



Women, Letters and the Empire

The role of the epistolary narrative in Alice Walker's
The Color Purple

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INTRODUCTION

When I started working on that which eventually became this thesis, I did not know which author, or which literary work, I wanted to write about. I only knew *what* I wanted to write about: I wanted to write about narratology, and more specifically, about epistolary narratology. It was not surprising that I ended up working with the novel that first roused my interest in the letter as a narrative agent: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. I first read it in an introductory class on American Literature, and one of the things that stuck with me was the way that the letters worked as a narrative voice. Simply put, reading *The Color Purple* opened my eyes to the difference in how a reader perceives the narrative of a person who is unconsciously telling her story in letters to someone else, and a first person narrator telling her story in a “regular” novel, in a voice that might be genuine but in a situation where the telling of the story is never explained. The fascination stayed after I reached the end of the last page, and closed the book. When I started working on my thesis, I did so with the knowledge that I wanted to learn more about how epistolary narrative works, and what makes it different from other kinds of first person narration – for there is unquestionably a difference, in the way that they work on the page and in the way that they give insight into the mind of the storyteller.

While much criticism of *The Color Purple* acknowledges the importance of the letter form and the way it portrays the growth of the protagonist from a voiceless and cowed child who is not acknowledged as a person into an independent woman who controls her life the way she controls the narrative of the novel, there seems to be little work that investigates the role of Walker's epistolary narrative in any depth. The only narratological scrutiny of the letters that I have found was in *The Signifying Monkey*, where Henry Louis Gates Jr. makes the case for Walker's narrative revision of Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by her use of free indirect discourse. However, his focus is on the revision of previous texts within the African-American tradition, and he does not discuss the epistolary form at large. When I began planning this thesis, I wanted to fill this gap for the sake of my own curiosity. I was not so much interested in the historical implications of the form or the aspect of minority literature, but these things changed during the course of the work. The existing theory on epistolary narrative is often centred on older and more “conventional” epistolary works; the most recent work discussed in any of the studies I read was Saul Bellow's *Herzog*,

which was published nearly twenty years before *The Color Purple* and in which the letters only make up one part of the narrative voice¹. *The Color Purple* comes from a radically different background than the novels in the studies I read, and this background proved to be essential to understanding how it uses the letter form. I found that Alice Walker to great extents deviates from the epistolary formula in both the construction of the story as well as the rhetoric of Celie's letters, and it seems that she was doing this to mirror to the act of reclaiming the marginalised identity that is illustrated in Celie's use not of standard English, but written dialect. When I started working on my thesis, I set out to discover what role the letter narrative plays in *The Color Purple*. Towards the end, it seemed that the more appropriate question was what *The Color Purple* does to the letter narrative.

The Color Purple is a novel in which the language of the letters look so much like spoken language that the reader is easily duped into believing that she is hearing the voice of the narrator, rather than reading her writing. Alice Walker's remarkable approach to the letter novel doubles the effect that has often been claimed to be the greatest appeal of the form: letter narrative is often read as the direct and unfiltered thoughts of a character, as a view into their minds without the interfering presence of the narrator, be this narrator a third-person entity or an older and retrospective first-person narrator. *The Color Purple* is written mostly in a distinctive rural black dialect that is so close to the speech of the narrator that her letters read like spoken language. The major development that happens in the novel is Celie finding a voice outside of her letters, but when the story is over, the letters remain as evidence of this growth – and it is in the letters that Celie survives until she can raise her voice. The oral flavour of the narrative voice foregrounds the major theme of the story, namely that of Celie speaking.

Celie does not only speak, she defiantly speaks her dialect, and *writes* her dialect in what later comes out as a refusal to use standard English or speak “properly”. Her identity is her voice, and to change her voice would be to surrender to those who define the standard language – in this case, the white majority in interwar America. The revision of the colonial language is no new sight in post-colonial literature, but *The Color Purple* takes it a step further: Celie is not only a narrator revising the English language, but a writer revising the very genre to which her story belongs. The argument of this thesis is that Alice Walker set out

¹ Altman 34-43, Bray 132-137.

to revise the epistolary novel in Celie's and Nettie's letters, and that she does so from her position as an African-American woman writer concerned with the destructive effects of European colonialism that linger even in the present.

The first chapter of this thesis is an introduction to the novel and the theoretical approach I have chosen. I will start with a summary of *The Color Purple* and present the novel's major thematic points as well as its reception and impact. The second part of the chapter introduces the theory on which this thesis is based, starting with the historical place of the epistolary novel and its particular relationship to female characters and woman writers; critics have suggested that the epistolary form was particularly fitted to the changes in the gender ideology of the period when the epistolary novel thrived. The chapter ends with a brief overview of the narratological aspects of letter narrative, focusing on the particular qualities of the letter as a narrative agent, as well as the differences between diary narrative and letter narrative, a line that is blurred more than usual in *The Color Purple*.

The second chapter is focused on the role that the letter narrative plays in *The Color Purple*. It investigates the relationship between *The Color Purple* and the epistolary novel of the eighteenth century, particularly Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, for the purpose of illustrating how Alice Walker intentionally avoided the conventions of the “classical” period of the epistolary novel. The second part of this chapter focuses on theoretical studies of epistolary narrative. It discusses *The Color Purple* in the light of two different studies, one on the epistolary novel and one on the diary narrative, and finds that Celie's letters corresponds remarkably little with the typical traits found in either of the two. The chapter ends with a reading of Nettie's letters in the light of the “traditional” epistolary novel, which shows that she writes her letters in a style that is far closer to the typical epistolary rhetoric than Celie's are.

The third chapter is about colonialism in *The Color Purple*, which is frequently related to racism and sexism. It maps racial and gendered problems, which are remarkably prevalent in the novel; in Celie's world, almost all problematic relationships have their source not in personalities and ambitions that clash, but in prejudices based on gender and race. Both these conditions are brought together in Celie, who in the early parts of her story describes herself and her work on Albert's farm with a language that evokes images of slavery. The chapter is also about the overt presence of European colonialism in Nettie's tale. This chapter discusses

the narrative voice in *The Color Purple* in light of post-colonial theory, and argues that the differences between Celie's and Nettie's letters are part of Walker's commentary on the colonial ideology.

A note on terminology

While most people understand “Epistolary novel” as a novel made up of letters, the term is often used as somewhat of an umbrella term for a variety of different narratives like letters and diary entries, or rarer forms like newspaper clippings, blog entries and forum posts. As such, I prefer to use the term “letter novel” when talking about the form that *The Color Purple* has taken. Because narrative in letters (or diary entries and the like) are often found in works that are not considered epistolary, I will use the word “letter narrative” when discussing the qualities inherent to the letter as an independent narrative agent. Likewise, I will talk about “diary narrative”. Finally, this thesis makes extensive use of H. P. Abbot's study on the diary narrative, and Abbot uses the term “diary mode” about a certain kind of narrative that he detects in diary novels and in letter novels where one voice dominates the narrative completely, and is so self-focused that the addressee exists only as an excuse for the letter-writer to be writing their life at all (Goethe's *Werther* and the like).

The use of letters as an agent of storytelling is – of course – a matter of narrative technique, which theoretically is independent of the content and focus of any text. It is highly questionable if the epistolary novel can be considered a “genre” merely because of its narrative peculiarities, and a more correct usage would likely be to consider it a “form”. When I make use of the word “genre” to describe the epistolary novel, I do so with reference to the historical position of the form, which is the epistolary novel of eighteenth century Britain². The letter novel was particularly affluent in this period, and it was uniform enough for scholars to make generalisations on the content of it – and for Alice Walker to write a modern novel with enough references to it to be considered a revision.

² Janet G. Altman, who authored the main theoretical study on the epistolary novel used in this thesis, defines it as such in her conclusion: “The epistolary novel, which flourished in the second half of the eighteenth century, developed recognizable conventions and a thematic cohesiveness that its predecessor, the memoir novel, did not have. Further historical, narratological, and semiotic work is necessary before we could offer more than partial explanations for this cohesiveness. But the simple conclusion should stand: in contrast to the autobiographical or memoir novel, which is definable essentially in terms of a narrative technique, letter fiction is describable as a genre and invites exploration as such” (Altman 200).

1. INTRODUCTION TO *THE COLOR PURPLE* AND THE THEORY OF THE EPISTOLARY NOVEL

This chapter will introduce *The Color Purple* in its historical and cultural context, as well as in terms of some basic theoretical works related to the epistolary form – both the historical context, as well as the narrative peculiarities. The aim of the chapter is to lay the foundation on which the rest of the thesis is built.

The Color Purple

The Color Purple was published in 1982, and became the work that propelled Alice Walker into the position of one of the best known contemporary African-American writers. It was a success with both critics and the reading public, and it earned Walker the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1983. The novel has been adapted to film (1985, directed by Steven Spielberg) and to the less common form of musical theatre (2004), both highly successful. It was met with criticism in some African-American quarters, however, particularly for what many saw as an overly negative portrayal of black men that played into racist stereotypes (particularly that of the black rapist)³, and for a heroine that was criticised for being unrealistically weak in the face of her misfortunes. Some also accused Walker of having done little more than to write a novel that was a modern, African-American imitation of the sentimental novels of the eighteenth century.

The Color Purple appears to be, at least to the casually reading eye, an untraditional autobiography or a twisted Bildungsroman. It consists of letters written by Celie and Nettie, two sisters living in the rural south of the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. Celie starts writing letters at the age of fourteen, and keeps on writing for four decades, ending sometime in the nineteen forties, when her journey through life and love, and Nettie's journey through the world, reunite them in their childhood home. Their letters are not of the sort we see in the classical epistolary novels, however: Celie's letters are initially

³ Jacqueline Bobo remarks that the controversy surrounding the novel rose with the release of the film adaptation, because the novel (written by a black woman) and the film (directed by a white man) conflated in the public mind, and the film – naturally – reached a much wider audience (332). She also remarks that black women at large received the film more positively than black men, and suggests that the attacks on *The Color Purple* had their source in the nineteen sixties race ideology where “black men and women must maintain unity (...) According to proscription, the woman must be silent and let the man speak for the race” (338).

addressed to God, and later to Nettie. As far as the reader is aware, no recipient ever read the letters from Celie; they are at least never answered in the kind that one expects from epistolary communication.

The novel begins as Celie stops talking and starts writing, after she has been raped by her father and threatened that she “better not never tell nobody but god”. Celie’s letters to God soberly recounts the death of her mentally ill mother, the two children she has by her father and which he has taken from her and sold to strangers. They tell of her being taken out of school due to her pregnancies until she is taken away from her home by her marriage to Albert (who Celie only refers to as “Mr. _____”), a widower with four children who needs someone to keep his house. This marriage is the start of the main bulk of the novel’s story. Celie parts with the only member of her family that ever loved her unconditionally, her scholarly younger sister Nettie. The early years of the marriage seems to be little more than a continuation of the story of abuse that Celie suffered in her childhood home, but her life starts changing as she meets two women who defy everything she has learned about womanhood: Albert's daughter-in-law Sofia, and his former lover, the blues singer Shug Avery.

Sofia, whose brash and outspoken attitude inspires both jealousy and admiration in Celie, came to be who she is from a background remarkably similar to Celie's: she and her sisters had to fight against the men in their family as they grew up, and learned to stand on their own and to hit back against men who hit them first. She is a contrast to Celie in a number of ways, the most obvious one being her open unwillingness to bend to the will of her husband, Albert’s oldest son Harpo. Harpo is a victim of his father’s bad example as a husband; he loves children and enjoys domestic work normally associated with women, but knows no other image of marriage than the one where a husband beats and dominates his wife. Sofia eventually leaves him, and soon after takes a fall from a fight not even she can win when she gets into a fistfight with the town’s mayor for “sassing” his wife. Sofia is imprisoned and brutally beaten, and her life is saved only by her accepting to work as the mayor’s maid. Her strength in the face of men who seek to oppress her is also what throws her into a decade of modern slavery.

Shug Avery is, much like Sofia, a woman who will not let men tell her what to do, be they her father or her husband or even her devoted lover. But where Sofia is free because she will not let men dominate her physically, Shug is spiritually liberated. She goes her own ways

without paying regard to the judgements of others, and she reveals to Celie how weak her husband can be in the face of a woman that he loves, but cannot control. As Celie befriends Shug, and later also becomes her lover, she finds unconditional love for the first time since her sister left her. With this love, with her body and her sexuality reclaimed and with the ability to finally speak about the things she only could write about before, Celie finally starts healing, and learns to see that her life is her own to make.

The story turns again as Shug and Celie discover that Albert has been stealing Celie's mail; they find years' worth of letters from Nettie hidden in his room. Nettie found Celie's stolen children with Samuel and Corrine, a missionary couple preparing to go to Africa, and followed them to their mission among a tribe called the Olinka. A great number of letters blindly written – Nettie never got any answers and correctly surmises that Albert is interfering in her correspondence – tells about her daily life in Africa, the life of the Olinka, her family and her work among them. When she confesses her relation to Celie's children to Corrine and Samuel, she learns the truth about her family: the man she and Celie knew as their father had married their widowed mother after their real father – a successful businessman – was lynched just before Nettie's birth. The discovery of these letters, the truth about the man who raped her and the injustice done to her by her husband is what makes Celie finally leave Albert. She goes to live with Shug in Memphis, where she starts sewing trousers for the people she loves and soon turns it into a thriving business when she discovers how in demand they are from both men and women. She continues writing letters, but her recipient is no longer God, but Nettie.

Celie is finally free from the men who held her down, but is faced with the final hurdle on the road to full self-fulfilment when the free-spirited Shug leaves her for a fling with a nineteen-year old boy. As Celie comes to face that she cannot force others to love her, so does the steady letters now arriving from Nettie tell about how the mission must acknowledge that not even Christ can save the Olinka from the clutches of colonialism: the village is destroyed to make place for a rubber plantation, and Nettie and her family – she was married to Samuel after Corrine died – cannot help them any longer. As the novel comes to a close, Celie comes to peace with herself as she reconciles with Albert and finds an unlikely friend in him, Shug returns to her, and she is reunited with Nettie and her children after having been separated from them for three decades.

The novel depicts Celie's liberation from mental slavery in terms of two essential turning points. The first is when she tells Shug about her (step)father's rape of her, thus breaking the taboo that necessitated the letters to God. With an audience that can listen, Celie can finally start healing – a process helped by her discovery of the letters from Nettie. Nettie's letters bring the truth that finally breaks Celie away from her obedience to father, husband and God: Pa is not their Pa. Celie's children are not the result of incest. When this final piece is in place, Celie's view of herself has shifted so far that she can speak up against Albert, and leave him to start a life on her own. Significantly, both these events are acts of speaking – first of speaking a terrible truth that had been stifled for decades, then of speaking up against those that never considered her to be a presence worth listening to. When Celie finally confronts Albert, she does it with a power that reduces him to stuttering, unable to counter her accusations. The very core of *The Color Purple* is the idea to give a voice to the voiceless, and the thesis of the novel seems to be that healing comes from being heard: Celie can be saved because her voice is recorded in letters, and of the antagonistic characters in the novel, it is those that are willing to listen who are also capable of reforming.

The colour purple is the novel's recurring symbol of female suffering and overcoming, but the title of the novel refers to a specific episode in which Shug and Celie debate their views of God, and where Shug – following the novel's pattern of questioning and rejecting models of authority – convinces Celie that “God” is not about a judgemental white man with a beard, but about seeing joy and goodness in all of Creation. In Shug's words, “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it” (196). This spiritual realignment from the Christian God to a pantheistic worship of “Creation” was a personal journey for Walker in the process of writing the novel, and it is mirrored in similar discoveries in several other characters, including the Christian missionaries.

The novel is highly political and fairly unsubtle about its opinions on race and gender. It is a woman's story, and it celebrates the feminine sphere of living. Community is formed around female activities; quilting becomes a symbol of female friendship, and the novel has a remarkable amount of women rearing each other's children (Nettie and Corrine raise Celie's, Celie raises Annie Julia's, Mary Agnes and Odessa raise Sofia's, Sofia raises Mary Agnes' and Miss Millie's). The traditionally feminine occupations are in fact what saves the men in the novel from their misery: love, family and the comfort of caring for others are the powers that

save and reform abusive men who have been brought up into an understanding of the world were the woman, and what the woman does, are seen as inferior to the male actions and values. The ideal man is Jack (Sofia's brother in law) who always cares for children and stands by his wife. Albert and Harpo are reformed when they embrace “feminine” tasks like caring for children and elders (Harpo) and sewing, cooking and keeping house (Albert). There is also a preoccupation with female sexuality. Celie must learn to love the world and to love *herself* before she can stop depending on others for her own happiness. Celie's learns to love herself as she discovers her ability to sexual pleasure in Shug's acceptance and love – the initially unrequited love for Shug brings Celie more anguish than the abuse of her husband, and these feelings also spark the first glimpses of Celie as a sexual being, years before the first time she and Shug make love⁴.

The problems of race are not as harmonically resolved, although the novel hints that the next generation might bring conciliation⁵. However, the novel firmly establishes that the victim can also be a perpetrator: Shug and Albert's treatment of Annie Julia and in the beginning also of Celie is evidence of this, as is Nettie, Samuel and Corrine's discovery that the Olinka consider them to be no better than the white missionaries that were there before them.

The Historical Influence of the Epistolary Novel

Until the recent revolutions in technology and the flow of information, the private letter was the most common and the most accessible form of written narrative. Other kinds of writing was largely reserved for those who were professionally occupied with regular publications. The writing of fiction takes training and talent, and the publication of it was and largely still is a matter of market demand and the approval of individual publishers and editors. The letter

⁴ Walker is more open about the connection between female sexuality and emancipation in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), a novel about female genital cutting in which the main character is Tashi, Celie's daughter-in-law. In this novel, FGC is explained as men's fear of women finding sexual pleasure with each other, or through masturbation.

⁵ Henrietta and Reynolds Stanley seem to find friendship in the very scene in which their mothers fall apart, as Sofia finally tells Eleanor Jane that she never was a mother to her. Miss Eleanor Jane starts seeing things from Sofia's side after this, and starts speaking out against her family. That this is a task for the future is clear in Celie's unusually polemic observation of how it looks like the toddler is “raping” Henrietta's leg, yet the normally rude and mean-spirited Henrietta claims to “not mind” company of the child. This scene is ambivalent, however, and one can read the compliancy of the normally rude Henrietta as a demonstration of how not even she dares challenge the white authority.

might appear trivial compared the print of the mass media or the works included in literary canons, but it is a form of writing that was much more accessible than the production of a newspaper editorial, far less a novel. Anyone who can write and read and afford the stamps can also write and mail a letter, and the writing of letters was an activity so universal that their authenticity are rarely questioned except in cases of known censorship. This contributed to the realism often perceived in epistolary fiction: the “artless” language made it easier to believe that these words had not been filtered by a narrator (Perry 13). This perceived authenticity likely contributed to the popularity of the letter as public reading after the Reformation, because it did not violate the Puritan scepticism towards the falsehood of fiction (Perry x), and because the personal nature of many letters was such that it opened for the soul-searching and introspection highly valued in the Puritan theology (Perry 65). The Enlightenment and the spread of Puritanism in Britain created a demand for “truth” in art, for which the letter was a particularly well-suited form: there was a new demand for realism, and the simple, everyday language of the private letter was something that the reading public could recognise from their own lives – an important departure from the flowery tales of the romances of the previous times (Perry 75). Letter literature was not only used for fiction and entertainment; as Ruth Perry notes, the letter form was “a perfect frame for travel reports or essays of any length and on any subject in this new age which so valued collecting information. (Indeed, the earliest newspapers were no more than batches of informative letters published together)” (Perry 7). Letters were also the substance of one of the peculiarities of the time, namely the letter manuals that constructed difficult situations and then offered solutions to them, instructing their readers in proper behaviour and correct moral response. Symptomatic of the developing novel was also a secondary mission of many letter manuals: they intentionally made use of emotional subtleties to train the “sensibilities” of their audience (Perry 88).

