Cross-Cultural Visions in African American Modernism

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Private Voice and Buddhist Enlightenment in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*

Nineteenth-century American writers such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman expressed their profound interest in Eastern philosophies and religions. When Emerson declared, “The Buddhist . . . is a Transcendentalist” (*Complete Essays* 91–92), he meant that Buddhism, unlike a religion, is a philosophy that emphasizes the primacy of the spiritual and transcendental over the material and empirical. Zen Buddhism in particular, unlike other sects in the same religion, teaches its believer how to achieve Buddhahood within the self, a precept that sounds much like the one given by Emerson, who urges the reader to think not for the sake of accomplishing things, but for the sake of realizing one’s own world. The achievement of godhead within rather than its discovery elsewhere is echoed by Thoreau and Whitman as well. *Walden* shows the reader how to attain one’s enlightenment through natural objects like trees, birds, and sands. In “Song of Myself” Whitman admonishes the reader: “Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself” (64).¹

In twentieth-century American literature, the influences of Eastern thought and poetics on Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams in the 1910s and 1920s are well known,² as is the fascination of mid-century writers of the Beat Movement—such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder—with Zen Buddhism, as noted earlier. Since the late 1950s, not only have a number of African American writers, including Richard Wright, Charles Johnson, Ishmael Reed, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison, all paid their homage to African philosophies and religions, but they have also expressed their strong interest in cross-culturalism. Among these writers, Wright, as shown in the previous chapter, was deeply influenced by Zen philosophy and aesthetics.
Although much contemporary African American literature focuses, as does Wright's later work, on African American cultural traditions, it is also drawn from, or meant to reflect on, cross-cultural and multicultural traditions and ideologies. *The Color Purple* (1982) serves as a prime example of such a text. While the novel reads distinctly contemporary because it concerns the gender conflicts and racial issues of African American tradition, as well as of more recent American cultural dialogue, it also reflects as strongly the philosophical and religious traditions of other cultures. In particular, I would like to demonstrate that, in establishing herself, the central character Celie acquires her own voice through Buddhist enlightenment. Walker has recently stated publicly that she considers herself a Buddhist, but it is unknown whether she had, in fact, an affinity with Buddhist thought when she wrote the novel over two decades ago. My primary aim is not to try to find the sources for Walker's interest in Buddhism but, through intertextuality, inter-authorality, and cross-culturalism, to show a reading of the Buddhist enlightenment behind Celie's self-creation, the novel's central theme.

1.

At the outset of her story, Celie is deprived of her own voice. Finding herself at a loss, she is unable to express herself. *The Color Purple* begins with a letter to God so that He may provide her with voice:

Dear God,

I am fourteen years old. I am I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me. (1)

Although she is able to hear the public voice that describes her pregnancy, for example, she does not understand what that description means; nor is she able to express her feelings about the traumatic event that has befallen her: “A girl at church say,” Celie writes to God, “you git big if you bleed every month. I don't bleed no more” (6).

Despite her repeated appeal to God, He has failed to grant her a voice. As late as the midpoint of the story, when a series of other disasters have taken place, she continues to complain:

Dear God,

…………………………………………………………………………

…………………………………………………………………………
One of the difficulties Celie faces in her quest for voice is the concept of God she has inherited from Christian doctrine: God and Christ are both male figures. To dramatize the dilemma of the gulf between His voice and hers, Walker develops a dialectic discourse. Celie's sister Nettie, who works for a Christian missionary stationed in the Olinka community in Africa, continues to communicate with Celie in the language Nettie has learned. Whereas Nettie's language is stilted, wordy, and lengthy, Celie's is ungrammatical, terse, and choppy. But Celie's language, like Huck Finn's, is vernacular and sounds more natural than Nettie's. Just as Huck's language subverts Tom's, so does Celie's “outsmart” Nettie's, which smacks of patriarchy, sexism, and “political correctness.”

The most important characteristic of Celie's language is poetry. Even at the outset of the story, the reader is impressed that Celie has the potential to become a poet: she is indeed endowed with poetic inspiration just as is the young boy whose “tongue's use sleeping” in Whitman's “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.” In In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (1983) Walker discusses Celie's prototype: those ancestral “grand mothers and mothers of ours . . . not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. . . . Perhaps she sang . . . perhaps she wove the most stunning mats or told the most ingenious stories of all the village storytellers. Perhaps she was herself a poet—though only her daughter's name is signed to the poems we know” (233–43). A young African American's potential to become a poet is also reminiscent of the young Richard Wright's lyricism, vividly described in Black Boy. As mentioned earlier, one of Wright's haiku, “Don't they make you sad, / Those wild geese winging southward, / O lonely scarecrow?” (Haiku 146) originates from a passage in Black Boy: “There were the echoes of nostalgia I heard in the crying strings of wild geese winging south against a bleak, autumn sky” (Black Boy 14).

