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"Trying To Do Without God": The Revision of Epistolary Address in The Color Purple

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IN HER FIRST letter to God, Celie recounts her rape at the hands of her Pa. Celie is fourteen at the time, and she prays to God for "a sign letting [her] know what is happening to [her]."[1] But the sign for which she prays is not forthcoming. That first letter initiates the story of Celie's unrelenting victimization, until little by little she manages—through identification with other women—to find her strength and identity. The epistolary form of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* highlights this aspect of its content, since the letters themselves figure crucially in the plot. Toward the middle of the novel, Celie discovers that her husband, Mr. ——, has been hiding the letters from her sister, Nettie, and allowing Celie to believe that her sister is dead. Through Nettie's restored letters, Celie eventually learns that the man who raped her—thus motivating her correspondence with God—was not her Pa after all, but her stepfather. Her last letter to God at this point reveals the amazed disgust she feels upon realizing that her chosen correspondent could hardly have been paying attention to her letters at all:

Dear God,

That's it, say Shug. Pack your stuff. You coming back to Tennessee with me.

But I feels daze.

My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa.

You must be sleep. (163)

Surely the most striking feature of the novel's particular epistolary form involves the shift in address that occurs at this point, as Celie turns away from her first correspondent and begins instead to address her sister. In her second letter to Nettie, Celie offers an explanation of her turn away from God as addressee. True to the womanist philosophy of the novel,[2] Celie's explanation involves the race and class as well as the gender associated with a God who does not listen to "poor colored women."

Dear Nettie,

I don't write to God no more, I write to you.

What happen to God? ast Shug.

Who that? I say. . . .

Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful and lowdown.

She say, Miss Celie, You better hush. God might hear you.

Let 'im hear me, I say. If he ever listened to poor colored women, the world would be a different place, I can tell you.

She talk and she talk, trying to budge me way from blasphemy. But I blaspheme much as I want to.

All my life I never care what people thought bout nothing I did, I say. But deep in my heart I care about God. What he going to think. And come to find out, he don't think. Just sit up there glorying in being deef, I reckon. But it ain't easy, trying to do without God. Even if you know he ain't there, trying to do without him is a strain. (175–76)

In the remainder of this crucial letter, Shug offers Celie a revised understanding of what "God" might be; and by the end of the novel, Celie has managed to put Shug's revised notion of God into practice. On the level of form as well as explicit content, this epistolary text performs the work of "trying to do without God," and by the end, that work is no longer such a "strain." The shift in Celie's address from God to Nettie, divinity to humanity, figurative to real family, "father" to sister, male to female, white to black, turns the novel in a new direction, toward the affirmative "Amen" of its closure.

Though Celie does not understand this until much later, the God whom she initially addresses is identified with men from the start. The choice of God as addressee, for example, is not made by Celie herself but

is urged by the man she calls Pa. His suggestion that God is the only "safe" confidant involves an explicit prohibition of the mother, as well as an implicit bond between the abusive human father and his God. This is clear in the italicized epigraph to the first letter, which suggests that Celie's text opens under the auspices of a voice other than her own: *"You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy"* (11). Celie follows this advice when she "protects" her mother from knowing the identity of her first child's father, and thereby, of course, she also protects the abusive father. "She ast me bout the first one Whose is it? I say God's. I don't know no other man or what else to say" (12). This refusal to identify the real father has the ironic effect of identifying that father with God; and this ironic association further serves Celie to explain to her mother when the child disappears. "Finally she ast Where is it? I say God took it" (12). Here "God" serves Celie as a mask for that other "he," who gives her children and then takes them away.