Letter fiction has been known since Antiquity, and examples certainly existed before the rise of the novel. The epistolary novel first appears alongside the publication of letters for informative and didactic purposes, and it would soon become a major figure in the literature of the Enlightenment. The novel of letters is an inescapable part of many national literary canons, which may be seen in the critics that consider *Pamela* to be the first true novel in Britain, the effect *Les Lettres Portugaises* had on the French writers of the seventeenth century, or the space that *Die Leiden des Jungen Werther* occupies in the German literary canon (not forgetting its part in fuelling Goethe's rise as a literary name). The novel of letters

sits comfortably in many early turning points in the history of narrative fiction. It is impossible to ignore the presence of the letter novel in the history of western literature, although its contribution to the art of writing and to the development of the novel as a genre has traditionally been considered to be of little notice. It was long discarded as a “primitive” form of the novel after it went out of fashion in the early nineteenth century (Bray 1), but the twentieth century saw the form taken up and used in various ways as an inroad into the mind of the characters (see, for example, Altman 3). The last decades of the twentieth century in particular saw a number of female revisions of the genre⁶.

Women and the Epistolary Novel

One peculiar aspect of the classical novel of letters is its connection to women. The British literary canon has its most infamous examples as *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, both penned by Samuel Richardson in the voice of young women who, deprived of other means of confident communication, write letters telling about their desperate situations. Across the channel, the Portuguese Nun was set as an example for other women writers to follow⁷, which contributed to the evolution of what K. A. Jensen calls “The Epistolary Woman”. This is a figure she detects in a particular mode of women’s writing in France, and which she believes was a particularly dangerous manner of representing the feminine mind. The letters of the suffering Nun were largely believed to be genuine, on the argument that the passion they express could only have been penned by a woman (Jensen XIII). Literary theorists – inevitably male – posed the doxa that while men studied language, women attained it subconsciously; lacking the training to write proper literature and being victims of a biology that was believed to limit them to naïve emotion, their natural talent was for the kind of writing in which primitive passion was preferable – in love letters (Jensen 10-11). The trend was supported by editors and publishers who would publish letter collections that deliberately framed female letters differently than male ones (Jensen 169, note 3). According to Jensen, this had the ultimate effect of turning the letter novel into an inviting trap for women writers: the only acceptably feminine mode of writing was the love letter, preferably that of an “anguished and abandoned” woman desperately writing to the lover who had left her, and it was not considered on a par with the male forms of writing:

⁶ See Campbell 1995, 332 and Salsini 2001, 352.

⁷ Ironically, *Les Lettres Portugaises* is today widely assumed to be the fictional work of a male author, Gabriel-Joseph de Lavergne.

the feminine love letter was seen as anything *but* literate. Its designation as a feminine art, however, helped to glamorize its marginal status and encourage women to engage in a cultural practice to which they were purportedly naturally suited and that, of course, supported male literary and sexual hegemony. (Jensen 35)

Jensen's claim is that the letter novel became a female way of writing a form that was invented by men, in a period when publication and editing of literature was controlled entirely by men. She believes that this happened as a reaction to the salon culture of the Enlightenment France, where women participated along with men and where the idea of *galanterie* came to question a culture where love and marriage were institutions in which women acted as possessions traded between men (Jensen 3)⁸. "The Epistolary Woman", eventually established as the norm of the French woman writer, became the antithesis of the "sexually dominant, literary empowered" woman writer of the salon culture (Jensen 21). Now, the ideal image of the writing woman is one who has been seduced and abandoned by her lover, and who is writing her unfulfilled emotions. Female suffering became a virtue, and pain something positive: it might persuade the lover to come back (Jensen 27). Women's letters which did not conform to this were often not published until centuries later, if at all (Jensen 177, note 62). Women's place in public writing became locked to the form of the personal letter, an influence that likely was felt on the other side of the channel; Ruth Perry notes on the popularity of epistolary fiction in pre-Richardson Britain that "epistolary fiction flourished in England long before Richardson wrote *Pamela*. Some of it was original, some translated from the French" (Perry xi).

Perry's *Women, Letters and the Novel* is a historical study of the growth of the novel in England, particularly the epistolary novel. She is interested in the social status of women at the time, and charts how industrialisation brought on women's gradual loss of economic independence and social influence, and ultimately reduced them to an infantile legal status, where their survival was fully dependent on men (the father or the husband), where any

⁸ "*galanterie* positions the lover as passionately, yet respectfully, in thrall to a virtuous and inaccessible mistress. She must constantly protect her virtue and honor and demand ever more signs of her lover's obedience before indicating, through discreet indirection, that he has pleased her and may continue to love her. The emphasis of *galanterie* is on a spiritual love that transcends carnal desire and is in harmony with honor and reason. *Galanterie* grants women power and independence and can be seen as their attempt to rewrite the traditional relationship between the sexes (...) a pregnancy out of wedlock could destroy her reputation and good name, while any pregnancy always threatened a woman's health and indeed her very life. *Galanterie*, then, was proposed as a way for women to engage in love without physical and moral danger" (Jensen 13).

possessions they brought into marriage fell to their husbands, where they received no education, and where the separation of workplace and home excluded them from influence on the dawning capitalist economy. The wife was the servant of the husband, and even their bodies – their chastity – were seen as male possessions. There was a shift in how woman's place in society was seen: where the nun had once been an independent, scholarly and respected figure in the Middle Ages, she was now an object of pity because she was not married, and became a staple figure of repressed female passion in the novels of the time (Perry 40-42). Perry notes that the development of the novel corresponded with a period when women – particularly in the growing middle class – were reduced to a state where they were expected to stay away from public life and devote themselves to their families, living on the mercy of their fathers and, as they grew older, their husbands (Perry 137). The women of this social group were often deprived of meaningful activities, brought up with the instruction that their foremost ambition was to find love in marriage, and that their most important occupation was to please men (Perry 149). Perry believes that this was a contribution to the popularity of the novel, as the focus on the individual and its scrutiny of thought and psychology in turn fostered a focus on emotion, which ultimately made for fiction more easily focused on the idea of romantic love as the fulfilment of a woman's life: “The epistolary novel was the perfect vehicle for stories of romantic love because its very format demanded a subject matter in which emotional states were most prominent” (Perry 138). She also shows that the motivation of the letter-writers in epistolary fiction is a passive response to emotional tension, which gives the genre a tendency to value emotion over plot (Perry 94).

Perry also discusses the novel's focus on women's sexuality, and the implications this had for the epistolary form. If women's value to society had been reduced to their sexuality, then the same process was seen in the novels: “if a novel had a male protagonist it could be about almost any sort of subject and circumstance, but if it was about a woman, it was almost certain about her relation to a man; nothing else was germane” (Perry 138). The epistolary form foregrounded subjective experience and emotions, which made it a perfect vessel for romantic fantasy, but this had an insidious flip side: the connection between consciousness and sex. In a medium where a person exists solely as the words they put onto paper, and where these words are assumed by the reader to be the unguarded view into the writer's mind, the conflict around which the story centres is often not physical, but mental. Seduction is sexual persuasion, and many epistolary novels seem to suggest that a woman who opens her

mind to a man, in due time will open her body to him as well (Perry 132)⁹. Perry connects this to the “proper” courtship rituals of the day, when young men and women interacted only within strict social rules – to the point where a young man writing a letter directly to a woman was displaying unpardonable frankness (Perry 133). Ultimately, the letter becomes a representation of the self that cannot physically be with the addressee, and violation of the confidence placed in the letter works as a metaphorical rape; the spiritual penetration forebodes the physical (Perry 131).

The lives of Pamela and Clarissa were written in a time when women were not expected to enjoy sex (another considerable change from Chaucer and the literature of the Renaissance which acknowledged women as sexual beings, for good and bad) (Perry 151). Romantic love played a big part in the tradition of epistolary fiction and certainly inspired unrealistic expectations and outright foolish choices in some of its female readers, a consequence that many writers of the time were aware of and made use of in the very novels they wrote (Perry 155). Many epistolary novels of the time seem to have intentionally catered to the desire for romantic and/or sexual fantasies in their readers. Indeed, the very construction of epistolary novels of the time mimicked the sexual expectations of the plot (Perry 158), and many writers emphasised the voyeuristic aspect of a novel made up of letters – many epistolary novels include a third figure standing outside the main correspondence, acting as a confidante to one or both involved and acting as an in-story stand-in for the reader, and even in the examples that lack it, you will frequently find that the letters are “always being forged, intercepted, or even just read, legitimately, by a third person” (Perry 162).

Women's lives were disproportionately well represented in epistolary fiction, even as the majority of writers and primary consumers of it were men (Perry 19). Epistolary fiction was also more available for women writers than other genres, and like in France, women were believed to be particularly suited for the emotional, unpretentious letter form (Perry 76). – “Letters were the one sort of writing women were supposed to be able to do well. Literate women wrote letters even in the days when they put pen to paper for no other reason, and so the public was ready to buy volumes of letters published under a woman's name” (Perry 68)¹⁰.

⁹ Taken to the lengths where the writing desk becomes a symbol of chastity as seen in *Les Liaisons dangereuse*, see Perry 134.

¹⁰“It is important to remember that women did not dominate this new sort of fiction although they wrote a good deal of it. The most authoritative checklist of pre-Richardson epistolary fiction includes seventy-two

Perry and Jensen both show that the epistolary novel might have given women writers a “respectable” manner of being published in a period when their social position was otherwise inhibited, but that it also was both a result of, and perpetrator in maintaining, a view of the women's place in society that was limiting the ways in which it was appropriate for them to express themselves, and what kind of female writing was judged worthy of being published. Both show that the writing of novels, and epistolary novels in particular, might have been empowering to women; but they also agree that the ideology apparent in this novel was perpetuating the ruling view of women of the day. This was the simple lesson that persists even in contemporary stories: the most important part of any woman's life is her love of a man.

Epistolary Narratology

When the ideal of fiction turned away from the romance and towards the novel, it was with a demand for realism and a focus on the individual person rather than her actions. *Moll Flanders* represents a revolution in the English literary history because of Defoe's intimate portrayal of contemporary London, where his characters traverse the same streets as his readers – a stark difference to the classical romance, which would typically be set in the far past and exotic locations. When the novel of letters first appeared, the letter was filling a psychological function that the plain prose narrative had not yet developed any adequate techniques for. Written in first person and presumed to be so intimate that the writer hid nothing from the recipient, the private letter was a unique opportunity to gain access to the mind of another person; Perry remarks that third-person fiction often would insert letters written in moments of emotional turmoil under the assumption that no heterodiegetic narrator could satisfyingly convey the raw emotion of the characters in moments of passion (Perry 95). The letter narrative is a first person narrative, but the temporal aspect makes it work on fundamentally different principles than the traditional I-story, and there are a number of associations with the form that often will colour how many readers approaches it. To analyse epistolary narratives, it is necessary to turn to more specific studies of how the intermediary act of writing affects the way the message passes from the narrator to the reader.

volumes written by men and fifty-four volumes written by women (...) sixty-eight of those 200 or so early epistolary works have no known authors and it is often thought that respectable women took refuge behind the label ‘anonymous’” (Perry 17).

The term “epistolary novel” is traditionally associated with the oldest and most well-known version of the form: fiction told through letters. However, a number of closely related narrative strategies are often listed within the genre, such as diaries and newspaper clippings, and more recently: blog entries, e-mails and entries posted on internet message boards. These have several narrative features in common: they consist of documents that are explicitly known to be *written down*, not narrated directly. Unlike autobiography (real or fictional), these documents are written down in intervals, often in the middle of the action where the writer does not know the outcome of events; epistolary novels are rarely retrospective, but rather focused on the present. Epistolary novels tell stories, but the only action taking place on the diegetic level is writing and reading.

Writing the Novel of Letters

Even with a definition that is not always set, there are a number of attributes found in the private letter that are *not* found in the diary or the blog entry, and which in many cases will influence the narrator(s) of the novel of letters in ways that sets it apart from the other varieties of fragmented, personal writing. In *Epistolary: Approaches to a Form*, Janet G. Altman argues that there are a number of narrative and thematic structures particularly salient in letter novels, and their presence can be credited to how the letter works in communicating between people: “In numerous instances the basic formal and functional characteristics of the letter, far from being merely ornamental, significantly influences the way meaning is consciously and unconsciously constructed by writers and readers of epistolary works” (Altman 4). She singles out a number of contradictory motifs of narrative in letters, relating to the very nature of the letter as mode of communication.

In her study, Altman defines epistolarity by whether or not meaning is created through characteristics inherent in the letter. She finds many examples of epistolary stories where the letters are not merely the vessels of passing on words, but where the existence of these letters as physical objects and devices of communication, and the implications they make about the relationship between the writer and her recipient(s), are a significant part of how the reader will interpret the story. Perry also notes the emphasis on separation and the longing for reunion that is so frequently displayed in epistolary novels; frequently the relationship in question is either unwanted by some outside force, or outright illicit. The privacy of the letter was not only a convention, but a necessity; isolation, whether physical or social, drove the

lonely letter-writer into putting her feelings down on paper. If the correspondence was secret, it was frequently the case that these illegal letters were not be limited to mere conventions of storytelling, but became objects that altered the flow of the plot as they were stolen or otherwise lost and read by the wrong eyes (Perry 99); both Perry and Altman note how the physical letters often are treated as replacements for the absent writer in epistolary novels. As mentioned above, Perry believes that the lack of direct communication made the fictional letter-writers connect not directly with the person they are writing to, but with a personal projection of this person based on memory and interpretation of their letters. More than that: through writing about their love, the epistolary letter-writer are “seducing themselves” (Perry 123); the act of writing about their love for another person is in fact a major factor in keeping this love alive.

Letter Fiction and Diary Fiction

When the working definition of “epistolary fiction” is “fiction narrated through the form of documents”, there are obviously further distinctions to be made within the genre – a newspaper article will never be written in the same style and with the same intent as a private letter between husband and wife. *The Color Purple* is sometimes described as a diary novel, which is not surprising given the conditions under which Celie writes her letters to God in particular, but also to Nettie – they are in part written without expecting answers, and at least in part written without expecting to be even *read*. Celie does not think of her letters as anything else than just that, as written documents saying the things she wishes to tell the recipients she cannot speak to in person. But regardless of Celie’s presumed thoughts on the topic, common sense and studies of the two styles in fiction suggest that there are differences between the letter addressed to others, however intimate, and the diary addressed to the self, however unconscious. To draw a line separating the two, however, has proven difficult. H. P. Abbott has one stance:

The letter strategy and the diary strategy are so similar that what can be said analytically about the one is frequently transferable to the other (...) the difference, then, between a study of epistolary fiction and a study of diary fiction derives not from a strict semantic distinction between 'letter' versus 'diary', but from a difference in focus or emphasis. (Abbott 10)

As he commences to discuss what he perceives to be the peculiarities of the diary style, Abbott includes novels usually regarded as “traditionally” epistolary (that is, letter novels)

because of the above cited similarity of form, but difference in focus: the issue is not the the existence of the addressee, but “the degree to which the addressee is given an independent life and an active textual role in the work”(Abbot 10).¹¹ He illustrates by way of *Die Leiden des Jungen Werther*, where Werther's main correspondent, Wilhelm, is “unchanging, represented for us entirely through Werther's words, he is easily conceived as Werther's other self, the solid rational self that Werther seeks to override” (Altman 11). Altman (to whose study on epistolary narrative Abbott refers) considers the Wilhelm-type figure to be a “passive confidant” whose only purpose in the narrative is to receive information, to be told things that she cannot witness (Altman 50); she is, in Altman's words, “the sounding board to the hero's sentiments” (Altman 51)¹². Lorna Martens says on the same example: “If the recipient in an epistolary novel is a confidant, an alter ego whose personality does not affect the tone or content of the letter writer's utterances, the fictive reader all but disappears” (Martens 7). Altman is also quite clear on the differences in mentality behind a diarist writing for herself, and the letter writer who reaches out to her addressee:

The particular *you* whose constant appearances distinguishes letter discourse from other written discourse (memoir, diary, rhetoric) is an image of the addressee who is elsewhere. Memory and expectation keep the addressee present to the imagination of the writer. (Altman 140)

But it is not only on the level of the psychological state of the letter-writer/narrator that the existence of this other person is a crucial influence: the very rhetoric of letters – as opposed to diaries – relies on the presence of another person, and a unique, tangible relationship between the writer and the reader¹³.

Abbott defines the unclear relationship between the letter and the diary novel by terminology and association: “The term 'diary' evokes an intensity of privacy, cloistering,

¹¹ He also remarks that fictive diarists often will address their entries to “friend, lover, God, the diary itself” (Abbot 10).

¹² Altman makes the comparison between the part of the addressee in the epistolary novel and the *confidante* of classical drama, and notes that the diary novel, in this regard, is analogous to the theatrical monologue (84 n.).

¹³ “Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the epistolary language is the extent to which it is colored by not one but two persons and by the specific relationship existing between them. (...) Those works that we perceive as being the most “epistolary,” as cultivating the letter form most fully, are those in which the *I-you* relationship shapes the language used, and in which *I* becomes defined relative to the *you* whom he addresses” (Altman 118).

isolation, that the term 'letter' does not" (Abbot 11). A similar observation is made by Martens, who remarks that the diary evokes "not only a certain form but also a certain content, a particular context or specific accompanying circumstances, and an implicit purpose or legitimation" (Martens 25). As a counterpoint, what Abbott defines as the "diary mode" can be found in writing not defined as diaries or journals. Gerald Prince writes,

it is not a superficial journal shape which particularizes a diary novel. I say this not only because a third-person narration respecting that convention, or a fictional log, a ledger, a cashbook, would not constitute a diary novel, but also because some well known diary novels do not adopt to that exterior shape. (477)

Prince defines the diary novel as "a first first-person novel in which the narrator is a protagonist in the events recorded"¹⁴ (477), and in which the time of narration (*Erzählzeit*) is fragmented, where events are narrated as they happen rather than in retrospective (478). The lack of an addressee is no does not distinguish the diary novel from the letter novel, as there are many examples of diarists writing with one or more readers in mind (478)¹⁵. Prince concludes that "what makes a diary novel unlike any other kind of narrative is, rather, a theme – or more precisely, a complex of themes and motifs" (479). That theme is the very keeping of a diary, and all that is associated with it:

The origin of the diary, the circumstances of its publication, its physical shape, its dialectical relationship with the narrator: some or all of these problems, as well as others related to them (...) are re-examined to a greater or lesser extent in every work considered to be a diary novel (480)

Most of Abbot's trademarks of diary fiction connect to the isolated individual consciousness that struggles with itself; he defines the difference between epistolary and diary fiction not as a matter of intention, but as a matter of the overall effect of the narrative:

the strategic decision that the author makes is not the decision to have periodic entries in letter form or in diary form, but the decision to create cumulatively the effect of a consciousness thrown back on its own resources, abetted only by its pen. This effect is enabled by a proportional suppression of other writing, writing by narrators or correspondences (11)

¹⁴ "One could add further that some first-person novels which exhibit the superficial features of a journal and come fully equipped with dates as section headings are often not thought of as diary novels, because they lack certain traits distinctive of the genre: good examples would be *Wuthering Heights* or Malraux' *Les Conquérants*" (Prince 477).

