Chapter 3

Romance, Marginality, Matrilineage: *The Color Purple*

The publication of *The Color Purple* transformed Alice Walker from an indubitably serious black writer whose fiction belonged to a tradition of gritty, if occasionally "magical," realism into a popular novelist, with all the perquisites and drawbacks attendant on that position. Unlike either *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) or *Meridian* (1976), *The Color Purple* gained immediate and widespread public acceptance, winning both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for 1982–1983. At the same time, however, it generated immediate and widespread critical unease over what appeared to be manifest flaws in its composition. Robert Towers, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, concluded on the evidence of *The Color Purple* that "Alice Walker still has a lot to learn about plotting and structuring what is clearly intended to be a realistic novel." His opinion was shared by many reviewers, who pointed out variously that in the last third of the book the narrator-protagonist Celie and her friends are propelled toward a fairy-tale happy ending with more velocity than credibility; that the letters from Nettie, with their disconcertingly literate depictions of life in an African village, intrude into the middle of the main action with little apparent motivation or warrant; and that the device of the letters to God is especially unrealistic inasmuch as it foregoes the concretizing details that have traditionally given the epistolary form its peculiar verisimilitude: the secret writing
place, the cache, the ruses to enable posting letters, and especially the letters received in return.¹

Indeed, the violations of realist convention are so flagrant that they might well call into question whether The Color Purple “is clearly intended to be a realistic novel,” especially as there are indications that at least some of those aspects of the novel discounted by reviewers as flaws may constitute its links to modes of writing other than Anglo-American nineteenth-century realism. For example, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has recently located the letters to God within an Afro-American tradition deriving from slave narrative, a tradition in which the act of writing is linked to a powerful deity who “speaks” through scripture and bestows literacy as an act of grace.² For Gates, concern with finding a voice, which he sees as the defining feature of Afro-American literature, becomes the context for the allusive affinities between Celie’s letters and the “free indirect ‘narrative of division’” that characterizes the acknowledged predecessor of The Color Purple, Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 novel Their Eyes Were Watching God.³

Gates’s paradigm suggests how misleading it may be to assume

¹Robert Towers, New York Review of Books, 12 August 1982, 36. Adam Gussow notes the “sudden swerve” into Nettie’s letters and calls it “one of the novel’s few weaknesses” (Chicago Review 34, no. 1 [1983], 125). Maria K. Mootry-Ikerionwu opposes Walker’s ideas to her “craft,” “which doesn’t quite carry off her vision,” and finds the letters to God as improbable as Celie’s passivity (“The Color Purple: A Moral Tale,” CLA Journal 27, no. 3 [1984], 347). Tamar Katz elegantly points out how The Color Purple refrains from exploiting many of the most characteristic conventions of the epistolary form in “‘Show me how to do like you’: Didacticism and Epistolary Form in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple” (Unpublished paper, Cornell University), p. 8. Significantly, it is a Renaissance scholar, Ruth El Saffar, who suggests the genre with which I believe the novel is most closely allied; in a review of The Color Purple in the International Fiction Review 12, no. 1 (1985), she writes, “the discovery of ‘Pa’s’ usurpation affects the novel itself, turning it from history, with all its emphasis on power and control, to romance, whose main focus is love and redemption” (p. 15).

²These motifs are summed up succinctly in a quotation of Rebecca Cox Jackson that serves as a headnote to Gates’s Walker chapter, “I am only a pen in His hand.” Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Color Me Zora: Alice Walker’s (Re)writing of the Speakerly Text,” in his The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 239.

³Gates maintains that the letters to God thus represent a further turn on Hurston’s own invention of a discourse accommodating both “dialect” and standard English: “Celie’s written voice to God, her reader, tropes the written yet never uttered voice of free indirect discourse which is the predominant vehicle of narrative commentary in Hurston’s novel” (p. 243).
that mainstream realist criteria are appropriate for evaluating *The Color Purple*. But the Afro-American preoccupation with voice as a primary element unifying both the speaking subject and the text as a whole does not deal with many of the more disquieting structural features of Walker’s novel. For instance, while the letters from Nettie clearly illustrate Nettie’s parallel acquisition of her own voice, a process that enables her to arrive at conclusions very like Celie’s under very different circumstances, the Afro-American tradition sheds little light on the central *place* these letters occupy in the narrative or on why the plot takes this sudden jump into geographically and culturally removed surroundings. And Gates’s subtle explication of the ramifications of “voice” once Walker has reconstrued the term to designate a *written* discourse does not address the problematic ending, in which the disparate members of Celie’s extended family come together as if drawn by a cosmic magnet—and as if in defiance of the most minimal demands of narrative probability.

The example of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* tends to compound these problems rather than provide a precedent that helps explain them, for Hurston’s most famous novel has also been judged flawed, and for many of the same reasons. To a certain extent, placing *Their Eyes* in the context of an Afro-American tradition that Hurston herself did much to document reveals how central the act of storytelling is in this book, to the point where Janie’s discovery and use of her narrating voice emerges as the major action.4 This context helps explain the tendency of the story about storytelling to usurp the ostensible main plot of Janie’s quest for happiness with a man—for example, the apparently disproportionate emphasis given to the

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digressive “‘co-talkin’” of such minor characters as Hicks and Coker in Eatonville or to the rhetoric of the “skin games” played by Ed Dockery, Bootyny, and Sop-de-Bottom on the muck and the exuberant fabulation that takes over chapter 6 so completely that the story of the mule “freed” at Janie’s instigation turns completely away from realism and becomes a beast fable, with buzzards as parson and congregation chanting a parodic litany over the carrion.5