Recognizing the bitter irony of Pa's recommendation of God as correspondent depends on seeing Celie's simultaneous exclusion from and implication within the male network of power relations. She attempts to protect her mother from death by collaborating with the father's lies, but her mother dies anyway, and Celie then realizes that her death came as a result of the very lies she herself had helped to tell. "Trying to believe his story kilt her" (15). Celie's mother, weakened through repeated pregnancy, had never provided her daughter with a strong support against her Pa. But with her mother gone, Celie herself is left in the position of surrogate mother to her sister, Nettie, and Nettie becomes her primary female relation. She hopes to protect Nettie from her own fate. "I see him looking at my little sister. She scared. But I say I'll take care of you. With God help" (13). Her desire to protect her sister motivates Celie's marriage to Mr. ——, insofar as her motives figure at all in what is basically an arrangement of convenience between father and husband. Mr. —— turns out to be a fit successor to Pa, and Celie's plan to protect Nettie from Pa only puts her in danger from Mr. ——, who, like Pa, has his eye on Nettie. When she refuses his sexual advances, he sends her away and revenges himself on the sisters by plotting to keep Celie from receiving Nettie's letters (26, 119). In other words, he takes Celie's sister away from her, completing the process that Pa began of isolating Celie from the other women in her family.

Her isolation is the precondition of Celie's continued correspondence with God. The novel's epistolary form, in other words, is the most fundamental representation of a concern with women isolated from one another within the patriarchal network, a concern that is also elaborately thematized within the novel. Because of Pa and Mr. ——, there is no one

safe to talk to, and the emblem of Celie's solitude becomes her choice of God as epistolary addressee. When parted from her sister by Mr. ——, she covers her sense of isolation by turning to God and to writing. "But I just say, Never mine, never mine, long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along" (26). Thus very early in the novel the functional analogy is established between God and the sister in the role of possible confidant. Here, "spelling G-o-d" is clearly meant to fill the gap left by the absence of the sister, as the first letter to God clearly substitutes for telling the mother. This formal substitution will be reversed later in the novel in the pivotal shift in address from God to Nettie. But until that moment signals Celie's decisive rejection of God as addressee, the ironic result is her correspondence with a confidant who only reinforces her passivity toward the male power structure.

The inadequacy of God as a confidant is underscored later in the novel when Squeak recounts the story of her rape by her uncle, the prison warden. Shug encourages her to unburden herself to her family by making fun of the only other alternative: "If you can't tell us, who you gon tell, God?" (95). Early in the story, however, Celie is caught up in just this mystification. Even then, the voices of other women—Nettie, Kate, Sofia—try to break through the mystified submission to her husband which Celie rationalizes with reference to God. "Well, sometime Mr. —— git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways." Sofia replies: "You ought to bash Mr. —— head open, she say. Think bout heaven later" (47). But since her sister is absent and presumed dead, Celie can think of rebellion only as futile, speech as impossibly dangerous. Her passivity and silence depend upon the absence of her sister and the lesson she reads in that absence. "I don't say nothing. I think bout Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight. I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive" (29). Writing—as opposed to speech—seems safe, seems even the sign of ongoing life. Within this context, epistolarity itself must be seen to represent both the resignation of Celie's silence and its implicit strength: her silent refusal to lose her identity, despite her isolation.

According to the logic of epistolarity, all the while Celie addresses God in letters, God too is absent—not necessarily and definitively "deef," as Celie later complains, but distant and uncertain of response. Janet Altman has theorized the play of absence and presence that characterizes "epistolary mediation" in general.[3] Within this context, the wit of *The Color Purple* implicitly draws attention to a similarity between epistolary desire and prayer; both represent attempts, through language, to conjure presence from absence. In addressing God, Celie prays to read a

sign of his presence in order to feel her own more clearly; if he were to answer her prayers, she would know herself, would know "what is happening to [her]" (11). Of course, God never answers, and the epistolary relation remains incomplete. For Celie, the practice of addressing God simply reaffirms her solitude; she is essentially writing to herself. *The Color Purple* is thus an example of an epistolary novel with close affinities to the journal, diary, or autobiographical confession.[4] As in those genres, here the practice of introspective letter writing records the disciplined process of increasing self-knowledge. In this case, however, self-revelation is at first referred to a principle of absolute exteriority—God—which is always paradoxically close to sheer interiority, and prayer always an exercise in attempted self-possession. The effect of this epistolary address is also similar to that of the poetic strategy of apostrophe or prosopopoeia, however, in which the lyric address of something absent, inanimate, or dead conjures the illusion of presence and voice but at the same time has the uncanny effect of reflecting absence back upon the lyric "I."[5] This feature of epistolary address, in other words, cuts across and complicates the fiction of increasing self-knowledge and self-presence, which is the generic mark of autobiography.