The most serious obstacle that stands in the way of Celie's search for voice is the fact that the public voice, the language of society, is dominated by males. As the story begins, Celie is forced to identify the public voice with the voice of Alphonso, who she supposes is her father but who turns out to be her stepfather. Since God fails to answer her letters, she cannot help accepting Alphonso's voice as the voice of powerful, earthly authority. She is
always at the mercy of Alphonso’s language and action: during his first rape of Celie, Alphonso starts to choke her, “saying You better shut up and git used to it” (2). When her mother asks her who her newborn baby’s father is, she gives an ambiguous reply: “I say God took it. He took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this one too, if he can” (3). In Celie’s voice, God and Alphonso, her baby’s father, are merged into the almighty patriarchal figure.

As the story unfolds, however, Walker’s use of patriarchal discourse becomes less direct and pervasive and at times reads as subtle. For example, Albert’s family, and his father in particular, are portrayed as conventional and conservative. Albert’s father tries to forbid Albert to marry the flamboyant blues singer Shug Avery for fear that her unknown paternity and her erotic behavior will ruin the family reputation. Albert’s brother Tobias also tries to dissuade Albert from living with Shug, which would set up a rivalry between Celie and Shug, who is also known as “Queen Honeybee,” a patriarchal, anti-feminist put-down. Such episodes suggest that even a man like Albert falls victim to the oppressive patriarchal family system as does Celie. Besides Shug, another blues singer, Mary Agnes, also challenges the patriarchal, racist convention. Mary creates her own songs:

They calls me yellow  
like yellow be my name

They calls me yellow  
like yellow be my name

But if yellow is a name  
Why ain’t black the same

Well, if I say Hey black girl  
Lord, she try to ruin my game (104)

By denying her nickname and the categorization of color and sexual attraction made up by a racist society, Mary is able to express herself through her own voice.

Celie learns from Shug and Mary that the first step in creating her own voice is to make male language female. If Celie’s “text, her creation of selfhood, is to proceed,” Lindsay Tucker points out, “the male text of the deity must be overturned and rewritten in female terms” (84). All the male figures Celie is associated with in the beginning are called by their generic male titles:
It is little wonder that Nellie tries to make Celie acquainted with the deity of the Olinka. In her letter to Celie, Nettie writes, “We know a roofleaf is not Jesus Christ, but in its own humble way, is it not God? So there we sat, Celie, face to face with the Olinka God. And Celie, I was so tired and sleepy and full of chicken and groundnut stew, my ears ringing with song, that all that Joseph said made perfect sense to me. I wonder what you will make of all this?” (160).

This letter clearly indicates that Nettie understands the Olinka God to be male. In this connection it would be significant to contrast the Olinka God with the Akan God, the divinity of the Ashanti in West Africa, a central theme of Wright’s *Black Power.* The Akan God, as Wright learned, is female, and, as he reveals in expounding its history and doctrine, the religion has over the centuries supported the survival of their life and culture. If Nettie’s letter about the Olinka intimates some forms of female oppression in that society, Wright’s observation vindicates the absence of such oppression in the Ashanti.

2.

Celie soon realizes that for her to acquire a voice of her own, her own body must first be treated as a precious being. As Albert’s wife, she is treated as if she were a commodity like a cow, and her body is used like a toilet. She has no pleasure but pain in their sexual relations, and Albert always demands that she keep his house clean and take care of his unruly children. “He beat me like he beat the children,” Celie complains. “Cept he don’t never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood” (23).

Regarding her body as a piece of wood is equating a living being with a material thing. Buddhism teaches its believer that the soul exists not only in human beings but all living beings. At this point of her self-creation and search for voice, she says to herself, “Celie, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man” (23).

A few scenes later Walker, through Celie’s mouth, gives a parable of Buddhist enlightenment with a pair of lucid signifiers, a living tree and a table:

> Everybody say how good I is to Mr. —— children. I be good to them. But I don’t feel nothing for them. Patting Harpo back not even like pat-
Her quest for voice and identity reaches its apogee when Shug Avery discusses with her the meaning of God. Shug says, “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” (202). Upon hearing this definition of God, Celie applies it to her own life: “She say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed” (203).

Shug’s epiphany that God resides inside Celie and inside everybody else is akin to Emersonian and Whitmanesque transcendentalism. But Shug’s further observation that only those who search for God inside them find it and Celie’s knowledge that cutting a living tree is the same as cutting her arm suggest that Walker’s belief bears a strong resemblance to Zen Buddhism. Zen teaches that divinity exists in nature only if the person is intuitively conscious of divinity in the self. To Emerson and Whitman, on the other hand, God exists in nature regardless of whether the person is capable of such intuition.