But once again the Afro-American paradigm leaves untouched some of the most problematic structural elements of this novel, elements that according to many critics constitute lapses or flaws in its composition. Dianne Sadoff makes the case most persuasively, and most sympathetically inasmuch as she discerns “‘marks, fissures, and traces of ‘inferiorization’” that amount to “‘scars of disguise or concealment because [Hurston] is black and female—doubly alienated from a white and patriarchal mainstream literature.’”6 Sadoff views Their Eyes Were Watching God as a celebration of heterosexual love that is undercut by Hurston’s own ambivalence over the compatibility of marriage and the creative “voice” that produces fiction. The ambivalence is figured most acutely in the misogynistic attitudes and behavior that Hurston tacitly ascribes to Janie’s third husband and great love, Tea Cake, and in the action of the scene where, according to the covert logic of the narrative, if not the overt logic of explication, Janie murders Tea Cake, just as she has murdered her previous husband, Jody Starks. As Sadoff observes, “Hurston has motivated her narrative, perhaps unconsciously, to act out her rage against male domination and to free Janie, a figure for herself, from all men.”7

In making the “marks” and “scars” that she perceives in Hurston’s novel the inevitable consequence of Hurston’s doubly marginalized social position, Sadoff employs a version of the Gilbert and Gubar “anxiety of authorship” model pioneered in The Madwoman in the Attic.8 In the process, however, she underscores problems with this

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7Ibid., p. 22.
8Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman In the Attic: The Woman Writer
model’s presumption that apparent inconsistencies in the narrative are due to unintended eruptions of repressed biographical material into the text. While Sadoff is more thorough and more sympathetic in her treatment of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* than, say, Robert Towers is in his treatment of *The Color Purple*, she presumes, as Towers does, that the author has inadvertently written something other than what she intended, and that what the author intended was an unironic and unambiguous realism, in Hurston’s case the realism of the heterosexual romance plot that structured so many European and American novels about women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Neither critic entertains the possibility that certain ostensible violations may be calculated subversions of conventions that the authors regarded as permeated with white, masculinist values or that other ostensible violations may arise from the fact that the authors were writing not realism but romance—perhaps in part because, unlike the genre of realism, the genre of romance is recognized as highly conventional, so that its ideological implications are easier both to underscore and to undermine.


9Nancy Miller coined the phrase “heroines’ texts” for such novels; see *The Heroine’s Text: Readings in the French and English Novel, 1722–1782* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980). Rachel Blau DuPlessis summarizes Miller’s argument in her *Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 15: “’Story’ for women has typically meant plots of seduction, courtship, the energies of quest deflected into sexual downfall, the choice of a marriage partner, the melodramas of beginning, middle, and end, the trajectories of sexual arousal and release.” DuPlessis contends that twentieth-century narratives by women deliberately “rupture” traditional sequence or syntax in order to evade the closure imposed by such plots.

10The critical responses already mentioned suggest one reason that a writer concerned with revising encoded ideologies might have for avoiding realism. Despite the existence of a great deal of narrative theory establishing that the realist novel is as conventional in its premises and methods as the sonnet, the epic, or such “genre” novels as the detective story or the gothic—see for example David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Fiction: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), especially pp. 22–41—realism is such a dominant form that its tacit claim to mirror reality is often difficult to question. More significant, the assumption that the realist novel is “like life” tends to imply that the rules governing this sort of novel come from a repository of dicta called “reality” and carry moral as well as metaphysical weight. Thus, to call a fictional outcome—say, a conclusion that redraws racial or gender boundaries—“unrealistic” is to suggest not only that things don’t happen this way “in reality” (which may amount on examination to the observation that things have never happened this way before) but that the
Romance is a term with a wide range of applications, especially when contrasted to realism,11 but it also has a more delimited technical sense that turns out to be surprisingly relevant to The Color Purple and illuminates certain analogous aspects of Their Eyes Were Watching God. Such late plays of Shakespeare as The Tempest and, especially, The Winter’s Tale, which draw on pastoral for a number of their governing premises but go on to use these premises as means to develop a tragicomic plot, have striking affinities with the narrative strategies created by Walker and Hurston. Shakespearean romance can in certain respects serve as a structural paradigm for these two novels without necessarily standing in a relationship of direct influence to them or absorbing them into its own network of assumptions about how the world is structured and how human beings fit into this world.12 Indeed, the romance paradigm seems most important in this context precisely because it formally encodes a system of hierarchical relations that have ideological repercussions, and because this recognizably conventional system of hierarchical relations is also the ideology of racism and patriarchy, which the two novels expose and, ultimately, invert.

In his introduction to the New Arden edition of The Tempest, Frank Kermode advances “pastoral tragi-comedy” as a more precise, if more cumbersome, designation for the late plays of Shakespeare more commonly termed romances.13 The phrase is useful insofar as rules of “reality” do not allow such developments, and therefore that they ought not to occur. In this way the mode of fictional realism becomes an arena for prescriptions based on a reading of ethics presumptively enjoined by something like a natural order.

1Richard Chase, in his classic study The American Novel and Its Tradition (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday/Anchor, 1957), distinguishes between “the romance, or romance-novel, and the novel proper,” the former category including “that freer, daring, more brilliant fiction that contrasts with the solid moral inclusiveness and massive equability of the [nineteenth-century] English novel” (vii–viii).