When she receives no letters, Celie must conclude that Nettie is not merely absent but dead, especially since the sisters have made a pact explicitly establishing letters as the sign of their ongoing life. Parting from her sister, Celie demands correspondence. "I say Write. She say, nothing but death can keep me from it. She never write" (26). Absence, the necessary precondition of any epistolary exchange, is here given its most ominous significance. Nettie's presumed death rationalizes Celie's continued address to God, and at the same time it provides the narrative opportunity for resurrection. When her letters do finally appear in the text, they appear suddenly, in a group that presents a more or less complete record of Nettie's life since the two sisters parted. The last letter in the group explains that "Pa is not our Pa," allowing Celie to revise her own personal history and forcing her to realize that God has never been adequate to her correspondence (162–63). Thus Nettie's figurative (and epistolary) reappearance from the dead gives Celie a new life as well. The first letter Celie writes to Nettie rather than to God (164–67) tells of a day "like it be round Easter," when she revisits their childhood home, now transformed, with flowering trees all around.

The figurative resurrection that takes place in Celie's life is of course made possible through her love for Shug. This is most obvious on the level of plot and theme, but it is true on the level of narrative form as well, for Shug is the route through which Nettie's letters are restored. They begin appearing two pages after Celie and Shug make love for the

first time (109, 112). In terms of the plot, this is fully rationalized—after Celie tells her about Nettie, Shug figures out where the letters are—but in textual terms it seems like magic, as if the act of love has conjured Nettie's voice. The plot structure demonstrates the axiom that sexuality conjures the sister, for when each one falls in love—Celie with Shug and Nettie with Samuel—she tells her beloved all about her sister (112–13, 174). It is this chiasmic confidence—Celie's talking about Nettie with Shug while Nettie talks about Celie with Samuel—that causes the parallel but divided plots of the two sisters to come together again. Shug produces Nettie's letters, the last of which reveals to Celie that "Pa not pa." Through Shug, Nettie is restored; and through Nettie, Celie's children return, purged of an incestous origin (though never of rape).

Celie's turn toward women overturns her earlier implication in the patriarchal network, and the revision in her epistolary address is the most graphic reminder of this shift. However, the sudden, pivotal shift in address is but the decisive register of an internal process of transformation, which begins before it and continues long beyond it. The awakening of Celie's sexuality begins the process of replacing God with the sister as addressee. Long before they become lovers, she feels for Shug's body a reverence that reminds her of prayer. "I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying. My hands tremble and my breath short" (53). But her sexual correspondence with Shug accomplishes what prayer could never do; it derives from and leads back to her increasing self-possession. Just before making love with Shug for the first time, Celie tells of her rape by Pa. For the first time, she experiences the comforting and responsive love of an attentive listener. This enables her to mourn her past life, to achieve the catharsis of tears, and to gain the intensified comprehension of her story afforded by the retrospective reenactment with another of her past losses (108).

Finally, the sexual correspondence with Shug metaphorically restores the familial—and definitively female—relations whose removal constituted the crisis of the novel's opening. While she combs out Shug's hair, for example, Celie is reminded of her mother and her daughter through the intimacy of this bodily attention (57). In one of the last letters to God she muses on what making love with Shug is like—"little like sleeping with mama . . . little like sleeping with Nettie," but different from both (110). This maternal network is drawn very close during Celie and Shug's first sexual encounter. "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). In the moment of ecstasy, Celie finds within herself the capacity to enact her greatest loss and its restoration. Sexuality in this novel represents the principle of

transference, substitution, and internalization. As Celie learns to love Shug, she finds her mother, sister, and lost babies within. No longer isolated, and full of her remembered relations, Celie begins to experience a sense of wholeness. "Dear God, Now I know Nettie alive I begin to strut a little bit" (138). At the end of the first letter addressed not to God but to Nettie, Celie reports Shug's summary of this compensatory vision. "Shug say, Us each other's peoples now, and kiss me" (167).