When Celie asks Shug whether God is male or female, Shug answers: “Yeah, It. God ain’t a he or a she, but a It.” To Celie’s persistence, “But what do it look like?” Shug says, “Don’t look like nothing. . . . It ain’t a picture show. It ain’t something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. . . . 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” (202–3). Shug’s use of the word nothing is remindful of the Zen doctrine of mu and satori. This state of mind is absolutely free of materialistic and egotistic thought and emotion; it is so completely free that such a consciousness corresponds to that of nature. This state of mind is what postmodern psychoanalysts like Lacan call the unconscious and the real, the truth that is neither imaginary nor symbolizable.

Shug’s and Celie’s Zen-like enlightenment also has a striking affinity with what Wright calls in Black Power “his [the African’s] primal outlook upon life” (266). Just as enlightened Celie sees herself and trees, Wright saw in African life a closer relationship between human beings and nature than he did between human beings and their social and political environment. In his haiku, as well as in Black Power, Wright takes great pains to express a Zen-like enlightenment in which human beings must learn the conscious or unconscious truth of human existence from the spirit of nature.
A belief in the primacy of the spirit of nature over the strife of humanity is what Walker and Wright share. This primal vision of life, which has its genesis in *Black Boy* and its further pronouncement in much of Wright’s later work, does underlie Walker’s characterization of Celie and Shug in *The Color Purple*. In Wright’s “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937), as pointed out earlier, one of the theoretical principles calls for the African American writer to explore universal humanism. Wright’s explanation of the Ashanti convinced him that the defense of African culture meant renewal of Africans’ faith in themselves. He realized that African culture was based upon universal human values—such as awe of nature, family kinship and love, faith in religion, and honor—that had made African survival possible.

Before discussing Ashanti culture in *Black Power*, Wright quotes a passage from Edmund Husserl’s *Ideas* that suggests that the world of nature is pre-eminent over the scientific vision of that world, that intuition is pre-eminent over knowledge in the search for truth. Similarly, Wright’s interpretation of African philosophy and Walker’s demonstration of that philosophy in *The Color Purple* both recall a teaching in Zen Buddhism. Zen’s emphasis on self-enlightenment is indeed reflected in Walker’s characterization of Celie in *The Color Purple*. At the climactic moment of the novel Shug, like a Zen master, gives her disciple Celie an admonition on the doctrine of *mu*: “You can just relax, go with everything that’s going” (203). With a *senryu*-like sense of humor, Shug continues her admonition: “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it” (203). “The color purple,” as a free signifier, may mean many things, but I would like to read it as Zen enlightenment.

3.

If Shug played the role of a Zen master, she would urge Celie to be self-reliant and find her own path in search of truth and happiness. And this is indeed what happens in the story after Shug gives Celie a lesson on the color purple. In the tradition of Zen instruction the attainment of *satori* is as practical as it is in actual human life, as noted earlier in my discussion of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. The young Bassui, a celebrated Zen priest in medieval Japan, asked his master, “What’s the highway to self-elevation?” The master replied, “It’s *never stop.*” Bassui failed to understand what the master meant: the master told him, “It’s just underneath your standpoint” (Ando 164). The master’s point about *never stop* is reminiscent of the spirit’s reply to Whitman in “Song of Myself”: 
This day before dawn I ascended a hill and look'd at the crowded heaven. And I said to my spirit *When we become the enfolders of those orbs, and the pleasure and knowledge of every thing in them, shall we be fill'd and satisfied then?* And my spirit said, *No, we but level that lift to pass and continue beyond.* (64)

The Zen master’s pronouncement also recalls the last passage in “Song of Myself”: “If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles. / . . . / . . . / . . . / Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, / Missing me one place search another” (68).

Celie describes Shug’s admonition of self-enlightenment and self-reliance with sorrow and stoicism:

> Dearest Nettie,  
>     Sometimes I think Shug never loved me. I stand looking at my naked self in the looking glass. What would she love? I ask myself. My hair is short and kinky because I don’t straighten it anymore. . . . Nothing young and fresh. My heart must be young and fresh though, it feel like it blooming blood.  
>     I talk to myself a lot, standing in front the mirror. Celie, I say, happiness was just a trick in your case. Just cause you never had any before Shug, you thought it was time to have some, and that it was gon last. Even thought you had the trees with you. The whole earth. The stars. But look at you. When Shug left, happiness desert. (266)

This letter is reminiscent of Emerson’s poem “Give All to Love,” which is an admonition that stoical self-reliance must be kept alive underneath one’s passion: “Heartily know / When half-gods go, / The gods arrive” (*Poems* 65). As long as one relies on others, “half-gods,” one cannot attain enlightenment.