12Walker was graduated from Sarah Lawrence College; Hurston, from Barnard College. Both read widely in several traditions. There is no reason to believe that either writer’s desire to claim her black heritage precluded a canny reappropriation through re-vision of the white, patriarchal canon.

it invokes the tradition of pastoral and thus a set of conventions celebrating a rural, "natural" community often explicitly identified with the nonwhite inhabitants of Africa or the New World and constituted in implicit opposition to a dominant urban community. 14 The Color Purple is clearly pastoral in these respects, for in it Walker makes a group of black farmers the central social unit and uses this community as a vantage point from which to deliver a blistering critique of the surrounding white culture. The denunciation is sometimes overt, as when Sofia fulminates: "They have the nerve to try to make us think slavery fell through because of us. . . . Like us didn’t have sense enough to handle it. All the time breaking hoe handles and letting the mules loose in the wheat. But how anything they build can last a day is a wonder to me. They backward. . . . Clumsy, and unlucky." 15 More frequently, however, the white society figures as profoundly unnecessary, invisible for most of the action and appearing only as explosions of violence and insanity that sporadically intrude into the relatively intelligible world of the protagonists, as when the mayor’s wife asks Sofia to be her maid and precipitates the beating, jailing, and domestic servitude of Sofia and the rape of Squeak or when the English engineers casually eradicate the Olinka village in the process of turning the jungle into a rubber plantation.

The point of view of pastoral is conventionally simple, artless and naïve—values rendered, of course, by means that are complex, subtle, and sophisticated—and can become the locus of a sustained attack on the mores of the mainstream society. 16 Walker’s protagonist Celie (whose name by various etymologies means “holy,” “healing,” and “heavenly”), is in these respects an exemplary pastoral protag-

15 Alice Walker, The Color Purple (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), p. 100, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text. All of Sofia’s dialogue is of course comprehended in the written “dialect” of Celie’s letters to God, a point that Gates makes in observing, “In the speeches of her characters, Celie’s voice and a character’s merge into one, almost exactly as we saw happen in Their Eyes when Janie and her narrator speak in the merged voice of free indirect discourse. In these passages from The Color Purple, the distinction between mimesis and diagesis is apparently obliterated: the opposition between them has collapsed” (“Color Me Zora,” p. 249).
16 “This indeed is one of the assumptions of pastoral,” observes William Empson, “that you can say everything about complex people by a complete consideration of simple people.” English Pastoral Poetry (New York: Norton, 1938), p. 137.
onist, for her defining quality, and thus the defining quality of the narrative, is innocence. If this innocence subjects her to violation at the outset of the story, it also figures as a capacity for wonder and thus for experience. Celie learns, and as she learns her pastoral community develops, in a movement that implicitly restores a submerged Edenic ideal of harmony between individual human beings and between humanity and the natural order.

It is this development that makes *The Color Purple* a narrative—tragicomedy as well as pastoral—and provides striking affinities with the late Shakespearean romances. Kermode has defined romance as “a mode of exhibiting the action of magical and moral laws in a version of human life so selective as to obscure, for the special purpose of concentrating attention on these laws, the fact that in reality their force is intermittent and only fitfully glimpsed.”17 Certainly the moral laws of Walker’s novel, subtitled in the original hard-cover edition *A Moral Tale*, have magical power, producing consequences that are not in naturalistic terms remotely credible. Nettie, Samuel, and the children miraculously return from the sea after their ship is reported missing, to provide a conclusion that brings together all the far-flung characters in a celebration that is part family reunion, part assertion of a new social order that will supplant the old (the celebration takes place on the Fourth of July, a date on which, as Harpo explains to a representative of the younger generation, white people are busy “celebrating they independence from England” and consequently black people “can spend the day celebrating each other” [p. 250]). Shortly before this climactic juncture, Shug returns from her last heterosexual fling to find Celie and Albert reconciled and living in platonic harmony, a reversal prompted by Albert’s recognition that “meanness kill” (p. 201). Shortly before this development Celie inherits a house, a store, and the information that her children are not the product of incest. And this last windfall comes after the success of Celie’s company, Folks-pants, Ltd., an enterprise purveying androgyny to Depression-era black sharecroppers. The comic impetus of Walker’s story is so powerful that it absorbs questions of probability and motivation. As

17Kermode, Introduction to *The Tempest*, liv.
Northrop Frye has noted of analogous Shakespearean plots, "What emerges at the end is not a logical consequence of the preceding action, as in tragedy, but something more like a metamorphosis." 18

In Shakespearean romance the metamorphosis is both social and metaphysical. It is social in that it involves a redemptive conclusion absorbing all the principal characters, whether or not they seem to deserve redemption. Moreover, as J. H. P. Pafford observes in writing of *The Winter’s Tale*, the element of tragedy in romances derives from the suffering characters must undergo because of the misbehavior of a powerful male figure; this figure nevertheless "always shares to the full in the final blessings, and, however guilty and responsible for the sufferings of others, he is ultimately absolved by facile excuse, if any is needed at all." 19

In *The Color Purple* the most important agent of suffering is also a (relatively) powerful male figure, Celie’s husband Mr. ——, whose unarticulated name, in the manner of epistolary fictions since Richardson’s *Pamela*, suggests fearful effacement of an identity too dangerous to reveal and whose transformation is signaled by a renaming that at once diminishes and humanizes. 20 In this case, the gratuitous absolution is also a conversion that affects descendants, for both Mr. —— (who is transformed into a little man given to collecting shells and called merely Albert) and his son, Harpo, are absolved by becoming integrated into a female-defined value community, "finding themselves" at last in the traditionally female roles of seamstress and housekeeper.

The metamorphoses of romance are not limited to the social order, and they have an analogous metaphysical dimension in *The Color Purple*, where Celie’s progress also serves to redefine the proper relation between human beings and the natural world they inhabit.