¹⁵ Abbott makes a similar point (see Abbott 10), and Martens lists several examples (see Martens 7).

This, in turn, is remarkably close to what Perry argues in her discussion on how isolation (social or emotional) affects the writers in the novel of letters. She claims that the process of writing letters well might be an act of communication, but that the recipient in the letter-writer's mind is not so much the person that she has been separated from for days, months or years, but often a fantasy stand-in made up of the writer's imagination as she has read the letters she in turn received, and her memories of this person the last time they were together: "This accounts for the uncanny tenacity of epistolary relationships, because events in the imagination often have stronger hold on a person than do physical experiences in the material world" (Perry 100). Writers in epistolary novels might write *to* another person, but they will often write *for* themselves, to settle their own feelings and find their own catharsis.

The isolation of the characters is essential to the epistolary formula because it throws the characters back into themselves, to probe their own thoughts, their own feelings (...) what the characters enact in their seclusion is at the core of the epistolary novel: a self-conscious and self-perpetuating process of emotional self-examination which gains momentum and ultimately becomes more important than communicating with anyone outside the room in which one sits alone writing letters. (Perry 117)

It has been hard to determine what exactly constitutes a diary, what defines diary fiction, where the line goes between diary fiction and letter fiction and how these two genres differ from each other. The closest consensus from the scholars discussed here is that letter fiction often is intensely focused on the existence of a reader, while diary fiction in its purest form is focused on the isolation of the self, and the self-consciousness in writing something that is directed at this self rather than recipients that cannot be reached with the spoken word. When dealing with two forms that are at once very much alike and essentially different from each other, it is likely wise to consider which expectations and prejudices the *reader* of such fiction brings along as she approaches the text. At the very least, the wish to make the distinction suggests that this distinction carries a meaning, however trivial it might appear in most examples.

Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston

When discussing the narrative of *The Color Purple*, it is hard to avoid Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), a work that Walker has described with the words "there is no book more important to me than this one" (Hurston, cover). Hurston was a writer and anthropologist who was active during the Harlem Renaissance. She slipped into obscurity

after her death, but has been discovered again and recognised as one of the most important African-American writers of the twentieth century. The spiritual kinship that Walker feels to Hurston is profoundly felt in *The Color Purple*. It is also a subject in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a study of African-American literature which is focused on revisions within the tradition. He dedicates a chapter to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and one to *The Color Purple*, with the focus on their narrative similarities.

Their Eyes Were Watching God tells the story about Janie, raised by her grandmother in “the white folks' yard”. Janie experiences an intense sexual awakening at the age of sixteen, but bends to the will of her grandmother's and marries Logan Killicks, an elderly man who is kind and rich enough to keep Janie “safe”, unlike her mother who drifted off into men and alcohol after the rape from which Janie was conceived. Janie is full of unfulfilled dreams, and soon leaves Logan for the charismatic and driven Joe Starks, who takes her to the black town of Eatonville. Joe becomes the major force behind the town's construction, the owner of its only store, and its mayor. His rise in status becomes a personal fall for Janie, who finds herself silenced and repressed by her well-spoken and jealous husband who confines her to his store and the honour of being the mayor's wife. Joe grows ill and dies after Janie speaks up against him and publicly humiliates him. Janie inherits his store and meets the last man of the story: Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods, a penniless drifter who falls in love with her and takes her away to work in the Everglades. It is with Tea Cake that Janie finds the equal love that she dreamed of as a teenager, and the freedom that was denied her by her first two husbands. But happiness is not lasting with Tea Cake either: he and Jane barely survive a hurricane, but he contracts rabies in the aftermath, dying as Janie shoots him in self defence. She stands trial and is acquitted, and returns to Eatonville.

Gates' finds the kinship between Walker and Hurston in the narrative used in their respective novels: both are stories explicitly told by the protagonist. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is narrated in third person, but it is the tale of a telling. The novel begins with Janie's return to Eatonville, where she first ignores the town's collective curiosity, and then sits down to tell the story of her life to Phoebe, a trusted friend. This becomes a frame narrative in which Janie's story is told, from her childhood up to her return from the Everglades. In the place of Janie's spoken words to Phoebe, we read the story as told by a

third-person narrator. *The Color Purple* avoids this narrator completely by letting Celie write the text of her story, with the additional benefit of having her write it down as it happens, which means that Celie tells her tale closer to it happening than Janie's retrospective narrative.

Their Eyes Were Watching God was the first African-American novel to make use of free indirect discourse (Gates 191). The novel also makes extensive use of black vernacular. This was Hurston's argument in a contemporary debate about how to represent the black voice in African-American literature. Gates writes,

After all, by 1895, dialect had come to connote black innate mental inferiority, the linguistic sign both of human bondage (as origin) and of the continued failure of "improvability" or "progress", two turn-of-the-century keywords. Dialect signified both "black difference" and that the figure of the black in literature existed primarily as object, not subject. (176)

Hurston transcribes all dialogue in dialect, and *Their Eyes* is remarkably heavy in dialogue, often spanning pages of nothing but reported speech. This, Gates shows, eventually starts influencing the narrator: as the use of free indirect discourse becomes more frequent, the language of the narrator becomes less standard English, more oral: at the end of the novel, it is difficult to tell whether the mind speaking is the heroine in free indirect discourse, or the narrator in a new, more oral voice. In Gates' words, "the interspersed indirect discourse and the free indirect discourse become extraordinarily difficult to isolate because of the similarity in idiom (...) Narrative commentary and free indirect discourse (...) move towards the indistinguishable" (212). As the novel ends, the use of free indirect discourse in combination with the increasingly oral voice of the narrator has rendered the voice telling the story one that could easily be mistaken for that of the heroine having won full domination over the narrator of her life. The storyteller, as the reader of the novel knows, is in fact herself. Gates draws the lines from Hurston and *Their Eyes* to Walker and *The Color Purple* in the last chapter of his study, devoted to illustrating how Walker's use of letters written in dialect is an reworking of Hurston's narrative strategy. Celie does not only reclaim her oral language for herself and uses it without feeling shame about what it suggests about her background and her character, she in fact dismisses any other narrative authority by taking the pen in her own hand and telling her story herself without having to worry about being judged and censored by others.

The story in *The Color Purple* is the story of a woman telling her story in her own voice, and through that finding the awareness to acknowledge herself as an individual rather

than an object to be used and abused at the will of others. This is a central question not only to Celie, but also to Janie. The empowerment in letting the characters talk instead of having the narrator doing the talking on their behalf is a device that is carried on and made yet stronger in *The Color Purple* because Celie does not have to struggle against an alien narrator for the authority of her own tale, like Janie does; the only one to have any say in Celie's story is Celie. Celie controls the voice of every character in the novel, and she bridges the gap between her writing self and the self that she is writing about with a use of free indirect discourse that makes it impossible to say if the one speaking is the experiencing Celie in the text, or the narrating Celie in the moment of writing (Gates 249).

The obvious common point between Janie and Celie is that they grow to find their own voices, and to overcome the domination of men so that they can fulfil their own lives and their own wishes. There are also more specific story elements in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that are revised in *The Color Purple*. Most obviously, Walker rewrites the very framework of Janie's story: her three marriages. Celie and Janie both go through three defining sexual relationships in their lives. The first one is a briefer one with an older man, the second is a long period of personal repression that they publicly revolt against, and the third is one of mutual acceptance and equal standing, and which ultimately is that which gives Celie and Janie both the ability to stand on their own. These marriages function likewise in space – the first marriage is a hopeless but temporary state, the second is one where the house becomes a prison and a place of unwanted labour, while the third takes both Celie and Janie far away from home and lets them participate in labour in which they find meaning and joy. Janie's marriages, however, are turned on their head fairly brutally in Celie's story. Logan, who is not portrayed as cruel although he lacks the ability to understand his young wife, is replaced by Alphonso who sexually abuses a barely pubescent Celie for years, but by whom Celie has her only children. Following that are the marriages to Joe and Albert. Joe is a man who “did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon” (Hurston 29), who never mistreats Janie but subtly dominates her to the extent that after his death, she has to look at herself in the mirror to remember who she is. Albert starts out on the other end of the scale, as the man who marries Celie for a cow, who beats her and ignores any cares she might have and who ends being taught how to live his life right by her example. Where Joe starts out as an infatuation and a chance to find a better place in life, and ends with disappointment and pity, Albert moves the other way around: from being the man who kept

the only person Celie loved away from her, he ends up being one of “her peoples” on her porch in the last chapter of the story. There are a great many similarities between Tea Cake and Shug, already in their very names – for both of them have botanical names but given nicknames associated with sweetness. Tea Cake's real name, Vergible Woods, is connected to the novel's use of a tree as the symbol for Janie's life (Gates 191), and a similar connection exists between Shug and the purple flowers in Celie's tale: “Lillie Shug's real name. She just so sweet they call her Shug” (120) (Shug being short for “Sugar”, as Celie affectionately calls her a few pages previous to this recording). Tea Cake and Shug are both drifting musicians, and both somewhat unsavoury love partners – Tea Cake is several years younger than Janie, and Shug is a woman.

2. THE COLOR PURPLE AND THE NOVEL OF LETTERS

In this chapter, I will show in detail how Alice Walker, in both content as well as narrative strategies, ties *The Color Purple* to the epistolary novels of the eighteenth century. I will do so by showing how it reverses the focus and the content of the typical epistolary novel of that period. Specifically, I will investigate its relationship to Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), one of the most influential works of the early English novel. In the second part of the chapter, I will closely analyse the formal aspects of the letters in *The Color Purple* on the background of studies done on diary fiction and letter fiction, which will show that Celie transgresses against and transforms the rhetoric of letters – not only their features from the eighteenth century, but some traits inherent to the medium even today. Similarly, I will show that Nettie conforms to the expected letter standard from which Celie deviates.

***The Color Purple* and the Epistolary Novel of the Eighteenth Century**

The setting and the narrative voice in *The Color Purple* are a commentary on the presumptions that many casual readers will have about the epistolary novel. Their acquaintance with the genre is likely to spring from familiarity with the “classics” of the eighteenth century. Alice Walker takes a form with a firm set of associations and uses it to tell the story of someone opposite to the kind of person you normally would find as the main character of an epistolary novel.

Based on Perry's study of the social background of the early British novel, we can make some very rough generalisations about the protagonist of the epistolary novel as they appeared at the height of its influence on the English-language literature: they likely belonged to a social group in which men did not perform much manual labour and women were not expected to perform in any kind of professional occupation; they were British, they were white, they could write and read, they were not yet married, and had romantic troubles. From the post-colonial perspective, we can wonder about the likelihood that at least part of their wealth depended on the exploitation of people in far-off places.

Celie is the antithesis of this figure. She is raped by her father and forced into an unwanted marriage with a man who has no romantic interest in her; she finds love and meaning in life not in marriage, but in the *leaving* of it (in a reversal of the eighteenth century ideology of love and marriage as a woman's lot in life, Celie's ultimate triumph is when she,

faced with the *loss* of love, finds that her life has more meaning than ever). She is poor and forced into manual labour by her husband. She is emotionally numbed and sexually damaged, she is black, she is undesirable, she belongs to a social class that was only just escaping slavery and was still subservient to others. She is *American*. She is able to write despite her class background because she belongs to a time and place in which schooling is universal, but she still does not seem to master the standard English she would have been taught in school. Celie is the descendant of those who were exploited under the colonial system and her world is one still believed to be the white man's duty to take control of¹⁶. Celie's social position is at the bottom of the ladder on which your average epistolary heroine would be close to the top.

The Era of the “Classical” Epistolary Novel

The epistolary novel was, as has been previously noted, a genre whose influence was considerable, and this influence was at its strongest in the early years of the novel as a form. The emergence of the novel was a gradual evolution of the prose narratives already existing, and is considered to have taken place during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. It came about as a consequence of changes in philosophy, worldview and not the least in the economic situation of the reading public.

As the common theory goes, the rise of the novel in Britain is credited to the rise of the middle classes. With the emergence of a considerable body of people that had the money and the leisure to read, literature shifted from depending on the goodwill of aristocratic benefactors to adjusting to the demands of the market, and the market demanded a new kind of literature. The romances of the previous times were often the stories of high-born heroes on fantastic adventures, but the novel was intent on realism, and often concerned the life of “ordinary” middle-class characters in settings that were familiar to the readership. In light of the societal changes out of which the novel is presumed to have developed, the rising middle classes stood in the centre of far greater developments: they were the consequence of the emerging capitalism, and this capitalism was intertwined with colonialism. That the middle classes rose to gain the influence they did at the time that they did it, was a consequence of a colonial economy.

¹⁶ As Nettie observes about the Missionary Society of New York: “It is run by white people and they didn’t say anything about caring about Africa, but only about duty” (136).

The epistolary novel held a formidable position in the early years of the British novel. Joe Bray dates the heyday of the epistolary form to have begun with the English translation of *Les Lettres Portugaises* in 1678, and ended between 1797 and 1798 when Jane Austen reworked “Elinor and Marianne”, believed to have been epistolary, into the third-person *Sense and Sensibility* (Bray 1). English-language epistolary fiction existed before this period and continues to be written to this day, but its influence on the development of the novel was never as great as in this period, and it was popular. “There were between 100 and 200 epistolary works published and sold in London during the early eighteenth century (...) all of the best selling Grub Street hack writers dealt in letters (...) they translated them, edited them, 'presented' them or wrote them outright” (Perry 15). It is in this period that we find the most famous examples known today, and it is to this period that Walker makes her most explicit references.

The Color Purple and Pamela

(...) the full meaning of Pamela's social position, which might well be compared to that of a black servant girl in the American South in the earlier part of our own century. Her use of language indicates her background, origin and status – and these make her, in Mr. B.'s world, an inferior, commonly thought of almost as another species of being. (Doody 14)

The only words in *The Color Purple* that are not filtered by Celie is the opening line of the novel, apparently spoken in a narrative present existing outside the letters that make up the vast majority of the text. By the end of the first page, the reader knows that these words are spoken as the novel's narrator is raped. Within the first few pages, we also know that the command to “not never tell nobody but God” is the reason the text – Celie's letters – exists in the storyworld: nobody knows about the abuse Celie suffers until Alphonso, years later, chooses to make it clear to the rest of the family. This line cements the two pillars that Celie's narrative rests upon: the rape, the suffering and the shame, and the fact that she is forbidden to tell anyone about it except for God – because God has not interfered on Celie's behalf before, and will not do so later. Still, Celie writes, and continues writing through the death of her mother and the abuse she still suffers, until she is taken away from her home against her will, in a loveless marriage to a man she cannot name in her letters. She addresses him, ominously, as “Mr._____”.

Celie's early life is a bleak mirror of Pamela Andrews, the titular heroine of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740). Pamela is a beautiful young girl from a poor family, who found a position with a lady that kept her in a good house and gave her an education above her position. When her mistress dies, Pamela – fifteen years of age – comes under the care of the lady's son, “Mr. B.”. He lavishes her with praise and gifts, but it soon becomes clear that he is seeking a sexual relationship. Pamela refuses him, and when she tries to go home to her parents to escape his attention, he kidnaps her and imprisons her in one of his estates. Pamela's continued refusal is awarded as Mr. B. marries her, no longer just impressed with her beauty and her abilities, but infatuated with the self she presented in letters she wrote to her parents. The novel was a “best seller” in its time and created a massive hype (Doody 7); it remains one of the most well known representatives of the classical epistolary novels, for good and bad. It is also considered a milestone in the early development of the novel as a form.

The early parts of *The Color Purple* is an inversion of the first part of *Pamela*. Instead of a chaste heroine writing to her parents, there is a child who is sexually abused by her father and neglected by her mother, writing to God. Instead of a gentleman lusting for his beautiful servant, we have a farmer marrying a woman because he needs somebody to keep his house. The sister-in-law is not a threatening presence disapproving of the heroine's low birth, but a brief appearance disgusted with how her brother treats his wife. Pamela is admired for her beauty by the people around her. The only testimony we have to Celie's appearance is that the three people she has sexual relationships with – Alphonso, Albert and Shug – all call her ugly in different phases of their lives.

The very essence of Pamela's struggle is her virginity, which she on the urging of her parents protects as if it was a matter of life and death¹⁷. Pamela's only options are to refuse the advances of her master and make attempts to escape, both of which constituted overt rebellion in her position as a servant woman. Her insistent rejection is ultimately successful, and is rewarded with his love and marriage which sanctions a sexual relationship that is morally acceptable (and elevates her social status considerably). This is an option that does not exist for Celie, for the opening words of the novel are uttered as she is raped by the man she knows as her father, and loses the one asset that Pamela justifies her rebellion with: as long as

¹⁷ “Arm yourself, my dear child, for the worst; and resolve to lose your life rather than your virtue” (Richardson 52).

Pamela has her chastity, she will have the opportunity of being honestly married; she will, unlike Celie, remain a “good girl”. It is not incidental that sexual abuse is the particular way in which Celie is cast under the control of men, for Perry remarks that the struggle over a woman's chastity – the seduction (seduction was a favourite topic of epistolary novels) and the woman's ability to stand against it or her submission to it – often was presented as a matter of power. A woman who could stand against a man's attempt to take her body was a woman who maintained her independence (Perry 21). This is the double tragedy of Celie, who is first raped at an age when she still does not understand the fundamental workings of human sexuality. Not only is she in a situation where it is impossible to struggle against her rapist, but she is so young that she has no concept of her independence and her right to control over her own body. With the historical epistolary novel as our context, Alphonso's rape of Celie has a double meaning. The effects on Celie's psyche are obvious and crucial because they establish the very reason behind the novel's existence. In the epistolary novels of Richardson's time, however, virginity is a state of mind in the most acute manner. Seduction was a popular topic, and the implication was that if you could earn a woman's trust, if she would allow you entrance to her consciousness, and if you had the power to manipulate her mind through letters, then she would also allow you to penetrate her body. Violent attacks on women were a rarity in epistolary novels; the common course of action was to try to gain her trust, and consequentially control over her perception of herself and the world (Perry 129). This is not how it plays out in *The Color Purple*, but the early parts of the novel takes place when the men who control Celie's body, also control her very being. Celie is, in fact, saved from her miserable self-image partially because Shug restores her virginity by giving the word a meaning independent of violence and force. It is only when Celie has been shown that her sexuality (and her body) is her own, and that she is worth of being loved by others, that she can rebel against Albert. This kind of salvation through language is impossible for Pamela, for her concern is not fear of violence, but fear of immorality (consensual or not) and the loss of a virginity which is her only ticket to a good marriage. Pamela triumphs when her prisoner marries her and makes her the mistress of the house she was imprisoned in; Celie's emancipation comes when she leaves her husband and starts a life on her own, making the house that was owned by the man who first raped her into her own property and chasing the ghosts of him out of it.

It is in *words*, however, that we find the crucial difference between *The Color Purple* and *Pamela*; it is in the treatment of their letters, and as an extension of that, their *voices*, that Celie's and Pamela's stories truly differ: Pamela's letters are not kept private. Mr. B. steals and reads her letters when she sends them to her parents; he intercepts their correspondence, and when Pamela stops sending her letters entirely, he searches her room to find them and arranges a robbery of the man Pamela has smuggled her letters out with. Pamela buries her letters in the garden and hides them in her clothing; in a particularly disturbing event, Mr. B. threatens to search her body for them. Mr. B. demands – and is given – entry to Pamela's innermost thoughts. Whatever other cruelties Albert commits to Celie, he does not attack her consciousness and her voice the way Mr. B. tries to control Pamela. Pamela's letters are threatened and intruded upon, while Celie's are kept private and remain a safe place where she can let herself express the thoughts she cannot yet speak out loud. Pamela reforms Mr. B. through her letters: he lusts after the servant, but falls in love with the woman who writes the letters he reads. Celie, too, reforms Albert, but she does so in *speaking*.