Celie's sense of wholeness is not complete until she manages to recognize both "God" and the absent sister within herself. "Trying to do without God," in other words, paradoxically involves an act of self-possession, of internalization, which cannot take place as long as she addresses God and thereby reinscribes an absence. Only after turning to address her sister as correspondent, and then almost immediately, Celie begins the work of radically redefining and internalizing God. Her "blasphemy" in rejecting God as addressee inspires Shug to put her through a catechism. She forces Celie to recognize that her God has been a white man, imprinted in her imagination by the pictures in "the white folks' white bible. . . . You mad cause he don't seem to listen to your prayers. Humph! Do the mayor listen to anything colored say?" After making the point that "God" is a culturally conditioned concept, Shug pursues a strategy of negativity, first rejecting race, then gender, as defining attributes of her God. "God ain't a he or a she, but a It" (177). Finally her iconoclasm goes far beyond Celie's "blasphemy" as she insists that God cannot be envisioned at all. God is absolutely interior, a matter of responsiveness, affirmation, love. Since It is inside, It includes Everything.

> Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. . . . Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It. (177–78)

The impersonal pronoun "It," which names Shug's "God," as well as the internal sensation of being a part of everything else, is close to the euphemistic usage of "It" to refer to the sexual act; this association is explicit in Shug's remark that "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" (178). In Shug's theology, sexual pleasure is the best metaphor for the state of ecstatic affirmation that characterizes God-as-Everything, for "Everything want to be loved" (178). In fact, the title of the novel comes from this second letter to Nettie, suggesting the crucial importance of

Shug's theology of love, admiration, and appreciation. "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (178).[6]

Unfortunately, the state of total responsiveness and affirmation is not easy to achieve, for the work of negation must constantly go on, in order to purge the world of the associations "man" has made.

> Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. (179)

"But this hard work, let me tell you," Celie comments. "He been there so long, he don't want to budge." In fact, this "hard work" is the work of this text. The narrative work of internalizing divinity is a familiar feature of a certain Protestant tradition in the English novel, a tradition in which *The Color Purple* still participates.[7] But the way that work gets done is of course particular to each narrative form. In *The Color Purple* the epistolary form enacts the effort to negate the corruption man has wrought upon "everything" and to address a female principle of totality and familiarity instead. The "Amen" that ends this crucial letter suggests again that Celie is finally really praying only when she begins writing to Nettie. The functional analogy established earlier between God and the sister is now fulfilled at the moment of its reversal, as the sister replaces God in the role of confidant. Addressing the sister instead is the route of detaching the concept of "God" from patriarchal oppression and allowing "It" to embrace "Everything." Paradoxically, the internalization of God accomplishes this massive externalization as "Everything." This revised divinity is no longer absent or distant, but close and familiar. "To do without God," then, is paradoxically to have "It" always readily available.

Meanwhile, through her experiences in Africa, Nettie too recognizes that "God" is a relative, culturally bound concept, for the Olinka have projected "roofleaf" as their divinity. Through the painful process of witnessing the colonization of the Olinka, she is forced to realize how powerless her own God really is (203). She too must come to the conclusion that divinity is internal, and therefore unrepresentable.

> God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone—a roofleaf or Christ—but we don't. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us. (227)

Since Celie's letters to Nettie are never received, only the reader can see how thoroughly the two correspondents "answer" each other. The paral-

lel plots of the two sisters' radically different lives work out elaborately parallel experiences of racism and sexism.[8] Through their work in the world, both Nettie and Celie accomplish the transformation, internalization, possession, and negation of God. But at the same time, each sister must achieve a similar sort of faith in relation to the other; the sister, too, must be internalized. Here again, the process of internalization depends upon absence. In the case of Celie's communications to Nettie as well as to God, the epistolary relation must remain unfulfilled in order for this crucial fiction of internalization to be enacted. In a sense, then, the epistolary form of *The Color Purple* is ironic throughout. A full epistolary exchange is never established, either with God or with Nettie, and the most profound motives of the narrative depend upon this fact. Meanwhile, the hope and faith that epistolary desire *might* be internally fulfilled sustain the epistolarity of the second half of the novel.

As correspondent, Nettie's position in relation to Celie is like Celie's position in relation to God: radical solitude prompts the address, and neither letter writer gets an answer. Nettie knows that Mr. —— is diverting the letters and that Celie has probably never heard from her. "I know you think I am dead," she explains, in the first letter from her produced in the text (112). Despite the lack of response, however, Nettie continues to write to her sister.