20Frye notes that the comic drive is essentially directed toward identity. Insofar as this drive toward identity is an individual matter (rather than involving a whole society), it takes the form of "an awakening to self-knowledge, which is typically a release from a humor or a mechanical form of behavior" (A Natural Perspective, p. 118). It is interesting in this context to note that masculine brutality appears to be a "humor or mechanical form of behavior" in *The Color Purple*. 
Shug’s disquisitions on religion and on the behavior required by a redefined God are consonant with the pastoral's characteristic fusion of reverence and hedonism and with a long tradition that uses pastoral convention to attack the excesses and misconceptions of established religious practice.21 “God love all them [sexual] feelings,” Shug assures a scandalized Celie. “That’s some of the best stuff God did,” and she goes on to maintain, “God love admiration. . . . Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing” (p. 178). In the ensuing critique of prevailing religious beliefs, this undemanding God emerges as not only sexless—an “it” rather than a “he”—but also radically decentered: not one but many and in fact, according to 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” (p. 178).

Like the value systems governing traditional romances, the nurturing pantheism this novel affirms as an ideal also figures implicitly as a preexisting state or Edenic norm that must be restored before human beings can attain social equilibrium. Celie only embraces it completely in the greeting of her last letter, which describes the celebratory reunion of all the principal characters: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (p. 249).22

Finally, Shakespearean romances provide precedent and rationale for an aspect of The Color Purple that readers have found particularly anomalous, the “Africa” passages, which in effect disrupt the Amer-

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21 The most famous attack on religious excesses and misconceptions in English pastoral occurs in Milton’s “Lycidas.” In The Oaten Flute: Essays on Pastoral Poetry and the Pastoral Ideal (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), Renato Poggioli suggests that even in its most orthodox Christian manifestations the pastoral ideal is based on “a double longing after innocence and happiness” and ultimately “stands at the opposite pole from the Christian one, even if it believes with the latter that the lowly will be exalted and that the only bad shepherds are the shepherds of men” (p. 1). Kermode points to the Renaissance pastoral as a site where Neoplatonism could systematize “the relation between spiritual and physical love and beauty,” and the Song of Solomon “provided all the necessary authority for expressing mystical love in erotic imagery” (English Pastoral Poetry, p. 35).

22 Poggioli remarks that utopias constitute “after all . . . the idyll of the future,” the pastoral Eden made the terminus of the narrative instead of the origin (The Oaten Flute, pp. 28–29). Frye similarly argues that in Shakespearean romance the return to Eden or a golden age is “a vision of something never seen or experienced, and hence, when it is presented as something we return to, it is a genuinely new vision” (A Natural Perspective, pp. 132–33).
ican action for some forty pages, when a whole cache of withheld letters from Nettie is suddenly revealed. These letters detail the story of Nettie’s adoption by a missionary family and her subsequent travels to New York, England, Senegal, Liberia, and finally the unnamed country of the Olinka. In the Olinka village she recapitulates Celie’s discoveries, decrying the irrationality of the sex-gender system, becoming increasingly committed to the nonhuman, asexual God, and achieving a heterosexual version of Celie’s stable, loving relationship. The function of the “Africa” section is clearly to provide analogies and contrasts to the dominant action. In this function, as in its seeming violation of realist conventions, it parallels scenes in the romances taking place in what Frye has called the “green world,” a pastoral landscape that serves as a “symbol of natural society, the word natural referring to the original human society which is the proper home of man” and is “associated with things which in the context of the ordinary world seem unnatural, but which are in fact attributes of nature as a miraculous and irresistible reviving power.” This “green world” is “particularly the world in which the heroine... dies and comes back to life,” and as such it is the locus of Nettie’s reincarnation as correspondent and conarrator.

The village of the Olinka, with its organically round huts, its roof-leaf religion, its restorative myths of black hegemony, and its simple agrarian economy, is in some respects, and especially initially, an idyllic counter to the world that Celie must dismantle and remake. In its geographical distance from the world of the main action, in the length of time the daughter-heroine spends there (as missing and presumed dead), in its structural function of healing old wounds through a marriage and the founding of a family, and in its recapitulation of major themes of the containing drama, this generic “Africa” most resembles the Bohemia of The Winter’s Tale—with one signal difference. Whereas Perdita in The Winter’s Tale learns from the pastoral Bohemia, which in many respects remains an ideal, Nettie in The Color Purple ends up criticizing the Olinka society, which she first perceives as a natural and self-determining black community but soon finds sexist and fatally vulnerable to incursions

23Frye, A Natural Perspective, pp. 142–43.
24Ibid., 145.
by the encompassing white empire. By contrast, Celie’s world becomes more woman-centered and more self-sufficient as it develops, finally containing and assimilating even elements of the white community in the person of Sofia’s former charge, Miss Eleanor Jane, who leaves her own home to work for Sofia.

But this one difference in many ways completely inverts the emphasis of the romance, suggesting the extent to which Walker unsettles this structural paradigm in the process of applying it. As a marginal and marginalizing work, *The Color Purple* not only reveals the central preoccupations of the tradition within which it locates itself but succeeds in turning a number of these preoccupations inside out, at once exposing the ideology that informs them and insinuating the alternative meanings that, by insisting on its own centrality, the paradigm has suppressed.

II

One of the chief preoccupations of romance as a genre is the relation between men and women. *The Winter’s Tale*, which, in this as in other respects, is the closest structural analogue to *The Color Purple*, deals with the unmotivated jealousy and cruelty of a man who is also a ruler, his loss of his wife and daughter for a period of sixteen years, and their restoration (both had been preserved in “green worlds”)

25 after he atones and comes to terms with his own misdeeds. The restoration is bittersweet: on the one hand, time has elapsed and many opportunities are gone for good; on the other hand, a young central couple restores the succession and suggests a more humane and rational future, both for this family and for the state that they govern.

