older Celie could not sustain the effect *The Color Purple* has in its early stages. The language of a younger, developing Celie, in order to maintain the colorful characterization the novel ultimately offers, must be bare-bones, and must lack witticisms and wisdom. The lack of clarity on which King-Kok Cheung elaborates, coupled with Celie’s early understanding of spirituality, makes the “tools” with which she is equipped more distinctive by the novel’s conclusion. A detailed understanding of Celie’s characterization, like this, is only possible in a form of writing that follows her along each step—the epistolary mode.

If the epistolary mode influences the clarity of Celie’s thoughts and the translation which takes place between her private and public realms, the novel’s format just as easily affects the setting of the correspondence. Both Celie and Nettie are nonspecific about time which their story occupies—the date of each edition to their letters and the passage of time within their
correspondence. Nettie writes at one point, “The years have come and gone without a single word from you. Only the sky above us do we hold in common” (189). What Celie and Nettie offer is a timeless novel. World War II is the single point of reference we may ever use to orient *The Color Purple* in history. Otherwise, time passes without limits in the novel, in varying increments and speeds. Time may sometimes leap forward greatly between only two letters. Describing Squeak’s transformation into Mary Agnes, Celie writes “6 months after Mary Agnes went to git Sofia out of prison she begin to sing” (98). The magnitude of this increment is astounding in that it overshadows the characterization of any character other than Mary Agnes. In other instances, time can almost stand still. Describing her confrontation with Mr. ______, Celie explains, “Sofia so surprise to hear me speak up she ain’t chewed for ten minutes” (200).

The methodology of Celie and Nettie—why they deprive the correspondence of juncture—may not be apparent, though it suggests an awareness of a certain paradox—that the bleakness of their situation may hurtle them through time with little control, yet simultaneously suspend them in the empowering and defining moments of their lives. On the other hand, at the level of authorship, the methodology—of “timelessness”—is discernible. Walker intended the novel as a universal piece, where the time which the narrative occupies is both malleable and movable. As time in *The Color Purple* moves forward in both skips and leaps, an atmosphere of historical vertigo encroaches—the story’s setting can be so disorienting, that it soon enough reads as though it could conceivably occur today. If the novel were penned from the perspective of a mature Celie, this “timeless” quality would be lost. The applicability of *The Color Purple* in a contemporary sense is reliant on the novel’s epistolary mode.

The novel is equally unhelpful in its depiction of physical setting. Nettie’s whereabouts are always approximate—usually once Celie receives the latest edition of Nettie’s
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correspondence, Nettie’s mission displaces her once more. Recall the despairing telegram late in the novel, “It say the ship you and the children and your husband left Africa in was sunk” (255). Nettie’s political and social aspirations correspond neatly with her geographic situation—the currents of time sway her life to an extent that is out of her reach. Nettie’s aspirations as a missionary are much more easily defined. Even when faced with the white British developers, Nettie declares, “Samuel and I are truly happy, Celie. And so grateful to God that we are! . . . Our days are fuller than ever, our sojourn in England already a dream” (242-243). Nettie’s diction here—the use of “dream”—suggests that even she cannot fully describe her physical orientation well to herself.

In comparison, Celie’s geographic situation becomes specific once she has secured a productive and esteemed role in society. Before she endeavors in her fashion enterprise, we are hardly aware her narrative takes place in Georgia, let alone in which town it occurs. In securing a business venture, Celie earns the privilege of place. She proudly concludes her announcement of the endeavor to Nettie with her address: “Folkspants, Unlimited. / Sugar Avery Drive / Memphis, Tennessee” (214). Regarding the same passage, critic Lauren Berlant writes, “Celi gains the nom du pare of capitalism: a trademark, which becomes a part of Celie's new signature” (852). The disparity between geographic setting of the two sisters suggests, on Walker’s part, an attitude toward achievement. To earn the privilege of place—to secure a stable geographic claim in a volatile and oppressive world—capitalism takes precedence over selflessness—the means to transcend the racial and gender hierarchy appears to be through industry and economy. The mission which Nettie pursues for decades progressively becomes lost in time and space, whereas, once Celie has found her calling, she quickly rises through the hierarchy and earns the esteem of a “signature.”
Convenient for the purposes of this piece, Harris makes one assertion regarding *The Color Purple*’s place in time:

My basic contentions were that the portrayal of Celie was unrealistic for the time in which the novel was set, that Nettie and the letters from Africa were really extraneous to the central concerns of the novel. (157)

The fallacy here, of course, is that the novel never is set at a specific time, and the letters from Africa by necessity are extraneous. *The Color Purple* reflects the skeptic’s understanding of race relations and the Civil Rights Movement—is the hierarchy of race and gender a permanent obstruction? Is it at all possible to move throughout this hierarchy? The extraneousness of “the letters from Africa” derives from the fact that, however noble her cause, Nettie hardly goes anywhere in her years as a missionary. In grappling with the force of British industry, Nettie fights the tides of industry and social catastrophe in the name of liberation. Rather than fighting capitalism, Celie uses industry to ultimately achieve her liberation. Lauren Berlant has explained, “The link between the theory and practices of ‘capitalism’ and of ‘religion’ or spirit is the key to the novel’s reformulation of mainstream Afro-American nationalist politics and consciousness (850).

The concluding epistle to *The Color Purple*, where Celie addresses “Everything” (285), mischievously bears the cloak of “a happy ending.” Harris specifically remarks,

From its opening in that paradoxical, nightmarish, fairy-tale vein, the novel moves through improbable events to the traditional passing out of presents in that contrived "happily ever after" ending. All the good guys win, and the bad guys are dead or converted to womanist philosophy. (160)
Harris neglects to realize the patterns and subtleties that accompany the *denouement*. Nettie, Corinne, and Samuel never succeeded to align the Olinka with Christian thought and Western ideology effectively. Shug has enjoyed a successful career, and now begins to feel the fatigue of age—“Shug mention she don’t want to sing in public no more” (285). If she has won anything, the victory came within the duration of her career. Of course, Celie has much to feel proud of at the end. She remarks herself, “I think this the youngest us ever felt” (288). Bear in mind however, that she still lacks true companionship, something which as a black southern lesbian has been extremely problematic in her development. There is a difference between content, and actual victory. The return of Nettie, Samuel, and their nuclear family marks the return of extended family to Celie’s universe. Berlant specifically remarks that Celie’s family “emerges from the gender and racial fractures that had threatened to destroy it” (854). Celie has never experienced even a semi-permanent home situation because, as Berlant suggests, the prospect of such a situation has been under constant threat. Her life is characterized by the coming and going of allies, a lover, enemies, hardship, and joy. Simply because the novel ends on this remark, does not render the lives of Celie and her company “happy.” The “gender and racial fractures” may easily resurface.

The attitude of this final epistle suggests the characters—especially Celie—though they have grown, may have failed to learn from their history. They mistake the current situation as the definitive “settling down.” Conceivably, the momentum that has brought them to this point should, soon enough, displace them once more. If the action at this point indeed takes place at the cusp of the Civil Rights Movement, the nature of life in the South could easily be the next event to bring the extended family apart. Walker appears to suggest that we must remain weary when navigating through the currents and tides of social movement and time. Amidst the strife,
we can find ourselves in the eye of a storm. Serenity does not signify the ultimate conclusion to chaos. Lest we forget, there are means by which we may transcend the burdens of our everyday lives; Celie’s characterization can attest to this. To conclude on such a letter really leaves the ending open to the reader’s discretion. Do our characters come to understand their history? Are they now able to collectively rise in society? Or, will they let what progress they have become stagnant? Will they once again move apart from one another? The epistolary form of The Color Purple opens this possibility of social discourse. The time and space which the novel appears to occupy ultimately transpires within our own present. The questions which Celie and her family should be answering themselves likewise deserve our own attention.
Works Cited