There are several further parallels between Celie and Pamela, some of them in the narrative frames used in the two novels. Celie writes letters that might constitute something functioning more like a diary, while Pamela eventually takes to keeping a journal that in fact is written in open address to her parents and with the hope that they one day will have the chance of reading it. Celie and Pamela both reveal their class in their prose, but where Pamela's "errors" are matters of vocabulary and diction, Celie takes it the step further and revises the very rules of the language in her dialectal spelling and grammar. The ultimate problem in both *Pamela* and *The Color Purple* is that of rape and the consequences of this particular brand of violence, but they disagree on what these consequences are. Pamela needs to save her chastity so that she can remain without sin and secure her position in marriage. Celie becomes the "bad" girl who is saved as she discovers and reclaims her sexuality outside of the heterosexual marriage.

***The Color Purple* and the Epistolary Narrative**

Walker's commentary on the epistolary novel is not only carried out through setting and character, but also through narrative voice. As the dominating voice of the novel, Celie controls both the words of the people present in her letters, but seemingly also the presentation of Nettie's letters. *The Color Purple* is a narrative that parts ways with the

“traditional” letter novel in a number of formal aspects, and these serve to underscore the contrasts established in the setting and the character. Celie is not only a woman in a different setting than the “traditional” epistolary heroines – she writes her story differently as well. In this section, I will analyse the formal aspects of the letters in the novel in terms of the theoretical studies introduced in the first chapter, and show that the narrative in *The Color Purple* is not merely formally inventive, but in fact avoids some of the most fundamental narrative traits that many of us have come to expect from epistolary narratives.

The Structure of Letters in *The Color Purple*

To state the bare statistics of the novel and its narrative and narrators: *The Color Purple* consists of 92 letters. 22 are from Nettie to Celie. 14 are from Celie to Nettie. The rest (56 in total) are from Celie to God, including the last letter which is addressed to "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God" (285). Additionally, there is a letter written from Shug to Celie, which is quoted full-length in one of Celie's letters to Nettie. Except for this and a few early letters from Nettie quoted inside of Celie's letters, each letter is independently presented, and act as a chapter of sorts in that each new letter starts on a new page, opens with an address and ending with a name signed (except Celie's letters to God). There are no dates mentioned at any point in the novel; not even years are given. Except for Celie's time in Memphis and Nettie's letter from England, the location from where the letters are written and the setting of the action in general is unspecified. There is no narrative frame aiming to explain how these letters were collected and published unless one is counting Walker's dedication before the beginning of the novel and her note of gratitude to her characters after it as part of the text rather than the paratext; both are instances where she identifies herself as the author of the book, which is explicitly non-fictional. Altman gives the following model of the levels of diegesis involved in a typical epistolary novel:

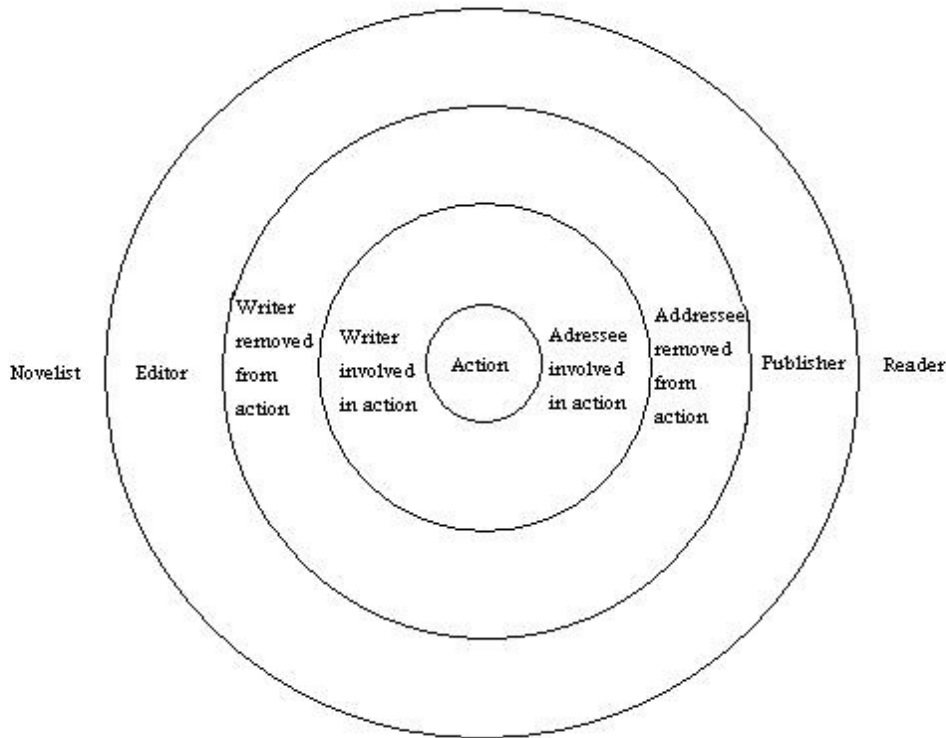


Fig. 1¹⁸

What can be clearly said for *The Color Purple* is that the first intermediary level – that of the Editor and the Publisher – are not introduced in the novel, and no mention is made to suggest that such instances exist at all. Celie and Nettie write letters, and these letters make up the text of a book. How the book came to be is never explained, but a degree of intentional organising can nonetheless be traced through the way the letters from Nettie are (re)presented. They are framed by Celie's narrative, and Celie comments on the presence of the first letters from Nettie.

Dear God,

This be the letter I been holding in my hand.

Dear Celie, ...

¹⁸ From *Epistolary: Approaches to a Form*, p. 201, somewhat simplified; the editor and the publisher are the fictive incarnations who claim responsibility to how and when the physical copy of the novel came into existence, like the "Publisher" in *Werther* who, although unidentified, explicitly claims to have ordered Werther's letters and made a considerable effort to reconstruct and report as best as he can the parts of the tale that they do not cover.

(117)

This first letter from Nettie is short and fully recounted within Celie's letter to God, which is continued afterwards. After this discovery, Celie and Shug conspire to find the rest of Nettie's stolen letters which are then inserted into the novel, but no longer as parts of Celie's letters: "These the first ones, say Shug. They postmark right here" (125) is the last line of Celie's letter explaining the theft. On the following pages are Nettie's letters, introduced by comments in italics: "Dear Celie, *the first letter say*, (126),

Next one said,

Dear Celie,

(127)

"*Next one say*," (128), "*Next one, fat, dated*¹⁹ *two months later, say*," (130), "*The next letter after that one say*," (134). After this, Nettie's letters follow without any preceding comments. Then follow two letters from Celie to God, before the next batch of letters from Nettie start from within a letter to God:

But I think bout Nettie.

It's hot here, Celie, she write. Hotter than July. Hotter than August and July. Hot like cooking dinner on a big stove in a little kitchen in August and July. Hot.

Dear Celie,

(148)

Unlike the first time Nettie's letter is "told" inside of Celie's, Celie's letter does not continue with her words to God afterwards – the next letter of the novel is from Nettie, with no opening comments from Celie. This is also Celie's second-to-last letter to God before the end of the

¹⁹ The source of this date is unclear; it could be referring to the postmark on the envelopes or dating that Nettie has made on the letters themselves, removed to preserve the ambiguous setting of the story. The novel is contradictory on this point as Celie mentions that "Us steam and steam the envelopes until we had all the letters laying on the table. Then us put the envelopes back inside the trunk" (124), yet the chapter ends with "These the first ones, say Shug. They postmark right here" (125). Other information that appears to have been omitted from the novel is Nettie's address: Celie mails her letters to Nettie, even though no address is given in any letters.

novel²⁰. With two of Nettie's letters quoted inside Celie's letters to God and the rest of them *not* while still tied to Celie's narrative, the question rises of how they came to be presented as such in the novel if Celie did not copy them into her letters to God like she did with the first one.

The reader cannot know what the letters of *The Color Purple* are. Were they compiled and edited for publication? Were they found in a chest of drawers in somebody's loft? Have they been passed down in the family? One might be tempted to assert that they are merely the clever use of narrative in a post-modern novel from a novelist skilled in her craft. *The Color Purple* avoids the exaggerated *dramatics* of theft, bad postmarks and information in the wrong hands that often enough can be observed in classical epistolary novels where letters are not only vessels of narration, but objects of the plot as well. There is ample evidence that the letters of Celie and Nettie exist as real, physical documents inside the world which they create. How else, after all, can Celie and Shug steam open dozens of envelopes with letters that Albert hid away in his trunk, and how else could the postal service return letters that Celie mailed? Epistolary fiction has its roots in real letter exchanges, and early works of the kind were often purported (and believed) to be real letters that had been found and published. There is a strong thread of mimesis in fiction that is told in the form of documents, and Abbot remarks that fictive diaries (as well as epistolary novels) frequently involve "editor's notes" explaining the history of the publication, for the purpose of attributing a sense of reality to the documents (Abbot 19).

The Color Purple never explains why it is that Celie's letters to Nettie are collected with her letters to God and Nettie's letters to her, but there are clues of somebody tampering with the way the letters are ordered in the book: aside from censored information about place and time, there is also the question of the notes written to introduce Nettie's letters in what looks like Celie's writing, but must either be Celie's spoken voice (similar to her stepfather's likewise italicised line as the novel opens), or someone (Celie in retrospect or another unseen editor) who at a later point arranged the letters, put them into context, and in writing imitated what Celie's voice must have sounded like *when she read these letters*. Additionally, Celie occasionally refers to things that Nettie has written to her, but which have not been printed on the page with Nettie's signature; at one point, she mentions a possible cure for Henrietta's

²⁰ The last letter being short, disoriented, and ending with the line "you must be sleep".

illness that she has heard from Nettie (252), but which Nettie only mentions in her next letter, four pages later. Nettie claims to have written to Celie biannually for close to thirty years (and more frequently in the first years), but only a little over twenty letters from her are printed within the novel: 2/3 of Nettie's letters are excluded from the narrative²¹. When Nettie's voice is interfered with by unknown instances, it might in turn pose the question if there are letters from Celie that have been similarly omitted. However, the only clue that could support that interpretation would be the length of time between Celie's letters, which normally span months and years of silence. It is impossible to say whether this is because Celie writes rarely, or because an invisible editorial hand removed letters that are without interest to the story. Considering the coherence of Celie's narrative and the care she takes to introduce new story elements and actors having shown up since the last letter, it seems unlikely (but of course not impossible) that there are pieces missing from her tale.

The Narrative Ambiguities of *The Color Purple*

At first glance, *The Color Purple* bears the formal marks of the epistolary novel: it is narrated in first person letters directly addressing a named narratee, its story-line is temporally fragmented because letters are exchanged between two parties separated by forces out of their control, its plot is linear, and resolution is final when the two are reunited. At a closer look, however, it becomes clear that the novel in fact distorts and subverts these formal signs at their very base. Letters are written by two parties, addressed to the other, but they are not *exchanged* because they are not received. The fundamental drive behind most epistolary novels is letters as means of communication when all other channels are closed, but this motivation is severely damaged in *The Color Purple*, where not even letters can carry the words between Celie and Nettie. As a consequence of this, Celie (and the reader) only gets to know Nettie's story years after it has actually happened, as her letters reach Celie in bulk. Celie's story and Nettie's story are told at different paces, rather than the expected 1:1 ratio between two partners exchanging tidbits of their lives; keeping with this, we also remember that most of Nettie's letters are in fact omitted from the novel, while (we assume) none of Celie's are. It is not the reunion of Celie and Nettie that brings about the final resolution of the novel; that happens in the pages preceding it. The novel operates with two writers but *three* addressees, but this issue is – tellingly – difficult to consider, because Celie shows remarkable

²¹ One could argue that these letters were simply not received, but there is at least one instance of Celie claiming to have heard things from Nettie that are not in any of the letters in the novel.

little interest in who it is she writes to. Considering Perry's observation about the importance of the *relationships* in many epistolary novels (Perry 93), and Altman's observation on how the *you* to the *I* influences the very rhetoric of the narrative (Altman 118), this point needs scrutiny.

Celie starts her narrative by addressing God, asking if "Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (1), and then recounting the events leading up to her question. This, in the first paragraph of the story, is one of only three times that Celie addresses God directly – that is, with a personal pronoun in the text in addition to the “dear God” at the top of the page. The second is when she finally gets an answer of sorts to "what is happening to her" through Nettie's revelation that Alphonso is not their father, after which Celie writes the shortest letter in the novel, ending it with "you [God] must be sleep" before she takes up the pen to write to Nettie instead of a God that seemingly never listened. The third time Celie addresses God directly is the very last letter of the novel, where she thanks God (now reworked into an animistic spirit rather than the patriarchal figure of the Bible) and "everything" for having brought Nettie back to her. Before the crucial discussion with Shug and the revision of her image of God, Celie talks to a God that never gives her the sign she asks for in the first letter, and most certainly does not answer her in person. Celie, in turn, never again asks for God's attention in her letters, but tells her story in address to him. When she abandons God to address her letters to Nettie, it is with a similar tone and a similar absence of direct address: Nettie's letters, stolen piece by piece and then finally received almost all at once, reads to Celie like Celie's letters read to the reader. Celie cannot answer all of Nettie's letters individually, and speaks to her sister like she spoke to God before: by telling the story of her life. So smooth is the transition from God to Nettie that Celie never even bothers recounting what has happened in her life since the two of them were separated, but jumps straight into the action of detailing how she and Shug went to see their stepfather. Only when Shug has pointed out that Nettie does not know who the people in Celie's narrative are does Celie introduce some of them. She never brings up Nettie's situation or asks for news: her letters to Nettie are still only about herself and her life. There is a notable difference between how Celie and Nettie address one another. Nettie frequently talks directly to Celie, reminds Celie in her letters that she is talking to her ("I never realized I was so *ignorant*, Celie!" [123]), mentions things that Celie have said, laments how much she misses her sister and wonders about her well-being. Celie, in contrast, only rarely talks to Nettie by use of the

second person pronoun: Nettie will talk about "you" [Celie] in nearly every letter, often several times, while Celie uses that address far more sparingly²². Indeed, the tone that Celie uses towards both Nettie and God is so similar that it seems as if Celie mails her letters to Nettie as seldom as she mails her letters to God until she tells us that the letters she sent have come back, unopened and as unread as those she had written to a God that never answered. Celie, then, makes so little difference between writing to God and writing to Nettie that it is clear that it is not in duty to *them* that she writes. When her letters to God go unanswered, and the secrecy that necessitated them is broken, it is clear that she writes not for his benefit, but for her own. Her letters are confessions that go unread by anyone except, one might speculate, Shug who at least knows that she is writing them²³. Indeed, Celie only starts addressing Nettie more directly in her very last few letters to her, when Shug has left her and she is deprived of the only person to whom she could *speak* of these things. Even then, she is far from as conscious of it as Nettie's letters are.

The Color Purple consequently does not depict a correspondence. There is neither intercourse nor communication between Celie and Nettie. Celie responds to some of the content in Nettie's letters, but mainly to other characters who are mentioned later in her own letters to Nettie; she clearly does not tell Nettie these things out of a wish to initiate discussion between the two of them. Nettie, who never receives Celie's letters and cannot know if her sister even is still alive, writes into a void. Celie likewise does not stop writing to Nettie even after she receives news of her death. There is a wall between the two of them that only Nettie's letters to Celie manage to overcome by the middle of the novel, and which keeps Celie's letters from reaching Nettie until Nettie herself can return to pick them up in person. Whatever the purpose a letter exchange might have – discussion, intimacy, gossip – it is something that Nettie and Celie cannot have, making the effect of their letters different from those that are exchanged between mutually aware correspondents. In *The Color Purple*, the letter has lost its most basic function: it fails to communicate. Consequently, the very purpose of the letter exchange is absent from the novel, because not only do letters not reach their addressees, but the writers are at least partially aware that their words will not be read.

²² A quick count showed that Nettie uses the address "you" to Celie on an average of 2.7 times per letter, while Celie uses it 0.3 times to Nettie.

²³ Shug is not only the person who helps Celie steal the letters from Albert, but the keeper of them as well: after they have taken the letters from Albert's trunk and put the empty envelopes back, Shug hides the letters in her suitcase (144).

The Color Purple and the Diary Mode

Oh, she a little mess, I say. Then I think back to one of Nettie's letters bout the sicknesses children have where she at in Africa. Seem like to me she mention something bout blood clots. I try to remember what she say African peoples do, but I can't. Talking to Mr. _____ such a surprise I can't think of nothing. Not even nothing else to say (224)

The above is quoted from a letter addressed to Nettie, from a scene in which Celie is talking to Albert and thinking back to one of Nettie's letters (in fact thinking forward to the next letter following the current one, in which Nettie mentions a hereditary blood disease among the Olinka). When Celie is writing this down at a later point, in a letter opening with the words "Dear Nettie" that later will be mailed to Nettie, too, she does not speak to Nettie in the second person. Instead of "think back to one of your letters bout the sicknesses children have where you at", it is "Nettie's" letter, where "she" at. Among the many hints of Celie not really writing for Nettie even as she is writing *to* Nettie, this is one of the clearest: in the middle of a letter, Celie forgets that she has a specific audience in mind.

If we ask, as was mentioned in the first chapter, whether *The Color Purple* should be called a diary novel, we would instantly be cornered with the theoretical problems with drawing of line between the diary and the extremely self-focused letter (*Werther* etc.). In his study of diary fiction as a form, Abbot included letter novels in which the only function of the addressee was to be a name to which the letters are directed. Martens noted the blurred line between the "public" diary and the self-focused letter in her study of the history of the diary novel, and defines the diary form as "fictional prose narrative written from day to day by a single first-person narrator who does not address himself to a fictive addressee or recipient" (Martens 4). Prince limited it further by defining the unifying trait of "diary fiction" to be fiction with particular emphasis on themes related to keeping a diary (Prince 479). We are left with the choice, then, of how to define the "diary": Is it the hyper-personal, self-centred narrative that can be written to the self, but can ostensibly also be addressed to someone else? Or is it the text that explicitly defines itself as a "diary" or at the very least a "journal" that is kept not for the sake of others, but for personal memory and reflection? Celie and Nettie clearly fall short of the last definitions, as there is no reason to believe that they are consciously using the address to the other as a disguise for what is a talk with the self. In Abbott's definition, what defines the diary narrative is not merely the form, but a mode of

writing that is produced by that form, or by forms so closely related that they at times can be hard to tell apart – in this instance, a certain variety of epistolary novel.

Abbot finds three functions that might not be unique to the diary form and not always be present in it, but which are associated with it. Historically, the form had a particularly **mimetic** function: it was presented as though non-fictional, and the immediate feeling of the narrative gave an illusion of direct thought rather than retrospection (compare Richardson's "writing to the moment") (Abbot 18-19). A second aspect is the problematic relation to **time**, as the diary narrative always will deal with two events simultaneously – the past action, and the present writing of it. When the narrative always takes place in the present, it contains a sense of suspense about the unknown future, but it can also have the opposite effect: in cases where the diary becomes so centred on the self and its emotional torment, it can achieve an effect of timelessness as action is displaced in favour of introspection (Abbot 29-36). Most obvious is the **isolation and the focus on the self** that the diary creates by definition, due to the lack of readership that can influence how and what the diarist writes. This is often visible in the props around the writer: diary fiction tends towards an unusual interest in the room in which the diary is written, and mirrors will almost certainly be present at some point or the other (Abbot 24-27).