Allowing for the fact that in *The Color Purple* the female roles of mother, daughter, wife, and lover are slippery to the point of being interchangeable, the plot of *The Winter’s Tale* has clear affinities with the plot of *The Color Purple*—and a very different focus. Despite the attention given to the main female characters, the play is about the

25Frye identifies Paulina’s chapel, where Hermione hides for an unimaginable sixteen years, as the corollary to Perdita’s Bohemia. It is worth noting that if this is the case, the pastoral quality of this particular green world derives largely from the fact that all its inhabitants are female.
father and ruler, Leontes, about his crime, his punishment, and his eventual, though partial, restitution. By analogy *The Color Purple* ought to be about Mr. ——, about his crime, punishment and eventual restitution. And of course Mr. —— goes through all these stages, emerging at the conclusion as an integral part of the new society embodied in the family that surrounds him. But *The Color Purple* is not his story. This point is especially important in view of the fact that Steven Spielberg seized on the underlying romance structure of Walker's novel when he made it into a film; he reinscribed Mr. —— (whom he renamed simply Mister, so that the title of authority became this character's identity) at the center of the story, making his change of heart the turning point of the action and involving him in supplementary scenes that show him coming to reembrace his estranged family. Even more striking, Spielberg went on to reinscribe the law of the father exactly where Walker had effaced it, by providing Shug with a textually gratuitous "daddy," who is also a preacher and thus the representative of the Christian white father-God explicitly repudiated in the passage that gives the book its title.  

This father asserts his power by refusing to speak to Shug until she and all the inhabitants of the evolving new society who have gathered in the alternative structure of the juke joint are themselves assimilated to the Christian church and give voice to Christian hymns. Spielberg's restorative instinct here was unerring, for Walker uses the Afro-American motif of "finding a voice" primarily to decenter patriarchal authority, giving speech to hitherto muted women, who change meanings in the process of articulating and thus appropriating the dominant discourse. Spielberg replaced this entire narrative tendency with its reverse, not only restoring voice to the father but making paternal words uniquely efficacious: the film's Mister is shown visiting Washington, talking to bureaucrats, and in substance becoming the agent of the climactic reunion between Celie and Nettie.  

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26 "Then she tell me this old white man is the same God she used to see when she prayed. If you wait to find God in church, Celie, she say, that's who is bound to show up, cause that's where he live. . . . Cause that's the one that's in the white folks' white bible" (p. 177).

27 Scott McMillin reminds me that, paradoxically, Spielberg's additions are often powerful precisely inasmuch as they make patriarchal speech a visual phenomenon:
In the novel, on the other hand, the emphasis is skewed away from this male discovery of identity. If Albert and Harpo "find themselves," it is within a context of redefinition that not only denies male privilege but ultimately denies that the designations "male" and "female" are meaningful bases for demarcating difference. In a fictional universe governed by the written "dialect" of Celie and initially conditioned by the paternal injunction "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (p. 11), speech among women turns out to be revivifying rather than death-dealing, especially inasmuch as such speech has the potential to bring about romance's characteristic reconstitution of society.

The reconstitution of society is largely a matter of redefinition, presented as the inevitable corollary of taking seriously the view from underneath, not only figuratively but also literally. For example, Celie's detached description of heterosexual intercourse, which prompts Shug to observe, "You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you" (p. 79), leads her into a revisionary discussion of female anatomy:

You never enjoy it at all? she ast, puzzle. Not even with your children daddy?
Never, I say.
Why Miss Celie, she say, you still a virgin.
What? I ast.
Listen, she say, right down there in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody. It git hotter and hotter and then it melt. That the good part. But other parts good too, she say. Lot of sucking go on, here and there, she say. Lot of finger and tongue work.

Button? Finger and tongue? My face hot enough to melt itself. [p. 79]

Mister's plot-advancing words are not heard, but are presented in a series of dumb-show vignettes. Furthermore, Mister does not speak at the concluding celebration; his Jaques-like self-exclusion from the reunion (which requires him to occupy a separate frame, as he stands alone in the middle of a sunset-stained field) evokes instead the American icon of isolate and taciturn masculinity, withdrawing from the din of female society to light out for the territories or ride off into that sunset. Walker's own character, Albert, is unremarkable at the conclusion of the novel because he belongs—he is absorbed into the buzzing, blooming female community.
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Shug begins by replacing conventional terminology for the female genitals, shifting emphasis from the lack or hole of patriarchal representation to a “little button” that “git hotter and hotter and then it melt”—a mixed metaphor from the point of view of the dominant discursive practice, which of course has only recently begun to acknowledge the existence of buttons that behave in this way. The consequence is immediately clear to Celie: if the important organ is not a hole but a button, then stimulation can come from such androgynous appendages as “finger and tongue,” and intercourse is not only insufficient but unnecessary for female sexual pleasure. Shug’s redefinition of the word “virgin” in this passage is equally threatening to patriarchal control over women’s bodies, in that it places priority not on penetration, and thus on the social mechanism for guaranteeing ownership of children, but on enjoyment, making the woman’s own response the index of her “experience” (p. 79). In the development of the story, Celie, along with the appositely named Squeak, acquires a voice and becomes a producer of meanings, while Shug and Sofia, articulate all along, increase their authority until it is evident that female voices have the power to dismantle hierarchical oppositions that ultimately oppress everyone and to create a new order in which timeworn theories about male and female “natures” vanish because they are useless for describing the qualities of people. Near the conclusion, the transformed Mr. ——, now happily calling himself only Albert, tries to explain his admiration for Shug: “To tell the truth, Shug act more manly than most men. I mean she upright, honest. Speak her mind and the devil take the hindmost.” But Celie takes issue with these categories. “Harpo not like this, I tell him. You not like this. What Shug got is womanly it seem like to me. Specially since she and Sofia the ones that got it.” Albert continues to worry the problem—“Sofia and Shug not like men . . . but they not like women either”—until Celie makes the relevant distinction: “You mean they not like you or me.” (p. 236) On the basis of such redrawn lines the entire immediate society reconstitutes itself, in the manner of Shakespearean romance, around a central couple. This couple is not only black, it is aging and lesbian. Yet clearly Celie and Shug are intended to suggest the
nucleus of a new and self-sustaining society: the triply marginalized become center and source.