> I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was. Well, now I know what you meant. And whether God will read letters or no, I know you will go on writing them; which is guidance enough for me. Anyway, when I don't write to you I feel as bad as I do when I don't pray, locked up in myself and choking on my own heart. I am so *lonely*, Celie. (122)

Nettie takes up the practice of writing from Celie and reflects back to Celie a theoretical understanding of what that practice means. She has already learned what Celie, too, will learn: the figurative equivalence of prayer and epistolary address to the sister. Finally, she expresses through this equivalence the sense that re-externalizing the internal is the dynamic of conjuring presence, companionship, and correspondence.

> But always, no matter what I'm doing, I am writing to you. Dear Celie, I say in my head in the middle of Vespers, the middle of the night, while cooking, Dear, dear Celie. And I imagine that you really do get my letters and that you are writing me back: Dear Nettie, this is what life is like for me. (144)

In this figurative sense, the faithful continuity of Nettie's invocation keeps Celie alive to her, though after thirty years of this unfulfilled

correspondence, she begins to imagine that Celie might be dead. But Samuel counsels her at this point to trust in God and to have faith of another, analogous sort as well, "to have faith in the sturdiness of [her] sister's soul" (227).

In the second half of the novel, after receiving Nettie's letters, Celie too learns to keep this faith "in the sturdiness of [her] sister's soul." A second time she is threatened with Nettie's death, when Mr. —— gives her the telegram from the Department of Defense saying that Nettie's returning ship has been sunk by German mines off the coast of Gilbraltar. "They think you all drowned. Plus, the same day, all the letters I wrote to you over the years come back unopen" (225). The return of Celie's unopened letters is an apt emblem of her sister's possible death, as the sudden appearance of Nettie's letters testified to her resurrection. At this point it seems that Celie's second correspondence will be as fruitless as her first. But her refusal this time to believe in Nettie's death is a mark of exactly how far she has come into her own. She, like Nettie, has learned to internalize her sister's presence.

> And I don't believe you dead. How can you be dead if I still feel you? Maybe, like God, you changed into something different that I'll have to speak to in a different way, but you not dead to me Nettie. And never will be. Sometime when I git tired of talking to myself I talk to you. (229–30)

Celie's explicit association of faith in her sister with the transformation of God emphasizes the parallel dynamic at work. And again, the thematic point is reinforced by the narrative form, which wittily exploits the temporal disjunction, or lag time, involved in any epistolary relation. Celie's faith in the sturdiness of her sister's soul is supported by a figure of her abiding presence, the evidence of her letters. "And no matter how much the telegram said you must be drown, I still git letters from you" (241).

Once more Celie must practice internalization as a compensatory technique, when Shug leaves with Germaine; and this final movement recapitulates and concludes this line of development in the novel. "Feel like I felt when Nettie left," writes Celie when Shug leaves earlier in the novel, emphasizing the association of Shug with her sister (76). After a time, Celie establishes an epistolary relation with Shug, and through this relation Celie learns both to do without Shug and at the same time to have her always within (236). No sooner has Celie accomplished the internal restoration of their relation than it is re-externalized—that is to say, rewarded in the plot—by Shug's appearance.

> And then, just when I know I can live content without Shug, . . . Shug write me she coming home.

> Now. Is this life or not?
> *I be so calm.*
> If she come, I be happy. If she don't, I be content.
> And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn. (247–48)

The extravagant magic of the plot's resolution may seem more fundamentally grounded if we have appreciated "this lesson" of epistolarity, its fictive trick of conjuring presence. Celie's internalized recreations of "Everything" and everyone eventually issue in their external appearances in the plot. The work of internalization done, Celie is complete; her solitude has become a company, and the narrative represents this achievement in the dramatized reunion of the family.[9] After Shug returns, Nettie again turns out to be alive. The male characters, who were expunged from the narrative's good graces during its period of separatism,[10] are redeemed and given reformed characters. Celie's children are no longer lost but grown up and joined by their African counterpart. The parallel and divided plots of the two sisters are reunited. Time is figuratively reversed, and everyone feels young again. And epistolary address ceases altogether, for Celie's correspondent has returned.[11]

The closure of the epistolary form turns again on Celie's pivotal revision of address. Since she can no longer address Nettie, Celie returns to her earlier addressee, now thoroughly transformed, both internalized (as Spirit) and externalized (as Everything). "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God" (249). This last letter closes with "Amen," Celie's characteristic signature ever since the second letter to Nettie, the one in which she describes her transformation of God. Nettie has begged Celie to "Pray for us" (169), and the novel's last word is the close of that prayer. It is also the "Amen" of enthusiastic response to "Everything"—as in a church service or revival meeting one answers the arrival of the Spirit with the tribute of a loud "Amen."