Early epistolary novels were often marketed and sold with the claim that the letters in them were real and had in fact been discovered on more or less believable flukes (Perry 72). Part of the appeal of the epistolary novel was that the narrative was believed to be artless and "genuine", and similar ideas existed about diary fiction (Abbot 18). *The Color Purple* is certainly not a mimetic novel. It opens with a dedication from the writer and an epigraph by an artist born after the end of the book. The dedication at the end makes clear that these are not letters written by two sisters, but by an author directing their voices in her own pen. Considering the extensive formal references present in the novel itself, we might take this as Walker's mockery of the classical epistolary editor, the figure whose commentary often framed the epistolary novel and acted as a witness to the authenticity of the letters, and argued why their publication would be beneficial to the public (Abbott 20).

The matter of time is likewise absent: no dates are given, and the reader must deduct the time period from the clues given in the text. The time spans are vastly exaggerated: At least two years must have passed between the first letter of the novel and the second one.

Harpo, twelve years old when he enters the story on page 7, is seventeen and ready to marry by page 22, has been married to Sofia for three years on page 36 and has fathered several children by page 67. We never know how long Celie lives with Albert, how long she lives with Shug, how long she lives on her own – the only measure of the time passing during the span of the novel is when Nettie, less than a year before their reunion, remarks that it has been nearly thirty years since they last saw each other. Celie appears to bypass the narratively troubling act of writing about a past that has already taken place – any self-conscious epistolary narrative must necessarily show *some* kind of reflection on how the writer is reporting events on which she looks back and arranges into a narrative that must exclude certain elements and exaggerate others. This is something that *The Color Purple* does not do; it would seem unnatural given the narrative voice that dominates the novel. At the same time, Celie's narrative never approaches the effect of timelessness that Abbott detected in the particularly self-centred writers whose diaries are more interested in the emotional state of the writer than in the events of the world around him (Abbot 34): even though time is unstated, couples are married and children are born in unspoken testaments to time passing as Celie tells her highly personal story.

The typical diary themes of isolation and introspection are not obviously present in *The Color Purple*. Prior to Shug's entrance in her life, Celie is clearly a marginalised presence that finds little sympathy and understanding in the people around her, and who can only talk about her feelings to God. This motive vanishes once Shug appears to break the ice; Celie will come to write letters about her lengthy confessions to Shug and later Albert. Celie initially writes about how external events are affecting her life, but soon enough moves on to allow Sofia a considerable place in her story, with Mary-Agnes, Shug, and Albert all getting to speak at remarkable lengths. Celie does not appear to be overly focused on her own emotions – she might remark that she is happy or sad or content, but she rarely dwells on these feelings in great detail. *The Color Purple* is the story of her healing, but it is not in writing that she is healed: it is with the love and acceptance from Shug, which enables her to take her words *outside* the letters and to speak them out loud, for someone else to hear. Abbott remarks that a common way of expressing the isolation of the diarist is to give the *room* in which the diary is written a disproportionately large place in the narrative (Abbot 24). Likewise, the mirror is a standard prop for doubling the often implicit purpose of the diary, namely to see a reflection

of the self in the writing (Abbot 25)²⁴. We are never told where Celie writes her letters, and she is certainly not locked up in her room; she is in the field, in town, in Memphis, at Harpo's; we never know where it is that she writes her letters, where she keeps them hidden (or even *if* she keeps them hidden), or how she mails them. There are two mirrors present in the story, but Celie will go a long way before she looks at the reflection of her own face: the first time, she uses it to see her genitalia in an act foreshadowing her eventual reconquest of her body and her sexuality. Only in the pivotal letter of the story, when Shug has left her and Nettie is believed to be dead, does Celie look in the mirror, and talk to herself for the first and the last time. Celie never gives any indications about pursuing a reflection of herself in the letters that she writes – and the fact that she at least mails the letters she writes to Nettie similarly suggests that what drives her to write is not the wish to see herself in another light.

To bring back *Pamela*, we remember that Pamela takes to writing a secret journal when it becomes clear to her that any mail she sends is screened by Mr. B. and that she cannot send confidential letters to her parents. This is marked as her “journal” in whatever editing instances we might suppose ordered her letters, but with the note that part of Pamela’s motive is the hope that she might smuggle them outside and safely send them to her parents. Her writing is still clearly addressed to her parents; when she talks about “you” – which she does often enough to keep the reader reminded of it – there is little doubt who it is she means. It is a “journal”, but the change in tone from how she previously wrote *letters* to her parents is minimal. She writes it on sheets of paper, and she successfully smuggles some of them out with Mr. Williams.

With Pamela as our comparison, we once again see that Celie is reversing the tradition established by the “classical” epistolary novel: Pamela writes a letter-like journal that is secretly read by outsiders. Celie writes journal-like letters that go unread even by their intended addressees. We can leave it up for debate whether or not Celie's letters are to be analysed as diary fiction, but what is clear is that her writing lacks the particular emphasis on many, if not most, of the themes and the formal signs that have traditionally been associated with it.

²⁴ “One of the telling differences between fictional diaries and even the most claustrophobic *journaux intimes* of the nineteenth century is that the fictive diarist is directed at least once by his author to look into this symbolic instrument” (Abbot 25)

The Color Purple and the Letter Form

Having established that *The Color Purple* certainly is not a diary novel in the classical understanding of the word, we can repeat the procedure from another angle. In the first chapter of the thesis, I mentioned Janet G. Altman and her finding of a number of “trademarks” of the epistolary narrative. We can use these features to study their presence – or absence – in Celie's letters. Altman concluded her study with six general motives that the letter brings to the epistolary narrative by its nature as an object in the story-world, its particular implications about its writer and the relationship between the writer and the reader, and how it makes continuous narration impossible.

Bridge/barrier: The letter is the embodiment of distance but also of communication and unity.

Confiance/non-confiance: Trust or lack of such in the addressee forms the way letters are written and read "to a remarkable degree"

Writer/reader: Writing and reading are both foreground actions, because the interpretation of letters and awareness of the intended audience influence the way letters are written and read

I/you, here/there, now/then: high awareness of the distances in both space and time between writer and reader, as well as the acute *present* of both writing and reading the letter

Discontinuation/continuation: How and where do letter narratives end?

Unit/Unity, Coherence/Fragmentation: A letter in an epistolary novel (as well as a diary entry in a diary novel) is a text in itself but also a part of a larger text, which opens for great use of contrast but also demands measures of coherence (Altman 186).

The first chapter in Altman's study is devoted to the letter as an intermediary device between two persons. The letter is a **bridge** between two persons who are far apart, or at least an attempt at establishing a connection (see Altman 13 - 43). There is little evidence of this in Celie's letters. She writes to God because she cannot speak about the things that happened to her, and she writes to Nettie because she believes that God never listened. As is detailed above, Celie never seems remarkably interested in reaching out to neither God nor Nettie; she is content to tell them her own story, and does not seem to expect their thoughts and feelings about it. Celie continues writing to Nettie even after Nettie is supposedly dead, suggesting that the most important function of her letters never was the wish for communication – at least

not communication with the real, living, breathing Nettie who has an address on which Celie can (theoretically) reach her.

Confidence (Altman 47 – 83) is one of the major reasons that Celie starts writing her letters, but her writing is of a nature that never makes her question it, and never makes the reader question it in turn. Celie never questions the trust she has in God and Nettie, the recipients of her letters; it never seems to occur to her that they might betray her or abuse the access to her feelings. Shug and Albert eventually come to earn enough of her trust to be told about the rape that initially could only be spoken about to God, but neither struggles in particular to achieve it, and neither earn it through their writing – they are told *outside* of the letters, and the process towards the trust in them is not one that is given much attention in the story. When Celie tells Shug about the sexual abuse she suffered from her father, she does not do so because of a long-lasting wish to talk to someone, but because Shug unassumingly asked her to describe her experience with the father of Celie’s children. The confession is a monumental event in the story, but the matter of trust between the two is not reflected on, neither before nor after.

Similarly invisible is the topic of **writing** – as was discussed under the diary heading – and of **reading** (Altman 87 - 112). Altman remarks, “If first-person narrative lends itself to the writer’s reflexive portrayal of the difficulties and mysteries surrounding the act of writing, the epistolary form is unique among first-person forms in its aptitude for portraying the experience of reading” (Altman 88). The interpretation of letters happens not only by the real reader, but by the fictional addressee (or other unintended readers) as well, and this reflects on the writer in turn: they will choose their words with a particular reader in mind (Altman 91). Reading, in many epistolary novels, is not merely a matter of passively taking in information, but of gaining a further, subtextual understanding of the writer. “What is more striking in the epistolary narrative is its emphatic portrayal of the art of close reading, the art of analysis and explication (Altman 92), but Celie does not make any attempts to analyse the letters from Nettie, at least not in the letters that she writes in return. Celie describes the act of reading the letters from Nettie at only one point in the novel: the very first time, after she and Shug have taken the letters from Albert’s trunk, they chose to read them not in Albert and Celie’s room, but on Shug and Grady’s bed instead. What Celie’s subsequent narrative is interested in is not

the content of the letters, or the reading of them, but her own transformation in the discovery of Nettie's survival, and Albert's betrayal.

I/you, here/there, now/then (Altman 117 - 141): Spatial and temporal distance between writer and reader is plainly of little interest to Celie as she writes her letters. Space and time are, as have been detailed above, strikingly diffuse. There are no addresses, there are no dates, and there are no attempts to make account for the time passed since the last time she wrote. Even within the letters, it is often impossible to tell if she is writing it all in one bout, or in bits and pieces. The topic of absence and memories of a shared past cannot be discussed in letters written to an omnipotent god with whom you never had a mutual relationship, but Celie hardly pays more attention to it when she writes to Nettie. It is perhaps in this that the similarity between the letters addressed to God and to Nettie is at its most remarkable: while Celie cannot suffer from the chasm between her and God because such a chasm does not exist within common Christian thought, there is very much a chasm between her and Nettie, but she is either as unaware of or as uninterested in bridging it as she is with creating that kind of bond with the ever-present spirit of God.

The problems of epistolary **closure** (Altman 143 - 163) – the question of how and when the letter exchange ends – is also somewhat different than in the “classical” situation, in which closure usually is attained by either death or reunion. *The Color Purple* ends with a reunion which makes any further letters unnecessary: In the final letter, Nettie is finally returned to Celie, so Celie can no longer address her; she turns back to God instead, and gives her thanks for having let Nettie come back to her. Celie's story has overcome the two things that makes her write: her inability to speak, and Nettie's absence. Celie no longer needs God as her audience. More remarkable is how Celie closes her individual letters, because until she starts writing to Nettie, she does *not*. There are no signatures in her letters to God, and initially also none in her letters to Nettie: Celie merely signs them with “Amen”; in one letter in fact let Shug speak it (“Amen, say Shug. Amen, amen” [207]). Later, she adapts Nettie's signature of “your sister”, and in one instance, she signs her letter with the full address of her sewing business. Her final letter also ends with “Amen”, signifying that God once again has made itself worthy of taking the place that Nettie occupied.

Unit/Unity, continuation/discontinuation and coherence/fragmentation, all facets of the same basic function in Altman's study, are keywords related to the letters as separate

entities within a whole work, and whether the blank spaces that inevitably exist between each letter are emphasised or not (Altman 167 - 183). It is a question of how continuous the narrative voice appears, and how harmonious any different points of view there might be. The question of which of any multiple narrators are speaking the truth is not a topic in *The Color Purple* because Celie and Nettie do not talk about the same events, or of different reactions to similar experiences. What is presented in *The Color Purple* is a distortion so fundamental that finding the narrative continuity between Celie and Nettie's letters can only take place on the thematic level, and even then it brings up the unmentioned but clearly visible hand of the editor that placed Nettie's letters inside Celie's. Curiously, Celie's letters have the reading effect of obliterating the gap in time between them, because the time that passes *inside* them is so unpredictable, spanning from matters of hours and days to months and years that are included for their relevance for the topic that Celie writes about.

Nettie's Letters

Celie is the only protagonist of *The Color Purple*. It is Celie's life that is told, it is Celie's world that is shown, it is Celie's thoughts and feelings that dictate the narrative. Although Celie on occasion lets other characters speak directly in her letters, Nettie has a special place: hers is the only story that is presented in her own written words, and hers is the only voice that the reader can trust a hundred percent, knowing that it is not filtered through Celie's memory and presentation. Nettie is a secondary narrator who tells a story that is independently of Celie's (but relies on it for its publication), and who tells it out of different motives and under different circumstances. In a novel so concerned with the genre and its narrative voice, it is hard not to notice that Nettie also writes her letters in a different manner than Celie.

It has been a long time since I had time to write. 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, in 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. (155)

If Celie is a narrator who transgresses against most unofficial rules of the epistolary narrative to the degree where it becomes difficult to set her letters in any genre, Nettie is a far more recognisable epistolary narrator. We can make another comparison with the motives that

Altman singled out as particularly epistolary, and find that they have a much greater presence in Nettie's letters than they do in Celie's.

There are two major narrative differences between Celie and Nettie's letters to each other: their respective use of the English language, and Nettie's voice, which is in part muted by the choice of which of her letters are to be included in the novel. I have no reason to suppose that the same was done to Celie. Nettie is a narrator who depends on Celie's existence for more than the publication of her letters in the novel, for where Celie writes and writes seemingly regardless of whether they are addressed to God or to Nettie and whether they will reach their addressee in physical shape, it is doubtful if Nettie would be writing down the story of her life if she did not have the motivation of telling Celie about it. In the context of the novel, we would not have read Nettie's letters if Celie had not been there to receive them; out of context of the novel, it is doubtful that they would have made a coherent story without the background knowledge that the reader already has about their situation. Nettie's writing is fundamentally different from Celie's in that Nettie knows where her sister is, knows that she is alive, and knows that there is a chance that she might get the letters. Her motivation for writing to Celie is markedly different than that of Celie's writing to God and, with the almost suspiciously seamless switch, also of Celie's writing to Nettie herself.

Distance is perhaps the essence of Nettie's entire presence in the novel: Nettie is removed from Celie not only through their interrupted communication – which is eventually restored in part – but through literal distance in space as well: she is removed from modern civilisation on a different continent and with the only point of contact with the rest of the world through England (an ambivalent location both in the American consciousness and the history of colonialism, as well as in Nettie's reception in British society). The idea of Celie somehow finding her in person is implausible; Celie is a largely immobile character, limited to very few locations in the text, and she knows little of the world outside of this. As she puts it herself when she sees the stamps on the letters from Nettie: “I don't know where England at. Don't know where Africa at either. So I still don't know where Nettie at” (119). Nettie is cut off from telecommunication – telegrams and telephone – as well. The only way Celie can reach Nettie is through letters, and these letters are vulnerable to interception on both sides: *time* is distorted as well, in how Nettie's letters only reach Celie years and decades after they were written, which makes any *exchange* between the two impossible. On the other hand,

Celie's letters to Nettie are delayed even longer, only reaching Nettie when they have lost their function – when Nettie is present in person to receive them, and hear the tale from Celie's own mouth instead of through her pen.

Confidence is also something with which Nettie is preoccupied, if not in her letters then certainly in her daily life. It is most evident in her carrying the secret of Olivia and Adam's shameful ancestry and her misery over Corrine's distrust in both her and Samuel, but the issues of confidence also appears in the many tiny secret she keeps from the Onlinka because she fears their disapproval. For the majority of the period of her writing, Nettie is keeping secrets: the secret of her relationship to Olivia and Adam, the secret of their violent conception, the secret of Tashi's budding consciousness about her position as a woman and as a member of her tribe and the secret of her strained relationship to Corrine. Only in writing to Celie can Nettie talk about the things that trouble her, in part perhaps because Celie is so far away that this is knowledge that cannot harm her feelings the way it could harm the feelings of those who might be involved directly, in part because there is nobody except Celie that Nettie would place this kind of trust in, and – we might speculate – perhaps also because Nettie is aware that Celie will not know of it at all. Confidence is foregrounded in Nettie's letters because the trust she has in Celie stands in contrast to the trust she *does not* have in the people with whom she interacts with daily. It is in Nettie that we also see how lack of trust keeps her at a distance, however small, from her family. Her love of Samuel only surfaces when they can be completely open with each other, and confess their doubts and disappointments: "He asked me to tell him about you, and the words poured out like water. I was dying to tell someone about us" (190) is followed by the news of their marriage at the beginning of her next letter, where she also details how "words long buried in my heart" (238) come almost as an instinctual response to Samuel's story about his and Corrine's dreams and wishes, and of his growing doubts about their mission. After giving Celie an ecstatic account of all the things she loves about Samuel's body, she closes it with the line, "And I love his dear eyes in which the vulnerability and beauty of his soul can be plainly read" (238). The last line of her next letter cements it: "But all things look brighter because I have a loving soul to share them with" (243).

Unlike Celie, Nettie pays attention to the act of **writing**. She tells Celie about when and where she is writing her letters, remarks why she stops writing, makes notes of when she

is interrupted, and even talks about her mailing them. And even though she does not get to read Celie's letters to her, the *possibility* of doing so still haunts her: she gives Celie stamps to encourage her in a letter sent before she goes to Africa, she intentionally writes to Celie at Christmas and Easter in the hopes of the letters getting through the holiday greetings, and in the quote on the top of this section, tells Celie that she has fantasies about her writing back. Nettie's early letters, mailed before she leaves for Africa, are desperate for answers from Celie. As with the matter of trust, it is the *absence* of reading that marks this action in Nettie's letters.

Closure in Nettie's letters is far more traditional than in Celie: she signs the first letter after she leaves Albert's farm with "love, Nettie", but after that, all her letters are signed with "Your sister, Nettie", sometimes with additions such as "loving", "devoted", or "in sorrow". Nettie's narrative ends with a more open promise of the classical reunion that Celie's last letter tells of: the last paragraph of her last letter is about Tashi and Adam's wedding, after which the family "immediately" sets out for the sea and the journey home.

I/you, here/there, now/then: Distance, as was mentioned above, is impossible to miss in Nettie's letters, preoccupied as she is with (at first) Celie's life at Albert's farm and his keeping the two of them apart, and (later) with the always delayed plans to return from Africa. It is in Nettie's letters that we find the clearest clues about time. Nettie gives the exact dates of their travel to Africa, and her letters make the unclear presence of the Second World War somewhat easier to place: and it is in Nettie's letters that we find the most talking about their shared past, and the most awareness of difference between the moment of experience, and the moment of writing. It is Nettie who writes about their childhood and common past to Celie (Celie does this only indirectly, by recalling similar conversations with Shug and Albert), and it is Nettie who wonders, in her letters, what their reunion might be like. The exaggerated awareness of the moment is one of the traits that Altman discusses under this heading, because the epistolary writer is suspended between a past upon which she is reflecting in retrospect, a future that she cannot control but often has expectations to, and the present moment of writing of these things that never truly can be caught, because by the time the letter reaches its addressee, that too will be a past action. We find all of these issues in Nettie's letters.