III

The issue of voice—and especially of voice as a way of appropriating discourse and remaking meanings—returns this discussion to the writer whom Walker has repeatedly claimed as her “foremother,” Zora Neale Hurston, and to Their Eyes Were Watching God, in which the protagonist, Janie, discovers her voice and uses it to assert her own authority in a world full of speechmakers and tale-tellers. Janie’s voice, first muted by the pathos of her Nanny’s stories, emerges to threaten her first husband but then is subsumed to the “big voice” of Jody Starks until the moment of the insult that by the logic of the narrative kills him: “Humph! Talkin’ bout me lookin’ old! When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life” (p. 123).

Janie’s relationship with Tea Cake reinforces the association of language and sexual potency—“He done taught me de maiden language all over,” Janie tells her best friend Phoeby (p. 173)—and finally raises her to a level of equality that is to some extent both sexual and narrative, for in “the muck,” the fertile Florida bottomland where Tea Cake takes her, “she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest” (p. 200).

“The muck” in this novel plays the role of a “green world” in Shakespearean romance: it is a magical, somehow “more natural” realm that shapes both the outside world and the conclusion toward which the narrative tends. Tea Cake describes it in unmistakably pastoral terms: “Folks don’t do nothin’ down dere but make money and fun and foolishness” (p. 192), and the narrator elaborates: “Pianos living three lifetimes in one. Blues made and used right on the spot. Dancing, fighting, singing, crying, laughing, winning and losing love every hour. Work all day for money, fight all night for love. The rich black earth clinging to bodies and biting the skin like ants”(p. 197). Precisely because “the muck” is a “green world,” however, it represents a transitory stage in Janie’s passage toward achieving her own identity, a passage that the romance paradigm further implies will lead to achieving the basis for a reconstituted
society. The heterosexual idyll with Tea Cake is thus not the culmination of the plot but a transformative moment that leads to the culmination. In other words, the theme of finding a voice does not supplement the heterosexual romance plot of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* but supplants that plot, just as the story of Janie’s telling her story frames and in framing displaces the ostensible main story of Janie’s quest for heterosexual love.

The action of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* begins with a homecoming, but against the evidence the Eatonville residents eagerly collect—the “overhalls” that Janie wears and her manifestly mateless state—this is a triumphal return. The whole of the ensuing narrative aims to establish that triumph, displayed especially in the significance of Janie’s ability to tell her own story. The capacity to tell this story rests on two conditions. The first is that there be a story to tell, a plot, a completed action in Aristotle’s terms. But because a completed action is one that has ended, the quest for heterosexual love must terminate in order to be appropriated by discourse, and the only terminus that will preserve the fulfillment of the quest while imposing closure on it is the apparently tragic one of Tea Cake’s death. Rather paradoxically, then, the killing of Tea Cake becomes part of the larger comic impetus that establishes Janie’s voice and gives him a fictional “life” that she can possess wholly: “Of course he wasn’t dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace” (p. 286).

The appropriative move goes further. In appropriating Tea Cake in the form of her story, Janie brings the “horizons” so important in the development of her aspirations—she undertook her “journey to the horizons in search of people” (p. 138)—back to Eatonville, the black community that functions as the locus of black storytelling in this novel. “Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin sit heah in mah house and live by comparisons,” she tells Phoeby

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Miriam Amihai has pointed out to me that Hurston’s female hero, who not only wears the pants (and very proletarian pants at that) but looks sexy in them (to the Eatonville onlookers Janie looks as if she has two grapefruits in her hip pockets), doubtless inspired Walker to base Celie’s economic independence on the cottage industry that produces unisex but provocatively sexual trousers.
The Other Side of the Story

(p. 284), but the closing image of the narrative affirms that the horizon has come with her: “She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see” (p. 286). And this looping, “netting” action also contains the novel, which begins at the end of Janie’s story and comes back to it, drawing the whole “life” of the plot in its meshes.

The central action of Their Eyes Were Watching God is thus Janie’s telling of her story, and the climax of this central action is the pulling in of the horizon, a dramatization of the fact of closure that establishes Janie as an accomplished storyteller. If one condition of this action is a completed story that can be told, a second condition is an audience capable of hearing it. Janie’s privileged listener is her best friend, Phoeby, whose credentials as audience are her empathy and equality with the narrator, to the point of being at least potentially interchangeable with her. “You can tell ‘em what Ah say if you wants to,” Janie assures her. “Dat’s just the same as me ‘cause mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf” (p. 17). The image implies that the relation of female narrator to female audience is nonhegemonic and reversible. But like so many of the images associated with storytelling in this book it is also highly sexual, suggesting further that the narratorial couple composed of Janie and Phoeby has displaced the heterosexual couple as the desired union that motivates and finally terminates the action. The commencement of Janie’s “conscious life” dates from a revelation in which the spectacle of bees fertilizing the blossoms of a pear tree led to the conclusion “So this was a marriage!” (pp. 23–24), but Janie’s subsequent three marriages somewhat miraculously produce no children. The real fertilization seems to occur when Janie combines with Phoeby to give birth to her story after she has returned to Eatonville, the town of tale-tellers. This story addresses the values governing her community, its misplaced emphasis on possession, status, class, and sexual hierarchy, all legacies of its founder Jody Starks. In narrating, Janie moves to

"Fishing is also one of the activities asserting Janie’s egalitarian relation to Tea Cake: Phoeby announces at the end of Janie’s story, “Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin’ wid him after this” (p. 284). And fishing itself is an exemplary pastoral activity. For “piscatory” as a subgenre of pastoral, see Poggioli, p. 7.