This epistolary novel is framed at its outer edges by epigraphs that break the fiction of presence and refer us to its author. We find, on the last page of the text: "I thank everybody in this book for coming. / A.W., author and medium" (253). Alice Walker closes the book as if it had been one long letter to the reader and this were her signature. The usual effects of epistolarity are set in motion again at the edges of the text in order to assert authorial presence and at the same time to deny it. As "author" she claims the novel as artifice, an aesthetic form created by her own letter-writing hand; but as "medium" she refers authority to a power external to herself, who speaks through her. The conception of the artist as mediating the voice of a higher power is but one step removed from the conception of the artist as analogous to or a

surrogate for God; both conceptions are traditional in romantic literature where, as feminist critics have pointed out, they operate to reserve authorial power in the male line.[12]

Here Walker's womanist revision of God has consequences for her vision of narrative authority as well. Through correspondence with the sister, the notion of God has been detached from the patriarchal chain of authorization, with the result that, when the female artist refers to her power as a "medium," she makes a claim at once more humble and at the same time more vast than the traditional male claim. She defers to Everything, and as a consequence her voice is multitudinous, democratic, and responsive; she speaks for Everything, and as a result everyone speaks through her.[13] The authority of her voice is grounded in its paradoxical assertion of deferral. She claims to have transcribed Celie's voice, to have listened carefully, to have responded. Walker's closing signature returns us to the opening epigraph of the novel, in which she introduces this epistolary fiction of presence with a gesture of deferring her own. Her dedication strikingly conflates life outside and inside the text; and it invites the reader to consider epistolarity as a paradigm for all creation. "*To the Spirit:* / Without whose assistance / Neither this book / Nor I / Would have been / Written."

NOTES

1. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 11. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

2. Alice Walker defines "womanism" in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi-xii. See also Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English," *Signs* 11:1 (1983): 63–80.

3. Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), esp. 13–46.

4. Altman notes the similarities and differences among "pure autobiography," journal and diary novels, and certain epistolary forms. Ibid., 88–89, 112n.2.

5. Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," *MLN* 94 (1979): 919–30.

6. The choice of color is also coded to Walker's exposition of womanism. The axiomatic ratio "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender" emphasizes Walker's wish to intensify feminism by "universalizing" it. She restricts her definition of "universalist" to racial terms, but this color coding can only remind us of her strictly qualified emphasis on lesbian sexuality, her insistence that it must not translate as "separatist." *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* xi-xii.

7. See Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), esp. 95–96 and 315–37.

8. On the most general level, Nettie's voice seems to relate to Celie's voice as theory relates to practice (Nettie theorizes the practice of epistolary introspection which Celie begins) or as the explicit commitment to "uplift" (127) relates to the pure experience of racism. Most reviewers did not find Nettie's voice compelling. See for example Mel Watkins, "Some Letters Went To God," *New York Times Book Review,* 25 July 1982, p. 7. But in relation to Celie's voice, the lack of "color" in Nettie's voice may be seen as its point, spelling the losses as well as the gains of education, uplift, universalism.

9. On this dynamic in romance see Harold Bloom, "The Internalization of Quest Romance," in *Romanticism and Consciousness,* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970), 3–24.

10. On this problematic feature of Alice Walker's womanist program, see note 6, above. A womanist is "not a separatist, except periodically, for health." *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* xi.

11. Altman points to this situation as the codified comic closure of the epistolary novel. (The codified tragic closure turns on the death of the epistolary correspondent.) Altman, *Epistolarity,* 150, 165n.8.

12. See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) and Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Bronte, and Emily Dickinson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

13. Alice Walker describes this experience of narrative power in "Writing *The Color Purple,*" in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* 355–60.