As we see in this comparison, the differences between Celie and Nettie's writing are not limited to their grammar and spelling. The conventions of Nettie's letters to Celie resemble those of the traditional epistolary novel, while Celie writes her letters to Nettie and God both in a manner that *might* be that of a diary and *might* be that of a letter exchange, but which works nothing like what we expect from either. There are no obvious reasons for this difference between them, for the conditions under which they write are fairly similar: Nettie writes to Celie and knows that Celie most likely will not read her letters, but continues doing so because *not* doing so makes her feel "as bad as I do when I don't pray, locked up in myself and choking on my own heart" (130) – but even with this confessional element and the obvious comparison between her prayer and Celie's letters to God, Nettie's letters are heavily marked by the presence of Celie as a recipient. Celie writes to Nettie in the belief that Nettie receives her letters, but she does not change her language and her address from when she was writing to God, and she continues in the same manner even when Nettie is reported to have died.

Nettie, moreover, is partially transported to the societal position that Celie is removed from. Samuel and Corrine are northerners and markedly different from the "folks at home" which surround Celie; they are well-educated, well-spoken, well-aware of their background and well-aware of their superiority compared to the rural community in which the novel's main narrator lives²⁵. Nettie is taken into the family as a kind of orphan; although Samuel and Corrine are her "brother and sister", they certainly take on a nurturing role towards her as well: they educated her, feed her and clothe her and ultimately takes her away not only from her home, but from her cultural background as well: the well-educated, "enlightened" Nettie who writes informative letters from the wide world is a quite different creature than the bright country girl that we meet in Celie's early letters. Nettie works hard, but she does not perform the manual labour that Celie is forced into; she is a teacher and a nurse. Finally, Nettie remains a "good girl" and plays the role so well that she is unconscious of her sexual attraction to Samuel: she is on her way to spinsterhood when she finally can acknowledge it and act on it.

Nettie's mode of writing makes it abundantly clear that Walker is very much aware of the formal expectations of her genre, and that the avoidance of them in Celie's letters is very

²⁵ Samuel and Corrine compare the Africans to the African-Americans and describe both as "bumbling and inept"(234)

much intentional. It doubles the differences between Celie and Nettie when it is not only the language of their letters that are different, but the very rhetoric of them. In the next chapter, I will discuss the place of colonialism in *The Color Purple*, and show how Celie's breaking from the norm and Nettie's inability to do the same plays a part in the political context of the novel.

3. COLONIALISM AND POST-COLONIALISM IN *THE COLOR PURPLE*

It is impossible to read *The Color Purple* without being constantly reminded of Celie's racial identity. She speaks in a black vernacular and writes a variety of English that is heavily informed by her oral language. Celie's voice/pen is the essence of not only the story but the very text of which the story is made, and that, in turn, makes it impossible to underestimate the importance of her identity as a black woman. When approaching the issue of the peculiar narrative voice in *The Color Purple*, it is simply not possible to ignore the issues of gender and race. They are tightly woven together on the story's thematic level, and in a novel so overwhelmingly concerned with the act of speaking (or writing) as *The Color Purple*, it is unsurprising that they also are manifested in the narrative voice²⁶. *The Color Purple* is also a highly political novel, and is hardly subtle about its opinions about race, gender, and the problems surrounding these categories for the people who are placed within them.

In this chapter, I will show how the racial and sexual issues are emblematic representations of forms of colonialism – particularly in Walker's presentation of racism in the United States, as it is worked out in overt forms through the institution of slavery. Celie is born merely fifty years after slavery was abolished and lives in a society where the economic and social structures behind it have survived, if in more subdued forms. In the previous chapter, I showed that the mere use of the epistolary narrative acts as an indirect reference to the heyday of British colonialism in the Americas, and that *The Color Purple* functions as a revision of the genre. In this chapter, I will connect this to the recurring topic of colonialism in the novel. I will discuss the traces of post-colonialism that can be found in *The Color Purple*, and show how the revision of the epistolary narrative works as a way of overcoming the destructive white dominance that influences both Celie in the American South, and Nettie in a colonised Africa. Specifically, I will show that Celie's disobedience to the established standards of the form and Nettie's adherence to them mirror their respective stances in meeting the dominant white society.

Sexism, Racism and Colonialism in *The Color Purple*

Much of the conflict in *The Color Purple* has its source in tension that takes place not between persons as individuals, but between people of different social standing. Abuse of

²⁶ Gates Jr. Shows how African-American writers have paid attention to the problem of representing the black voice that was muted in so much "mainstream" (white) literature.

socially sanctioned power is what lies at the bottom of nearly all inter-personal conflict in the story: Alphonso in his part of the father, Albert as the husband, Samuel and Corrine as representatives of a colonial system, Miss Millie, Eleanor Jane and Doris Baines as white and upper-class people in a world order that gives them every privilege over the black and the poor. Men abuse women, white people abuse black people, and colonial empires abuse their colonial subjects.

Celie is the quintessence of the abused woman, deprived of her sexuality, her children, her self-respect and her ability to act against the people who do her wrong, and her story is one that carries a number of unstated parallels to the suffering of those who came before her. She records many different varieties of violence, but not all of them are of her own experience. The only white characters to take up any considerable story space in Celie's narrative is Eleanor Jane and, through her, her son Reynolds Stanley. Miss Millie is mainly present in Sofia's voice; Nettie contributes with the tale of the eccentric Englishwoman Doris Baines. Sofia is the character whose suffering through the racist system is most obvious, as the one who nearly takes her death from rebelling against the town's Mayor. The tragedy of the Olinka is a less direct but still devastating result of a racial ideology that has been so well institutionalised that not even the descendants of slaves are aware of it. The black missionaries are incapable of criticising the exploitation of native people who have neither technology, military power, political influence nor understanding of the processes of modernisation. To the native Africans, the greatest danger is not racism alone, but uncontrolled capitalism on a still colonised continent.

Colonialism and the Epistolary Novel

The epistolary novel thrived at the height of the British imperial ambitions, at the end of the first empire and the establishment of the second after the American War of Independence. This is a history that still bears weight in Celie's story, which takes place after the First World War as racial discrimination persists in the United States; it ends with the rise of the Second World War heralding the fall of the colonial empires and the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement. Walker refers heavily to the most successfully lasting example of the epistolary novels of the era, and the narrative connects Celie's story to the place where her troubles began. The British Empire is a looming shadow in *The Color Purple*, never explicitly debated but alluded to at a number of places, most brutally in the English rubber planters that

demolish the village of the Olinka, destroy the roofleaf that they worship and use to shield their homes, and leave them no choice but to either flee into the jungle, or survive by working for the plantation and getting the means of accepting tokens of the “modern” life at the mercy of what the plantation owners will grant them. The missionary work of Corrine and Samuel is also administered through London: while both French and Dutch imperialism is mentioned in the novel, it is the British Empire that works the most direct, and the most devastating, violence against the Olinka. The imperial past of the United States is explicitly brought up in the final scene of the novel, where Celie's extended family has a reunion on July 4, and Harpo remarks that they have this opportunity because the white Americans are celebrating their independence from England, “so most black folks don't have to work. Us can spend the day celebrating each other” (287). The barb is aimed at the white understanding of American history and white definition of patriotism: Harpo, descendant of slaves, has little reason to see meaning in a celebration of nationhood that is defined entirely by the actions of white men against other white men, with the exclusion of black people.

A less direct connection to Eighteenth century Britain is the presence of manufacturing industry in the novel. It was with the appearance of machines for spinning and weaving cotton that the Industrial Revolution grew, with a gradual demand of supplies and infrastructure to a growing variety of factories. The first machinery for production of fabric was invented in the middle of the Eighteenth century. This dawning industrialisation relied on cotton from the colonies overseas, produced with slave labour and ultimately responsible for the displacement of Africans onto the American continent. Celie and Harpo farm cotton on the land of Albert's father, bearing the name of a “_____ plantation” (72), and another character connected to this industry is Sofia. Her unwanted charge grows up to marry a man more interested in his father's cotton gin than in his family, and Miss Eleanor Jane complains about this to a less than sympathetic Sofia. The novel highlights the naivete of this woman by passing her complaints through Sofia's mouth, as Sofia's sons are drafted to war in Europe while Miss Eleanor Jane's husband stays with his family, because he has to “run his daddy's cotton gin” (262). Ruth Perry has discussed how women in the rapidly growing middle classes did not have any purposeful occupations except keeping homes, a consequence of how the industrial entrepreneurs were occupied with work involving managing the labour of others – a kind of work that was not performed by women except in the home. The industrialisation of Britain helped fuel the brutal slave trade, and it was also the force that slowly deprived women of

their economic influence and, in the case of the middle classes, their social inclusion. For the women of what was to become the working class, the consequence was alienation from their work similar to that of men: spinning and weaving had been typical industries that before the industrial revolution took place in the family home, and which now was removed to factories. Miss Eleanor Jane is the modern reincarnation of this woman who first lives on her father's earnings and later finds that marriage does not give her the bliss she expected. Her complaints are filtered through Celie, however, and neither Celie nor Sofia has much sympathy for the perceived suffering of someone speaking from a position of extreme privilege.

Fittingly, sewing is a symbol of the salvaging power of feminine values in *The Color Purple*. Quilting is the bond between several female characters; Shug first shows her sympathetic side as she sits down to sew with Celie, and Albert's friendship with Celie grows as she teaches him to sew. Quilting works as an allegory for Walker's revisionism in the novel, for quilts are made by taking old material that no longer can be used for its intended purpose, and use it to make something new that still carries the memories of the old inside it (it is with old dress fabric in a quilt that Nettie makes Corrine remember meeting Celie). Celie's first pair of trousers is sewn from a pair of army issue, passed down from Sofia's brother in law. The women in *The Color Purple* perform in the same industry that their British sisters were excluded from, but they do so in a communal, American crafting tradition²⁷.

Celie As A Figural Slave

The title of *The Color Purple* is written once in the text of the novel, spoken by Shug and recorded by Celie, as they talk about God, Celie's first confidant. It is evoked on several other occasions, and while they often involve Celie, a number of them also concern Sofia. Sofia is at once a foil to Celie, and a mirror to her: Sofia grew stronger by an abusive childhood home while Celie was broken, and both Celie and Sofia suffer the tyranny of people who believe that they have a natural right to dominate black women. Sofia is the most obvious descendant of slavery in the novel; she is viciously punished for her disobedience towards the white majority, and her fate is to become the novel's vessel of social criticism. Sofia, forced to become the white woman's maid, is a deconstruction of the Mammy stereotype. Sofia's lot as the slave is further established with a number of comparisons to Celie, such as the colour of

²⁷ One of the many parallels between Celie and Pamela is that they both make a living by sewing. Pamela, in the service of a good lady, has learned embroidery and ends up as Mr. B.'s prisoner in part because she insisted on staying in his house to finish embroidering a piece of clothing for him.

the clothes they wear: “I’m busy making pants for Sofia now. One leg be purple, one leg be red. I dream Sofia wearing these pants, one day she was jumping over the moon” (216), which goes back to the early years of Celie’s marriage to Albert, when Kate (Albert’s sister) takes her out to buy her new clothes. Celie imagines what colours Shug Avery would wear, and requests “somethin purple, maybe a little red in it too” (20); but there is no purple fabric in the store, and Kate thinks that Albert will refuse to pay for red. Celie and Sofia have remarkably similar family situations, and remarkably different: Sofia and her sisters fought their father and brothers where Celie and Nettie are intimidated into submission; Sofia leaves her home to marry the man she loves where Celie is forced away in an unwanted marriage; Sofia is taken in by her sister, while Celie takes in Nettie.

There is racial subtext in Celie’s portrayal as well, but not so obvious and not so current as in Sofia. Celie does not embody the popular image of the servile black woman of the early twentieth century, but the real life of the slaves a century before her time. Angela Y. Davis’ published her study *Women, Race and Class* in 1981, a year before *The Color Purple*, and we can trace the story of Celie’s life in it. Davis discusses how slavery has affected the family structures and the gender roles among African-Americans, with a particular focus on women.

In the economy of slavery, women were seen as the equals of men in terms of material output (“Since women, no less than men, were viewed as profitable labor-units, they might as well have been genderless as far as the slaveholders were concerned” [Davis 5]). Men could not function as the provider for the family, the nuclear family was impossible and the domestic sphere was the only place where the slaves could control their own lives and labour. These conditions shaped a view of women’s participation in work outside of the home that had to be radically different from that of the white family where the public sphere belonged to men, and the main aspiration of their wives was to function as homekeepers, mothers and gentle companions (they were, like their British sisters, excluded from all professional labour). Davis makes a thorough list of ways in which slavery affected the self-image of the black woman, and that list closely mirrors Celie’s life. Observe, for example, an early description of Celie’s life in Albert’s home:

Harpo no better at fighting his daddy back than me. Every day his daddy git up, sit on the porch, look out at nothing. Sometime look at the trees out front the house. Look at a butterfly in the light on the rail. Drink a little water in the day. A little wine

in the evening. But mostly never move. (...) Me and him [Harpo] out in the field all day. Us sweat, chopping and plowing. I'm roasted coffee bean color now. He black as the inside of a chimney. His eyes be sad and thoughtful. His face begin to look like a woman face (27)

The scene portrays Harpo and Celie as little more than practical slaves on Albert's farm (Davis notes that women and children were in particular demand as slave workers [Davis 10], and debunks the myth that female slaves were primarily domestic workers: "around the middle of the nineteenth century, seven out of eight slaves, men and women alike, were field workers" [Davis 5]). Their skin grows darker by their work and Harpo starts taking on a more feminine appearance (the gender roles turned upside-down is of course also a crucial part of his marriage to Sofia²⁸); Shug later makes a corresponding point about Celie, suggesting they sew her a pair of trousers: "You do all the work around here. It's a scandless, the way you look out there plowing in a dress" (146). Albert is economically dependent on Celie and Harpo's labour ("Old Mr. _____ [Albert's father] been selling off the place so that nothing much left but the houses and the fields. My and Harpo fields bring in more than anybody" [56]). This is foreshadowed already when he asks Alphonso for permission to marry Nettie, and Alphonso refuses but offers him Celie instead, and a cow: "She ugly. He say. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it" (8), to which Albert answers that he "never really look at *that one*" (emphasis added). Albert does not propose to Celie, but bargains with Celie's father. Celie is not a presence who merits as much as a human pronoun, "her"; she is an object for trade. Their debate about Celie is not a debate in which Celie has a say in who she is to marry and what her standing in the marriage will be, but a grotesque mirror of the slave markets of a century past:

Pa call me. *Celie*, he say. Like it wasn't nothing. Mr. _____ want another look at you.

I go stand in the door. The sun shine in my eyes. He's still up on his horse. He look me up and down. (...)

Turn round, Pa say.

I turn round. (...)

²⁸ See also his conversation with his aunt on page 21, where she tells him to help Celie with housework:

"Women Work. I'm a man.

You're a trifling nigger, she say. You git that bucket and bring it back full."

She good with children, Pa say, rattling his paper open more. Never heard her say a hard word to nary one of them. Just give 'em everything they ask for, is the only problem.

Mr. ____ say, That cow still coming?

He say, Her cow. (10-11)

Motherhood, essential to the female identity, was dismembered by slavery²⁹. In Davis' words, "Since slave women were classified as 'breeders' as opposed to 'mothers,' their infant children could be sold away from them like calves from cows" (Davis 7) and, for those who kept their children, "Unable to nurse their infants regularly, they endured the pain caused by their swollen breasts". She then relates an anecdote about women working slower because of the pain when they couldn't nurse, and being flogged as a result, "so that blood and milk flew mingled from their breasts" (Davis 9). Compare Celie:

He took my other little baby, a boy this time. But I don't think he kilt it. I think he sold it to a man an his wife over Monticello. I got breasts full of milk running down myself. He say Why don't you look decent? Put on something. But what I'm sposed to put on? I don't have nothing. (3)

Davis' final point is also one that helps us define Celie's position in the text: "the punishment inflicted on women exceeded in intensity the punishment suffered by their men, for women were not only whipped and mutilated, they were also *raped*." (23). Davis frames it outside of the sexual context, and rather as a form of violence that is both physical and mental:

If black women had achieved a sense of their own strength and a strong urge to resist, then violent sexual assaults – so the slaveholders might have reasoned – would remind the women of their essential and inalterable femaleness. In the male supremacist vision of the period, this meant passivity, acquiescence and weakness (24)³⁰

Rape is what leaves Celie without a voice in the story-world, which ironically is what makes her the author of the narrative that encompasses it. It is rape that breaks Celie so thoroughly that she is incapable of standing up against Albert's cruelty. Celie never revolts

²⁹ The alienation from her children is also Sofia's greatest sorrow – or at least point of verbal complaint – about her servitude to Miss Millie.

³⁰ In a psychoanalytical approach to the characterisation of Celie and Nettie and their different reactions to their childhood trauma, Charles L. Proudfit points out that the weight of the trauma that Celie suffers topples over into a condition known as "soul murder" (Proudfit 95). This, in turn, casts light on her repressed feelings and particularly the peculiar lack of rage directed at her parents and Albert.

against her stepfather, but there is another character who does not surrender to the terror of incestuous rape:

Squeak look round at all of us. Then take a deep breath. Mumble.

Say what? ast Odessa.

Yeah, say Shug, if you can't tell us, who you gon tell, God?

He took my hat off, say Squeak. Told me to undo my dress. She drop her head, put her face in her hands.

My God, say Odessa, and he your uncle (96)

Mary Agnes, who has a willing audience and *can* tell someone else than God, can stand up and move on and take back her identity, by demanding to be called by her proper name: “She stand up. My name Mary Agnes, she say” (97). The difference between Celie and Mary Agnes becomes even more pronounced after this, as the rape that can be spoken about gives Mary Agnes the strength to dismiss a diminutive nickname given her about her voice, and start singing despite her natural gifts working against her. Ultimately, she leaves her boyfriend and makes a career as a singer.

First she sing Shug's songs, then she begin to make up songs her own self.

She got the kind of voice you never think of trying to sing a song. It little, it high, it sort of meowing. But Mary Agnes don't care.

Pretty soon, us git used to it. Then us like it a whole lot. (98)

Colonialism and Sexism

Celie's enslavement to men links sexism and racism in the novel, and the condition has been thoroughly mapped by post-colonial critics. The era of classical colonialism was dominated by nations that were deeply entrenched in a view of the world in which the white man ruled over the others: over children, over women, and over the inferior races, most potently the native inhabitants of European colonies on other continents. A concept in post-colonial theory is that of the gendering of the colonised. In *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Ania Loomba discusses the tradition of depicting countries and continents – that which the colonial male conquered and protected – as women. Native women were portrayed to either desire the white man and being willing to give up on her old ways to get him, or as a victim that the coloniser had to save from the "savage" native man (Loomba 129-130): "the barbarity of native men

was offered as a major justification of imperial rule, and it shaped colonial policy" (Loomba 131). At the same time, deviant, "deprived" sexuality was commonly associated with the non-European colonised (both male and female) (Loomba 131-2). Loomba cites Helen Carr, who points out that

in the language of colonialism, non-Europeans occupy the same symbolic space as women. Both are seen as nature, not culture, and with the same ambivalence: either they are ripe for government, passive child-like, unsophisticated, needing leadership and guidance (...) or on the other hand, they are outside society, dangerous, treacherous, emotional (...) sexually aberrant, irrational, near animal (Carr 50)

The language of colonialism created a discourse where the colonising man stood in opposition to women and to the colonised (Loomba cites Nancy Leys Stepan, who write that "so fundamental was the analogy between race and gender (in scientific writing) that the major modes of explanation of racial traits were used to explain sexual traits" [Stepan 40]). This polarity between the white man and the other (female, black) created other patterns as well, such as the objectification of the Other by those with power and authority (Loomba 137). Kipling's tragically immortal words, "half devil and half child", could have been a natural description of women in a culture that refused to acknowledge them as the intellectual equals of men, but also was deeply afraid of women's sexuality.