"A point underscored in the version developed by The Color Purple, where the consequence of heterosexual activity for women is almost invariably “getting big.”"
renovate the society that she has rejoined, transforming it at last into a female speech community embracing the playful, nonhierarchical values that constitute the lesson she draws from her experience—an Edenville.  

Walker clearly picks up on these implications in her own revision of Their Eyes Were Watching God. In The Color Purple a homosexual romance plot replaces the heterosexual one, with the appetizing Tea Cake (“So you sweet as all dat?” Janie inquires when she learns his name [p. 149]) transformed into Celie’s lover and mentor Sugar Avery. Moreover, the drama of Celie’s epistolary self-creation revolves around the discovery of a female audience that finally fulfills the ideal of co-responsence. Celie initially writes to God as an alternative to speech. The process of finding her speaking voice is a process of finding her audience, first in Sofia, then in Shug, but she is not able to deliver the Old Testament-style curse that in turn delivers her from bondage until she is assured of the existence of Nettie, her ideal audience, who also tells a story leading to identical conclusions about the nature of spiritual and social reality—as if her sister’s tongue were in her mouth.

IV

Thus in Their Eyes Were Watching God, Hurston’s ostensible frame tale decenters what it appears to comprehend, shifting the story of heterosexual love to the margin even as it contains and completes that story. It behaves, that is, like the frame or margin that Jacques Derrida has discussed under the rubric of the parergon. Conventionally extrinsic, supplementary, or inessential to that which it borders, a parergon is simultaneously intrinsic and essential, inasmuch as the priority of the center depends entirely on the oppositional

31 Eatonville is a real community, founded by (among others) Hurston’s own father; see Alice Walker, “Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View,” in In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1983), p. 85. But even the names of real towns are sometimes the product of just this sort of highly literary slippage. For example Pysht, in the state of Washington, was christened out of a postal clerk’s misreading. The town was to have been called Psyche, and to have been companion to a town that did receive its intended name, Sappho. Minority communities, like minority texts, appear particularly subject to mainstream misreadings.
relation of center to margin. Yet to call attention to this margin is to destroy its marginality, for the parergon is what it is by virtue of "disappearing, sinking in, obliterating itself, dissolving just as it expends its greatest energy." To call attention to the margin is to render it no longer marginal and consequently to collapse the center in a general unsettling of oppositional hierarchies.

This turning of attention to what is not conventionally in the center—most obviously to conventionally marginal characters—is of course a characteristic activity of conventionally marginal writers: black women, for example. And of course to give voice to marginality—to let the margins speak—is to mix a metaphor intolerably, for a speaking margin cannot be a margin at all and in fact threatens to marginalize what has hitherto been perceived as the center. Or, rather, such a phenomenon tends to destabilize precisely the hierarchical oppositions that give margin and center clearly demarcated meanings.

Such hierarchical oppositions are the basis of traditional genres. In the paradigm of the Shakespearean romance they guarantee the distinction between major and minor characters, between dominant and peripheral lines of action, and between classes, sexes, and generations—all of which may become confused during the development of the plot but must be sorted out so as to fall into place in a conclusion that at once reconciles apparently conflicting elements and confirms their inherent differences: the ritual marriage. This conclusion makes its model of unity the patriarchal family and its model of continuity the order of succession in which power passes from father to son. Distinctions of class, gender, and generation coincide with distinctions between major and minor, dominant and peripheral, on the levels of character and plot. These distinctions


33Philip Brian Harper aligns the parergonal "posing of the margin as essential" with the decentering of the postmodern subject and suggests "the supposed postmodernist 'decentering of the subject' [is] merely a symptom of the recentering of subjectivities which have traditionally been relegated to the borders—of texts, of works of art in general, of societies—as mere parerga to the dominant subjectivity whose hegemony itself has so long skewed our view of the relation between center and margin." "The Recentered Subject: Pale Fire and the Question of Marginality" (Unpublished paper, Cornell University), pp. 2–3.
are unalterable, a premise that becomes the basis for both the tragic and the comic aspects of pastoral tragicomedy.

But these distinctions are destabilized in Their Eyes Were Watching God and The Color Purple, novels that Rachel Blau DuPlessis has identified as employing a “narrative strategy of the multiple individual,” in which the female hero “encompasses opposites and can represent both sociological debate and a psychic interplay between boundaries and boundlessness” and eventually “fuses with a complex and contradictory group; her power is articulated in and continued through a community that is formed in direct answer to the claims of love and romance.” 34 Not only is the traditional heterosexual couple supplanted as emphasis of the action, but it is replaced by interchangeable versions of the same-sex couple: mother and daughter, sisters, lovers, narrator and audience. The roles of the characters have become slippery and permeable.

Perhaps most significant, the mother-daughter relation is continuously transformed. Dianne Sadoff observes the extent to which both novels suppress or overtly repudiate traditional mothering—Janie hates her Nanny and produces a story with Phoeby rather than children in any of her three marriages; Celie loses her children, and their foster-mother subsequently dies—and suggests that such suppressions or repudiations “question anxiety-free matrilineage.” 35 The issue is particularly important in light of the role of literary foremother that Walker has assigned to Hurston, and Sadoff uses what she perceives as an unacknowledged theme of failed mothering within the two novels to bolster readings that discern “ruptures” within Their Eyes and “scars of concealment” within The Color Purple, with its imbedded claims of unproblematic descent from the mother- tale.