Celie’s self-creation, inspired by self-enlightenment, depends upon annihilating the patriarchal and racist view of African American women and accepting her own body as beautiful and worthy of love and happiness. Although Celie, perhaps mistakenly, thinks Shug’s desertion of her is a sign of lack of love, she feels her heart is still “young and fresh” and is “blooming blood” (266). Earlier in the story Shug has taught Celie that when Celie felt beautiful and happy, that was exactly what God felt: “God love all them feelings. That’s some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves ’em you enjoys ’em a lot more” (203). Such a revelation has also made Celie realize that a female body is a beautiful reflection of nature and divinity. She has
learned from Nettie that both the Olinka and Christians have a worldview just opposite to Celie’s newly experienced outlook. Like the Ashanti, Celie is convinced that human beings are not the center of the universe. Nettie, on the other hand, writes: “I think Africans are very much like white people back home, in that they think they are the center of the universe and that everything that is done is done for them. The Olinka definitely hold this view. And so they naturally thought the road being built was for them” (174). *Black Power* demonstrated that the Ashanti were conscious of the unimportance of human beings in the universe. Celie thus shares her worldview with the Ashanti as Nettie does not.

Celite’s change of heart about human life has now led to a more tolerant attitude toward others. Celie no longer hates Albert as she used to, for she now realizes that he is genuinely in love with Shug, who used to love him as well. Celie also observes that, like herself, he listens to her as if he were a disciple receiving admonition from a Zen master:

> Plus, look like he trying to make something out of himself. I don’t mean just that he work and he clean up after himself and he appreciate some of the things God was playful enough to make. I mean when you talk to him now he really listen, and one time, out of nowhere in the conversation us was having, he said Celie, I’m satisfied this the first time I ever lived on Earth as a *natural* man. It feel like a *new* experience. (267; emphasis added)

Albert’s recognition of himself being “a natural man” suggests that, like a true Buddhist, he adheres more to the spirit of nature than to the egotism of humanity. His life as “a new experience” suggests that it is based on Zen doctrine. Zen is not considered a religion which teaches the follower to have faith in a monolithic deity. Like Thoreauvian transcendentalism, Zen teaches one a way of life completely different from what one has been conditioned to lead.

As her worldview changes in the course of her story, Celie also learns under Shug’s guidance that one must experience sexuality with the spirit of nature. The consummation of love she experiences with Shug is portrayed as a natural maternal experience of love: both make love not only without guilt and repression but without egotism and oppression. Indeed, annihilation of egotism and oppression is one of the cardinal principles of life taught in Buddhism. “Then,” Celie says to God, “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” (118). Evoking “heaven,” the supreme spirit of
nature, or nirvana, Celie tells God, “I feel Shug’s big tits sorta flop over my arms like suds. It feel like heaven is what it feel like, not like sleeping with Mr. —— at all” (119). Referring to the sexual relationship between Celie and Shug, Linda Abbandonato argues that sexuality is able to “resist the ideological laws that operate through its very terrain, to survive and flourish in ‘aberrant’ forms despite the cultural imposition of a norm.” She also considers this kind of sexuality “highly disruptive potential” (1112). In the context of the novel, however, the sexuality of Celie and Shug seems far from “aberrant” and disruptive; rather it reads natural and peaceful.

Not only is this sexuality depicted as an innate maternal act of love, but it also reads as an ideal act of love between two individuals. It is concentric, as opposed to phallocentric: Shug and, in particular, Celie have both been victimized by patriarchal and racist conventions. Even Shug, a seemingly liberated woman, has fallen victim to the anti-feminist prejudice which Albert’s family perpetuates. Most importantly, these two individuals’ sexuality is consensual: their motive is an enactment of genuine, requited love. Their sexuality transcends all elements of materialistic desire in society that stand in the way of the search for love and happiness. Shug as a fictional character is not used for what Henry James calls ficelle, a functional character.\(^\text{10}\) She appears in the story not merely as what Lindsey Tucker calls “an image, an objectification of the female to counter the victim-figures” (85).\(^\text{11}\) Like Celie, whose heart “feel like it blooming blood” (266) and whose “arm would bleed” if she “cut a tree” (203), Shug also feels her heart pounding and feels her arm would bleed if she cut a live tree: both share the spirit of nature, upon which Buddhist doctrine is based.

In this novel Celie’s and Shug’s sexuality, drawn with Zen-like spontaneity and naturalness, is diametrically opposed to that fundamentally flawed human interaction: the rape of a woman by a man, which destroys love and tenderness, the most universal and precious human values. Some readers may call the two women’s sexuality lesbian. Julia Kristeva has observed that “to believe that one ‘is a woman’ is almost as absurd and obscurantist as to believe that one ‘is a man’” (qtd. in Abbandonato 1113). I agree with Kristeva and would like to say further that to call Celie and Shug lesbians is to grossly misread their sexual relationship. In *The Color Purple* they are hito or ningen, human beings, as they are called in Buddhist texts.