This opposition between the white man and everybody else is doubly inflicted upon black women. As an object of both racism and sexism, the colonised women were wont to fully disappear from the picture of suppression: the victim of sexism was the white woman, the victim of racism the black man (Loomba 138). Loomba notes that in the societal changes brought on by colonialism, Christianity and colonial law would lead to further repression of women in colonized societies (Loomba 141), and it "intensified patriarchal oppression, often because native men, increasingly disenfranchised and excluded from the public sphere, became more tyrannical at home" (Loomba 142).

Walker moves a step beyond the outline given above and includes another outsider group in *The Color Purple* as she lets Celie talk not only as a black woman, but as a black lesbian. To this must be added that Celie's lesbianism (and Shug's bisexuality) is never treated as a problem in the novel, perhaps because the ruling ideas of female sexuality until recent decades were so centred on the phallus that the notion of female homosexuality was and is perceived as an impossibility by many. The only time Celie mentions the reactions others

have to her relationship with Shug, it is that Harpo and Sofia think “womens love just by accident” (260). Celie does not seem to think of their love for each other, sexual as well as romantic, as a *deviation* as much as an alternative that doesn't involve men. One can also take notice of the absence of vocabulary for such a relationship: there are no terms beyond husbands and boyfriends and wives and girlfriends, and having a husband and a boyfriend at the same time is hardly a problem (as demonstrated by Albert's first wife, as well as Harpo, Sofia, Mary-Agnes and the prizefighter). Shug is Shug and the only person beside Nettie to ever love Celie, and quite possibly the only person beside Nettie who Celie admits loving for large parts of the novel. She is certainly responsible of Celie's sexual liberation and reconquest of her body, but Celie has no word for “lover” – Shug is her “woman friend” (267).³¹

The novel repeatedly establishes racism and sexism as parallel forces in the novel, by comparisons between Celie and Sofia. For example, Celie's reaction to the discovery that Albert has been stealing Nettie's letters: “All day long I act just like Sofia. I stutter. I mutter to myself. I stumble bout the house crazy for Mr. _____ blood. In my mind, he falling dead every which a way. By the time night come, I can't speak” (120). This is an echo of Sofia in prison and as Miss Millie's maid: “I dream of murder, she say, I dream of murder sleep or wake” (98) and “Three years after she beat she out of the wash house, got her color and her weight back, look like her old self, just all the time think bout killing somebody” (100). Both Celie, in the wake of the discovery of Albert's cruelty, and Sofia, in her work for Miss Millie, are described as somehow less than alive (Celie 120, 123, 146; Sofia 131). We hear it more explicitly from Olivia's mouth, in one of Nettie's letters: “When I told her the Olinka don't believe in educating girls, she said, quick as a flash, They're like the white people at home who don't want colored people to learn” (156).

Nineteenth century American and British colonialism might not be the most obvious context for reading contemporary African-American literature, but it has a tangible presence

³¹ This is not necessarily an unrealistic portrayal: bell hooks writes, “We were not allowed to say negative, hateful comments about the people we knew who were gay. We knew their names, their sexual preference. They were our neighbors, our friends, our family. They were us – a part of our black community” (hooks 120); “I have talked with black folks who were raised in southern communities where gay people were openly expressive of their sexual preference and participated fully in the life of the community. I have also spoken with folks who say just the opposite” (hooks 121). She goes on, however, to note that where she grew up, “lesbians were talked about solely in negative terms” (hooks 121) because they defied the purpose of their womanhood: to bear children.

in *The Color Purple*. It is first and foremost present in Nettie's letters about the life in Africa and the ruin of the Olinka at the hands of European rubber planters, but the scars of America's own colonial past are not only present in the discrimination and abuse that the people around Celie suffer. In *The Color Purple*, the image of the black victim of the white colonisers is turned upside-down when black Americans having internalised the European culture of enlightenment and Protestant Christianity, go out to take on their part of the burden and bring the goodness of civilisation to their brothers and sister in the jungle. Their ultimate failure at saving the Olinka from their own harmful traditions and the European abuse has an echo in another black character who is working on helping the “poor natives”: the only one of Shug's children who wants to see his mother despite her “evil” life:

He a schoolteacher too and work on the Indian reservation. They call him the black white man. They have a word that mean that, too, and it really bother him. But even if he try to tell them how he feel, they don't seem to care. They so far gone nothing strangers say mean nothing. Everybody not a Indian they got no use for (267-8)

In the light of the connections between racism and sexism discussed above, it is not surprising when Walker draws several parallels between colonialism and masculinity. When it becomes clear that Celie is to marry and leave her childhood home, she and Nettie – having realised that knowledge is the key to liberation – study as much as possible before Celie's marriage will separate them.

The way you know who discover America, Nettie say, is think bout cucumbers. That what Columbus sound like. I learned all about Columbus in first grade, but look like he the first thing I forgot. She say Columbus come here in boats call the Neater, the Peter, and the Santomareater. Indians so nice to him he force a bunch of 'em back home with him to wait on the queen (9)

In Nettie's lesson about who discovered America and unintentionally laid the foundations for the devastation of the Native Americans and the African slaves, Columbus is named after a phallus (cucumber) and his ships (Santa Maria, Pinta, Santa Clara) have all received male names. In a foreshadowing of the failure of her mission in Africa, Nettie's first meeting with the Missionary Society is a disappointing episode that completely fails to recognise her existence as a black woman. “On every wall there was a picture of a white man. Somebody called Speke, somebody called Livingstone. Somebody called Daly. Or was it Stanley? I looked for a picture of a white woman but didn't see one” (137). In both these commentaries on colonialism, Nettie is unconsciously distorting fact that she passes on to

Celie as she fails to remember the correct names of men involved, and unconsciously taking notice of how colonialism and the institution working in its favour were associated with a strictly white, strictly male universe. The second episode, ironically, takes place in the paragraph after they have been introduced to the still unnamed Doris Baines, praised as a model for all to copy but in reality a person who undermined the “charitable” system as she did not become a missionary out of love of Africa, but used the system to escape from the life of a woman in the British upper classes. Doris, when she later appears in person, serves as a backwards, ambivalent and unintentional model for the kind of improvement that the “heathen” needed more than the well-intended but ultimately doomed religious and cultural doctrines that Samuel and Corrine preach. Her methods might have more beneficial results than those of the Missionary Society, but her motivation is not the well-being of the Africans, but her personal dissatisfaction with life in Britain. Her status among the Africans is the inverse of Nettie's – Doris Baines, the wealthy and ambitious white woman who became a missionary because she did not want the men presented to her and now writes adventure novels under a male pseudonym, is treated like a man, and given several wives. In comparison, Nettie's status among the Olinka is marked by the opposite: she is pitied because she is not married³², and has no other man who can take care of her.

Celie, Nettie, and the Colonial Experience

In the previous chapter of the thesis, I argued that there are substantial differences between the rhetoric in Celie's letters, and the rhetoric of Nettie's. In essence, it is impossible to say if Celie's letters are proper letters or if they have the function of diary entries, because Celie cleverly avoids almost all thematic concerns that normally follow either of those two narrative modes. Nettie, in contrast, faithfully follows the epistolary “formula” even if she is writing under conditions that in many ways can be compared to Celie's. Nettie also writes Standard English, and her spelling and grammar significantly becomes *more* standard as she lives with Corrine and Samuel, preparing to leave for Africa.

³² Nettie's status as “the unmarried teacher” among the Olinka is of course also a repetition of Alphonso's dismissal of Nettie and Celie's teacher: “Whoever listen to anything Addie Beasley have to say. She run off at the mouth so much no man would have her. That how come she have to teach school” (10), even as Alphonso later refuses Albert's proposal to Nettie because he wants to make her a teacher.

Revising and Reclaiming the English Language

Celie is only directly repressed by black men, not often by white people. Still, the shadow of a once-colonial nation still reaches her life through rude shopkeepers, her lynched father, and Sofia's fate within the legal system. The idea of “taking back” the language of the colonisers is a central motive in many literary works considered to be post-colonial: as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argued in *The Empire Writes Back*, “The crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing defines itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 37). In *The Color Purple*, there is no-one who can control the words that Celie puts down on paper as she writes highly private letters to recipients that will remain discrete. Celie's voice is empowered at the expense of Standard English and genre conventions; the narrative plays the most crucial thematic role in the story by being the catalyst of Celie's liberation. If it is peculiar that Walker tells Celie's story in letters, it is even more striking that it is told not in the Standard English Celie was taught to write, but in written black vernacular. Reading Celie's written word is an experience that is remarkably easy to mistake for reading Celie's *spoken* word, and it reinforces that the great mission of this novel is to give Celie a voice and the ability to tell her story.

The issue of Celie's spoken language breaks the surface of her narrative in an episode fairly late in the story, where Celie has hired two others to help her with her sewing: “Jerene and Darlene come help me with the business. They twins. Never married. Love to sew. Plus, Darlene trying to teach me how to talk.” (215). Jerene and Darlene are a curious pair in the novel, which has a rich secondary cast which remains present for considerable parts of Celie's life. Jerene and Darlene are never mentioned again after this letter, where Celie's brief introduction of them echoes the same conformity which their rhyming names and their status as twins seems to suggest. Is there any difference at all between Darlene and her sister? Celie does certainly not seem to think so, and responds with amusement to Darlene's attempts at spreading her conformity by teaching Celie to talk – the lack of adjectives like “properly” or “educated” suggests that Darlene does not consider Celie's dialect to be an acceptable language, because Celie is not “talking” unless she is speaking an acceptable form of the language. Celie is no grateful pupil. She puts up with the discussion, but does not conform and even censors Darlene's language by reporting it in her own dialect: “Darlene keep trying.

Think how much better Shug feel with you educated, she say. She won't be shame to take you anywhere” (215-216). But even though Celie never pays much attention to the politics behind the language she uses, there is a jab at something darker than stubborn individualism beneath the language she writes.

Every time I say something the way I say it, she correct me until I say it some other way. Pretty soon it feel like I can't think. My mind run up a thought, git confuse, run back and sort of lay down (...) Look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind (215-216).

Celie might not consciously recognise the power that lies in depriving people of their language, but following the theory of power and oppression in the wake of classical colonialism, the fool who would want to talk in a way that feels peculiar to her mind might not be so far removed from the woman who let her father, her mother, her husband, his lover and even his children abuse her, because she did not know that she could rebel against their authority, or that she could possibly stand up against a seemingly endless tsunami of abuse and contempt. To happily adopt the language of the coloniser is to implicitly admit that your own language is not good enough. Celie has been liberated from men, from the economic slavery of a racist society, and from the idea that she herself is worthless. Darlene, much as she might love to sew and might well have chosen to stay unmarried, is Celie's inferior because she has yet to understand the central purpose of Celie's text: Darlene believes that Celie's language, the very thing that liberated her by enabling her individuality to grow, is inferior because it is markedly black, and not an imitation of white, standard English.

Celie's non-standard use of the English language is important in itself, but also works as a more overt mirror to her non-standard approach to the medium in which she writes. Celie is empowered in part by her taking control of the English language and moulding it after her own preference, in stark contrast to Nettie who submits to the standardised language and the system that is part of the exploitation of the Africans. This conquest of language is mirrored in a conquest of genre: *The Color Purple* has a number of peculiarities for belonging to a tradition as conventionally straightforward as the epistolary novel. This is, again, something that is contributed by Celie: where Celie twists, bends and outright ignores the trademarks of epistolary language and form, Nettie conforms to them as she keeps account of her service to the colonial system that the novel attacks.

Celie, Nettie and the Epistolary Language

Altman's study focuses on older letter novels, and rarely discusses 20th century works. If we consider *The Color Purple* as a reference to epistolary novels before the advent of modernism, we also see that there are numerous stark contrasts between Walker's novel and her predecessors from the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Celie is not only a character living a radically different story than most epistolary heroines and a narrator whose voice is radically different from theirs in both dialect and orthography; she is also a writer whose letters escape some of the most fundamental functions associated with the form. There is a similar conclusion to be drawn from any consideration of Celie's writing as a disguised diary: Perry charts the social background for the confessional and self-reflecting writing of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and mentions the virtues of keeping a diary in the Puritan tradition. Recording the details of one's life was a religious exercise – "God's Divine Purpose could be discerned in the shape of a person's life" (Perry 65) – and a personal practice of "self-examination" so as to be able to become a better person. Celie eludes the narrative customs that Abbot means to find in the diary form, as well as the intellectual purpose that diaries were given in the age to which her writing is directed. She starts writing to God with a request for an answer that will give meaning to the violence she suffers, but instantly abandons this in favour of a simple narrative that is not directed at her own self and devoted to contemplation of her inner life – rather, it is the story of the people around her, and how they cope with the world.

The first words that Nettie speaks in the novel are about the discovery of America, as she teaches Celie how to remember Columbus' name. She goes on to become a representative for a colonial system, as she leaves for Africa together with Samuel and Corrine, full of good intentions and hopes for their brothers and sisters who need their help, "Christ and good medical advice" (131). In her early letters, Nettie speaks about her wish to help the Africans with the conviction that hers will be a different part than those of the white people who came before her because she is not white, she is not European, and she and her ancestors have also suffered at the hands of white people. In essence, however, it is still the language of the belief that the enlightened, industrial world needs to save their primitive brethren from their ignorance. For all their good intentions, Nettie, Samuel and Corrine are working on behalf of an organisation that is run by white people and works with the blessing of the colonial

authorities. Nettie has few kind things to say about the representatives from the Missionary Society that she meets, but she, Samuel and Corrine have not escaped its narrative about where white and black people belong: Nettie's observations about Africa's past glory and present misery are interrupted by the tale of Sofia, which she heard from Samuel and Corrine. In their telling, it has become the story of how the Mayor took Sofia out of prison and let her work for his family after she had attacked him. The first several letters that Nettie sends from Africa are not about their daily life with the Olinka, but the journey there. She keeps faithful record through New York and the Harlem Renaissance, London and the colonial spoils in the British Museum, Senegal with all its white people and Monrovia where the black people act like white people. It culminates with the journey from the coast to Olinka, first in canoes up the river, and then being carried in hammocks through the jungle. It is a narrative reminiscent of those of white explorers documenting their journeys to exotic locations and peoples³³, complete with a certain didactic purpose to the reader: in the two letters that Nettie uses to completely describe the Olinka people and the daily life of the missionaries among them, she uses parenthesis to explain the vocabulary that she apparently does not expect Celie to know.

Even if she might be the one whose life seems to be initially more “successful”, having avoided the abuse of father and husband, been unusually well schooled and seen much of the world, Nettie returns from Africa fairly empty-handed³⁴. She has not saved the Olinka, far less Africa, far less taught them to treat their women better or how to save themselves from threats both from the outside and the inside. The village is lost, the Olinka will not take to the traditional Christian teachings that the missionaries initially brought them – the missionaries, in fact, abandon these ideas themselves in favour of a spirituality closer to the one that Celie finds in the pivotal scene in the novel. Everything that Nettie devoted her life to has been for nothing; she predicts that they will live in poverty when they return to the United States. In contrast to this we see Celie’s thriving business, as she makes good money on doing something that she loves. Celie has taken over the house of the man who caused them so

³³ Perry talks about the popularity of this literature in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, see Perry 6-8.

³⁴ See Proudfit: “Nettie brings nothing to this reunion [the end of the novel] that is truly hers (...) when she arrives at Celie's and her house, she is accompanied by a dead woman's husband and a living woman's grown children” (Bloom 107). Proudfit argues that while Celie buckles under the weight of the trauma of her childhood and adolescence and is then healed during the course of the novel, Nettie early on develops a “false self”, a defence mechanism that complies with the demands of the outside world while erasing her individualism (Bloom 104 – 108).

much pain, reformed Albert and found in him a friend of a kind she never had before, gotten Shug back for good, and found a spirituality that gives her life a meaning and joy that looked impossible for her when the novel began. It is also important to remember that Nettie's narrative is completely subordinate to Celie's: if Celie's story did not exist, we would never have heard Nettie's.

In this light, it makes sense that Nettie should write letters which correspond so well with the stylistic and thematic characteristics of the “traditional” epistolary novel. It is not only history and religion she learns from Samuel and Corrine: her written language also changes as she lives with them. The first letter she sends Celie is written in Standard English, but makes use of a number of dialectal forms (“when I left you all's house (...) you know how he do (...) my bundles was heavy (...) he was some mad” [126]). These disappear soon after she comes to stay with the missionaries and prepare to go to Africa, and as Nettie learns more conventional history, so does her language become that of those who told that same history. Celie maintains a dialect that marks her race and her social status, but Nettie's language becomes indistinguishable from the very white people who she believes she is different from. In the end, it is not only in language that Nettie contrasts to Celie: where Celie's narrative is a rejection of the epistolary mode as it was established by white, British writers of the seventeenth century, Nettie's letters submit to this idea of epistolary writing and letter novels in style, in themes and in rhetoric.

Race, Nationality, and Finding Your People

The epistolary novel of the eighteenth century was not directly connected to Britain's colonial ventures, and *Pamela* is not obviously a colonial work, set in the English countryside and among the landed gentry, and focused on the plight of a servant imprisoned by her master. Even if we read *The Color Purple* to be a post-colonial revision of it, *The Color Purple* must be seeking to take the literature of colonial Britain and re-make it in the image of the now-liberated once-slave, reversing not only its portrayal of relationship between husband and wife, but also using this to make a wider commentary on the relationship between black and white, European and African. The connection with *Pamela*, however, has a curious effect on the historical implications that this revision raises.

In *The Imaginary Puritan*, Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse suggest that the British novel did not (as it is normally assumed) grow out of the existing European tradition. They set *Pamela* as the work that initiated the novel form, and find the roots of her story not in European literature, but in the captivity narratives of the American colonies. Many of these narratives were published before the American revolution, in a time when the colonists still identified themselves as European and England existed not only on the island of Great Britain, but on the American continent as well. It follows that what is today considered early American literature was *then* considered (colonial) English literature. Armstrong and Tennenhouse believe that the novel appeared when colonial writing was taken back to the motherland, significantly in the popular captivity narratives (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 204). It was in the meeting between the English society and the alienated colonial experience of the captivity narratives that *Pamela* was conceived.

The core of the captivity narratives was a battle of identity, where writing became the way to maintain one's Englishness, to refuse to go native (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 203). The individual writer is alone, surrounded by barbaric strangers menacing her existence by threatening to rob her of her national identity and force her to become one of them instead. By writing about their trials, the authors of the captivity narratives confirmed their national identity, and the captives' isolation meant that their narratives were limited to a single consciousness amidst a mass of others (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 207). The survival of this consciousness meant the survival of the English. It is this battle that in *Pamela* is transported to a manor house and transformed so that the battle of consciousness no longer is a struggle to keep a national identity, but a struggle to keep a virginity. Like the heroine of the captivity narrative, Pamela is forcefully taken away from her family and imprisoned by a presence who seeks to possess her and take away her control of herself; like them, she struggles to return to her family and the place she came from. Like them, Pamela takes to writing to preserve her consciousness and her identity; the setting is different, but the conflict is the same, and the readers accepted it more than willingly: "most readers appear to have accepted Pamela's view that it was better to die than have sex with anyone but one's husband. Could it be that they heard in her protests the sentiments of colonial heroines responding to the Indian menace?" (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 209). *Pamela* and the captivity narratives reconstructed English nationality when survival of the nation no longer is a question of the survival of the upper

classes, but the survival of the common man and woman – in Pamela's case, survival in a struggle against the upper classes that made the law and the state.