But the preceding discussion of the two novels might suggest, rather, that the issue is less one of the failure of mothering than of a redefinition, in which mothering is presented as a wholly relational activity. In The Color Purple children create mothers by circulating among women who in other contexts are daughters, sisters, friends, wives, and lovers. Celie’s children pass first to Corrine, then to Nettie. Squeak takes on Sofia’s children when Sofia goes to jail, and

34DuPlessis, Writing beyond the Ending, p. 142.
Sofia later mothers Squeak's daughter Suzie Q and—with exasperated acknowledgment that even unwilling nurture can engender filial affection—the white girl Eleanor Jane. And Celie's love affair with Shug begins from an erotic exchange that is poignantly figured as a mutual reparenting: "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" (p. 109).

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, mothering is intimately allied with production of a powerful narrative that enjoins a world view and a series of prescriptions about how to live. Nanny's story of Janie's lineage, which begins from what appears to be a piece of maternal wisdom, "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (p. 29), concludes with the demand that Janie marry the man who, in Hurston's wonderfully apt conflation of social class and phallic power, owns "de onliest organ in town" (p. 41). While Janie ultimately repudiates this version of her story as unlivable, her repudiation is explicitly dissociated from an agonistic Oedipal model in which the child kills the parental figure in order to revise this parent's master narrative. If the narrative logic by which an ensuing action is figured as a consequent action indicates that Janie is responsible for the death of two husbands, the same logic makes Nanny's death the consequence of her own story, for Nanny's acknowledgement that she is dying, "Put me down easy, Janie, Ah'm a cracked plate," occurs at the end of the narrative in which she coerces Janie into marrying Logan Killicks (p. 37). In replacing Nanny's story about sexual oppression with an alternative story about sexual love that paradoxically enables her to live independently and alone—"by comparisons" (p. 284)—Janie in effect takes on the maternal function, in company of course with her listener, Phoeby. She becomes author of her own story, both source and subject of maternal wisdom, in effect giving birth to herself.

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36This is of course the (masculine) model of influence introduced by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

37Narrative tends to insinuate more causal links than we are allowed to infer from sequences in daily life; to construe "the king died and then the queen died" as "the queen died because the king had died" is both an informal fallacy and an orthodox reader response that makes a plot out of mere sequence. In narrative, post hoc is likely to be propter hoc, unless the causal interpretation is expressly ruled out.
Clearly in Walker’s and Hurston’s novels mothers are no guar­
antors of succession or legitimacy, and mothering is a slippery and
even reversible relationship. Furthermore, Walker has suggested
that the same sort of observation holds for literary motherhood
among black women writers. Indeed, in her essay “In Search of Our
Mothers’ Gardens” she elides the distinction between biological and
literary motherhood in the same way that in The Color Purple she
elides the distinction between mothering and other, conventionally
contrary female functions. Mothers are artists, artistic precursors are
mothers, and in either case the mother’s creation may be inseparable
from the daughter’s: perhaps Phillis Wheatley’s mother “herself was
a poet—though only her daughter’s name is signed to the poems
we know.”^ This collaborative model of maternal influence suggests
a subversively extended family romance, in which the mother as
co-creator is simultaneously parent of the writer and her lover or
spouse. Most disruptive for the absolute status of all these role
definitions, she may even become the daughter of her own daughter.
Du Plessis has suggested that in fulfilling or completing her biolog­
ical mother’s work the twentieth-century woman writer is inclined
to dramatize her mother’s situation, recreating her mother as a char­
acter and revising her destiny by reinscribing it in the fiction.39 Alice
Walker, who gave birth to her stepmother when she created Celie,40
also uses The Color Purple to revise her relation to the woman she
has elsewhere called her foremother. Gates points out that the pho­
tograph of Hurston parenthetically described in Walker’s essay
“Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View”—“(I
have a photograph of her in pants, boots, and broadbrim that was
given to me by her brother, Everette. She has her foot up on the
running board of a car—presumably hers, and bright red—and looks
racy)”—is in essence the photograph of Shug Avery that fascinates

^Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” in Walker, In Search of Our Mothers’
Gardens, p. 243.
39DuPlessis, Writing beyond the Ending, pp. 93–94.
40She has captioned a photograph in The Alice Walker Calendar for 1986 “My mother,
‘Miss Mary,’ my stepmother Rachel (‘Celie’), and my mother’s mother Nettie” (New
York: Harvest/HBJ, 1985), n.p. And Gates cites a personal letter from Walker re­
porting, “All names in Purple are family or Eatonton, Georgia, community names.
. . . The germ for Celie is Rachel, my stepmother: she of the poem ‘Burial’ in Revo­
lutionary Petunias” (Signifying, p. 280, n. 14).
Celie in *The Color Purple*: "I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like somethin tail. She grinnin with her foot on somebody motocar" (p. 16). In recreating her relationship to Hurston as a reciprocal and interactive one, Walker dramatizes Hurston’s literary role as the undoer of inessential and divisive hierarchies. In casting Hurston as Shug, she revises theories of influence as they apply to black women.

What is finally at stake in readings of the two novels is the centrality of the paradigms and values informing what mainstream Western society chooses to call literature. To invoke these paradigms and values as if they exhausted the possibilities, and to castigate Walker and Hurston for failure to realize them, is to judge according to assumptions rather like those of the white community that Sofia ridicules in *The Color Purple*. It is like maintaining that slavery failed because blacks didn’t have sense enough to handle it. In this chapter I have suggested, on the contrary, that by treating the marginal as central and thereby unsettling the hierarchical relations that structure “mainstream” genres, Walker and Hurston manage to handle very well the conventions that threaten to enslave them in a system of representation not of their own making.