Writing is a means of survival in *The Color Purple* as well, but Celie is not a prisoner of hostile strangers. Celie is a prisoner of her own broken spirit: Nettie, Sofia and Kate all urge her to fight against Albert, because she is the only one who can save herself. The struggle between Celie and the men who abuse her is not a matter of identity, because they are all of the same “nation”: Celie does not stand to lose her identity at the hands of aliens, because it is her own people that represses her. Celie's freedom comes the moment she can articulate her own existence out loud, to the people who controlled her by refusing to acknowledge her as an individual.

In *The Color Purple*, we meet a cast of characters for whom nationality is a force of exclusion. For Samuel, Corrine and Nettie, arriving in Africa is a religious experience, and it is the return to “the land for which our mothers and fathers cried – and lived and died – to see again” (143). The Olinka do not share this view – to Tashi's father, there is no difference between Americans and Britons, or white and black people from elsewhere: “You Christians come here, try hard to change us, get sick and go back to England, or wherever you came from” (161). A similarly suggestive comment is made in the novel's final scene, where Celie's reunited family is having a barbecue – like the Olinka – and Harpo comments that the 4th of July is when white people celebrate their independence from England, so that black people can have the day off and celebrate each other. American nationalism, as defined by the white society, does not include the black folks.

Nationalism is one of the many institutions that are questioned and rejected in *The Color Purple*. Samuel, Corrine and Nettie look at Africa as the lost motherland that they must save and see the Africans as their “brothers and sisters”, but they learn that they can never be Africans. Just like the American society mistreats them because of their ethnicity, the African society rejects them because of their nationality. They can never become Olinka, but the Olinka nationality is itself problematic in the horrible sacrifices it demands that women make to show their belonging. The most obvious example is that Tashi undergoes female genital cutting to affirm her identity as an Olinka woman (it is indeed particularly precious to her because it is uniquely African and not performed in Europe and Africa). Nettie sees the abusive home in which she and Celie grew up mirrored in the entire Olinka society and the

roles delegates to women and men: “There is a way that the men speak to women that reminds me too much of Pa. They listen just long enough to issue instructions. (...) They [the women] look instead at his feet or his knees. And what can I say to this? Again, it is our own behavior around Pa” (162). This is also one of the novel's many comparisons between racism and sexism, because Alphonso does not only abuse women, but uses compliance to the white society for his own personal gain, even if it is to the damage of black people at large.

Celie's and Nettie's struggles with their place in a society dominated by white people are brought together towards the end of the novel. Of the letters in the novel, there are two that in particular stand out because of their length: Nettie's letter about the journey she, Samuel and the children make to London, and Celie's letter about her final reconciliation with Albert; they are, respectively, fifteen and eighteen pages in length. These two letters mirror each other in content as well: in the centre is a conflict between black and white that is mirrored in a lengthy tale of in-story mythology. A bitter truth is acknowledged (the Africans do not appreciate the effort of the missionaries; Celie must resign herself to a life without Shug). There is a confrontation with sexual love (Samuel; Shug), and Celie's rape, the great secret that started the whole story, is revealed on both sides of the Atlantic (to Adam and Olivia in England, and Albert in the US). Both letters open with an observation about how they are growing older and their bodies are changing as they age; both letters mirror the emotional state of the two sisters in their mobility (Nettie travels to England newly in love; Celie is left behind to receive postcards from Shug, who is crossing the continent with her young lover). Both letters end with the greetings of a husband – Samuel sends his love, while Celie finds that Albert “ain't Shug” (276), but is becoming someone she can talk to. It is in these two letters that the Second World War enters the novel, and in these two letters that the novel sheds light on the Indians, who suffered worse at the hands of European colonialism than the Africans – slaves or not – did. In fact, the black presence is unintentionally erasing the Indian. Most importantly, it is in these two letters that the two most prominent white presences in the story are brought to light and confronted.

In the early parts of both letters is the portrayal of a dysfunctional interracial family relation; it is followed by a conversation between husband and wife – past and future – in which they come to change their view on their lives through the discoveries made. In Nettie's letter, we find Doris Baines and her “grandson” Harold – born to one of the women that Doris

was given for wives when she arrived in Africa, sent to England for education, and subsequently gave away to African men. Harold appears to care for his grandmother, but “her verbosity produced in him a kind of soberly observant speechlessness” (231). Doris tells the story of her life over considerable space in Nettie's letter, in a manner that prompts the writing Nettie to interrupt her several times to take note of how her (boring) tale was dominating the conversation on the entire journey from Africa to England. Doris is also a writer by profession, a novelist writing under a male pen name, a “run-away success” in America and England (230) who has used her skills for the benefit of the tribe she is staying with: she has written “reams of paper in their behalf: about their culture, their behaviour, their needs, that sort of thing” (230); she has mastered their language and used it to deceive the Missionary Society, and used her family's fortune to build facilities for her tribe. Doris, we learn, *owns* the village of Akwee and intends to use her wealth to stop the colonisers that ruined the Olinka; her educated “daughters” will see an end to the female genital cutting. Doris tells a story in which she has succeeded in the places where Samuel, Corrine and Nettie failed, but her relationship to the tribe she claims ownership to is best expressed in her grandson. The tribe is silent; it is Doris who speaks and writes treatises on their behalf, and her view on the “heathens” is patronising. Doris became a missionary because she did not want to marry, and instead took the place as an indifferent matriarch (“*grandmama*”) to the tribe. Doris in fact believes she has learned mothering from the Akwee, who do not beat or otherwise violently punish children.

When in England, Samuel and Nettie meet a bishop to ask for help for the Olinka, but the man is more concerned about Nettie's presence with Samuel now that Corrine is passed away. This is followed by the conversation in which Nettie and Samuel discover their mutual love for each other, one which Samuel starts by telling how he met Corrine through their aunts, Althea and Theodosia. Althea and Theodosia were missionaries together in Belgian Congo, and the stories of their adventures were a source of amusement and amazement to Samuel and Corrine, who caricatured them in comics. Theodosia and Corrine both attended the Spellman Seminary, which fostered an astounding will to do well for black people in its well-bred students. Samuel also claims that many students at Spellman were of mixed race, descending not from black and white, but from black and Indians that refused to be relocated. Most people did not know about their Indian heritage but assumed their Indian traits were from a white ancestry, and Corrine, he claims, was one of them. Among the “Indian” qualities

Samuel detected in her is one curious ability: “she could erase herself, her spirit (...) when she knew the people around her could not respect it” (235). He believes that this ability might have played its part in Corrine's death, for she used to tell him that the Olinka “resented” the missionaries. He also relates the story of Theodosia's medal, which she had been awarded by King Leopold for her service in his colonies. Theodosia told the story of how she received it to a group of younger people, but her pride in it is shattered by a young “Edward DuBoyce” who brusquely tells her that her medal symbolises her service to one of the most infamously brutal colonial regimes. Samuel sees something of himself in Theodosia and her wish to be appreciated, and finally admits his grief over how the Africans refuse to consider the African-Americans as part of them – worse, their refusal to recognise them as the “brothers and sisters they sold” (237). Samuel acknowledges that he has spent his life on a futile mission: “We failed so utterly (...) we became as comical as Althea and Theodosia” (236).

In the letter from Celie, we first see her finding Albert to be an increasingly agreeable presence, telling us that they talk about the past, but not about Sofia's troubles. Sofia's troubles are not over yet, because Miss Eleanor Jane is still demanding that Sofia gives her the emotional support that her family will not. In one of the places where Celie seems to step completely aside and take up the full role of the secretary, Sofia tells about how Miss Eleanor Jane introduced Sofia to her husband, Stanley Earl. Sofia fakes politeness in the face of the white family, and her inability to freely express herself to them is made worse by her daughter's non-vocal but very much audible rebellion: “Henrietta turn the radio up loud in the back room. I have to almost holler to make myself understood” (261). The only attention Stanley Earl pays to Sofia's family concerns the photographs of her sons in uniform, about which he asks if she knows where they will be stationed (she does not), and remarks that he would have gone to fight, but needs to stay behind to run his fathers cotton gin and supply the army with clothes. “Too bad they not fighting in Africa. He laugh. Miss Eleanor Jane smile” (262). Miss Eleanor Jane's more subdued reaction to her husband's ignorance is further backed up by her attention to parts of Sofia's family which he ignores: she has brought food for the ill Henrietta.

Miss Eleanor Jane's eventual revolt against the rest of her family and the ignorance that her husband is exemplifying is set into motion in a second confrontation between her and Sofia, this one narrated by Celie, who is present to observe it. This time, Miss Eleanor Jane

has brought her son along as she visits Sofia, and is fishing for compliments. It is here that Sofia finally speaks up against the Mayor's family, as she tells Miss Eleanor Jane that she does not care about her son. Sofia sees the child as just another future source of trouble, who is messing up her house before he has turned a year old. When Miss Eleanor Jane protests that it is "unnatural" for Sofia not to love the child, Sofia tells her that there can be dire consequences for the black person who disagrees with someone white: "Some colored people so scared of whitefolks they claim to love the cotton gin" (265). Miss Eleanor Jane has mistaken Sofia's indifferent care for love, and Sofia admits that the two might have been unfortunate comrades in one aspect: they were the only ones showing the other "some human kindness" in Miss Eleanor Jane's family. The confrontation leaves them both upset, and Sofia ends it with telling Celie "It's times like this make me know us didn't make this world. And all the colored folks talking bout loving everybody just ain't looked hard at what they though they said" (267).

This is followed by the only letter in the novel not written by Celie or Nettie, but by Shug: it tells about her son, a teacher on an Indian reservation who is upset that the Indians call him "the black white man". The Indian's attitude towards Shug's son is the same that Samuel despairs of in the Olinka: Indifference.

The letter ends with a long conversation in which Celie tells Albert about the Olinka, particularly about how the Olinka understands the biblical creation myth. In their understanding of it, Adam was not the first man, but the first white man. White children born to the Olinka were killed in infancy, and Adam became the first who lived. The Olinka chased away the white children because of the way they looked, and they chased away the others – those who became slaves – because their actions did not conform to the society. In this telling, the African-Americans are the serpent, angry and lusting for revenge after being thrown out of paradise. The Olinka prophesise that the outcast children will destroy each other and the world, although some disagree and believe that with the "biggest white folks" gone, the remaining will understand that they can only survive by accepting each other as children of one mother. The Olinka, Celie also tells us, admire and worship the snake. When Celie's son Adam first arrived, the Olinka gave him a new name: Omatangu, which means "the first man who knew he was not naked". Celie and Albert both agree that the Olinka mythology is flawed.

The core of both these letters is the grief of the outsider: Samuel's desperate wish for acceptance among the Olinka, and Sofia's refusal to acknowledge Eleanor Jane as a daughter because she knows that she never was a mother, but a servant. They show African-Americans as trapped between the continents: outcasts in the United States, overlooked in Europe, colonial oppressors in Africa.

In Doris Baines and Miss Eleanor Jane, we can again see the novel rejecting the masculine norm and preferring the feminine sphere: Doris Baines has adopted a male persona both outside (her pen name) and inside (her status as a man among the Akwee), with the consequence that she has conquered both the physical village of Akwee and the voice of the Akwee people to the outside world. Doris has not reared any children on her own, preferring to play the part of the doting, but distanced, grandmother. Miss Eleanor Jane, as detailed above, is a modern stand-in for the typical epistolary heroine, and a mother who will not let her son be "mean to the colored" (266), unhappy in her marriage but incapable of seeing herself leaving it. However, Eleanor Jane is taught to listen to the voice of black people, and in doing so, she reforms. She does not intrude into Sofia's house any longer, but uses her better equipped kitchen to make food that Henrietta will eat. This is also visible in the way the two talk about the Second World War. Doris Baines is returning to England because she does not intend to "miss" this war like she did the last one; she can see the preparation for the war in the colonies, but does not seem to care about the consequences for people other than "hers", the Akwee; Eleanor Jane brings the war into conversation indirectly through her husband, who works the cotton gin; his wife, we will soon learn, will come to see him in a far less romantic light. She sees the faults in him that Doris Baines, however much she rejected the aristocratic men who courted her when she was young, cannot see in the system promoting the war on her side of the story.

This difference between Doris and Eleanor Jane indicates another unspoken preference in the novel: that of the future over the past. There are no answers to be found in the past of *The Color Purple*. Celie, Shug and Albert all have negative relationships with their parents – Celie's mother is blind to the abuse of her daughter, Shug's parents cast her out because of her illegitimate children, and there are several parallels between Albert and his father³⁵, although

³⁵ Albert's refusal to let Harpo marry Sofia exactly mirrors his father's refusal to let him marry Shug; the scene in which Albert's father comes to scold his son for having taken in Shug mirrors the one in which Sofia comes to visit Albert and tell him that she intends to marry Harpo.

Albert reforms as he remembers how he once used to love cooking and sewing, like his mother did. The second generation hints that change is happening: both Sofia and Harpo have bad experiences with their parents, but also restores them. Harpo initially follows Albert's lead, and believes that to be a "proper" man, he must mistreat his wife. Much like Celie, Sofia comes from a home with an abusive father and a mother incapable of protecting her children. Her mother is a curious figure who is mentioned twice in the novel: once in the very beginning, when Sofia compares Celie to her and describes her as such: "she under my daddy thumb. Naw, she under my daddy foot. Anything he say, goes. She never say nothing back" (41). The second time is towards the end, when Celie returns from Memphis to attend her funeral. Sofia's tone has changed dramatically: "Mama fight the good fight. If there's a glory anywhere she right in the middle of it" (218)³⁶. These two come together in the novel's scepticism towards *fathers* in particular: It is Tashi's father who is the most verbally sceptical of her friendship with Olivia, it is in the chain from "Old Mr. _____" to Albert and finally to Harpo that the story of spousal abuse repeats itself, and it is in from the patriarchal religion that Celie turns away: Alphonso is not merely a representative of the cruellest kind of abuse of women, but indeed also of the Christian God. After her mother's death, Celie's letters start confusing him with God, in the passage "I say God took it.

He took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods" (2), where it only in the next letter becomes clear that the "he" in this sentence is not God, but Alphonso. In the letters before her marriage to Albert, Celie refer to him as "he" more often than as "Pa", and eventually uses the divine capitalisation on the pronoun. "Mr. _____ finally come right out and ast for Nettie hand in marriage. But He won't let her go" (6), and on the next page, once again on the topic of Nettie, "Well, He say, real slow, I can't let you have Nettie" (7). Alphonso is textually placed as a tangible, earthly representation of the same God that we later learned instructed Celie to "Honor father and mother no matter what" (42), an indirect divine sanction of his cruelty based on an assumption as fundamentally inhumane as those arguing the natural defences of sexism and racism: his position as her father excuses all cruelty, of all kinds, towards her. It is after the final confrontation with Alphonso that Celie

³⁶ The first we see of Albert's reformation is during this funeral, in which the similarities between Sofia's mother and Celie are revisited: "When he walk by the casket to review Sofia mother's body he stop, whisper something to her. Pat her shoulder. On his way back to his seat he look over at me. I raise my fan and look off the other way" (222)

and Shug found what is to become Celie's spiritual family: having both been rejected by their families through the actions of their mothers, they become "each other's people" (183).

It is not in rejection of the white society that Celie finds her place and her people, because Celie hardly acknowledges it enough for there to be anything to reject. Celie finds her place as she learns to love herself as a black woman: what is rejected is the harmful patterns that have been repeated by the generations before her. Over and over in the novel, change happens when daughters rebel against the destructive mindsets of their parents: Celie's rejection of the god that Alphonso embodies, Shug's refusal of her mother's narrow definition of love, Sofia's dismissal of the opinions of her father and her father-in-law, Tashi turning away from the limited life of a traditional Olinka woman, and Eleanor Jane standing up for Sofia against her family. Samuel and Nettie discover that it is impossible for them to become Africans, and that any future they might hope for will be in the United States. Meanwhile, Celie teaches Albert that categories like "women" and "men" and how each are meant to behave only work to limit each person's happiness, and Sofia seems to convince Eleanor Jane to see the world from the perspective of black people. It is not as sharply articulated as many other points in the novel, but one recurring lesson in *The Color Purple* is that it can be a dangerous practice to identify yourself by the place and the people you came from, rather than finding out who you are on your own.

CONCLUSION

When I first started working on this thesis, my intention was mainly to study *The Color Purple* from a narratological point of view. I initially focused on investigating the text with a background on studies done on the epistolary novel, but quickly discovered that this would not suffice: Walker's novel conforms to the epistolary novel in name and little else, and in fact appears to be intentionally rejecting nearly all tropes and conventions associated with the form. A secondary focus of my thesis became to uncover *why* she was doing this. As I have argued, I believe the answer to that is to be found in Walker's African-American background and the novel's concern with colonialism. Gates Jr. devoted *The Signifying Monkey* to tracing the history of African-American literature, with particular focus on the problem of representing the black voice – a question which he finds as far back in African-American writing. He uses the ritual of signifyin(g) as a symbol of literary revision within the African-American tradition, and makes the convincing argument that one of the functions of *The Color Purple* is indeed to be a loving revision of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Literary revision, however, is also a powerful tool with which an outsider can approach the texts of the mainstream. As Nancy Walker puts it:

Appropriating a literary genre in order to review or even reverse its assumptions, ideologies, or paradigms is one of several ways in which a writer may alter an inherited tradition (...) to rework a specific text by a specific author (...) is to exercise a different kind of disobedience, one that questions the singularity and ownership of certain themes, plots, tropes, and narrative strategies. Such revisions are a way not only to subverting the traditional text, but also of laying claim to it, entering into dialogue with it on an equal plane. (Walker, N., 4-5)

In *The Color Purple*, I believe that we can see Alice Walker challenging both the tradition of the epistolary novel, as well as the specific novel *Pamela*, the perhaps most emblematic work of the genre. Lorna Martens makes the following claim:

forms take on the connotations of functions with which they have been frequently or familiarly associated. One finds in the history of genres an increasing tendency to play on such intertextual resonance. A writer can evoke connotations just by choosing a form, and indeed, it becomes difficult to use an old form innocently. (Martens 190)

The letter novel is no exception from this assessment. The form occupies a considerable space in the history of the English novel, and a number of tropes and motives have traditionally been associated with it. In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker has written a letter novel that reaches back to this past by rejecting it: Celie's life is an inversion of the values posed by

epistolary novel of Richardson's time. The expected preoccupations of a woman of the British middle classes in the eighteenth century – church, children, spouse – only bring her misery. She cannot find satisfaction by following their ideal, and must instead invent one of her own, like she invents their genre anew. Celie finds happiness when she is free to love who she wants, to embrace her sexuality and most importantly, to raise her voice. Celie's marriage to Albert, in particular, seems to be constructed as a cruel mirror of the life of Pamela Andrews. The greatest deviation, however, is perhaps to be found in the novel's peculiar undermining of the very form: letters are normally written out of a wish to keep up a correspondence, and to maintain contact with a beloved person that cannot be reached through other means. Celie writes letters that are not read, and Celie *knows*, at least in part, that they will not be read. Writing letters is a method of survival until she finds someone who is willing to acknowledge her existence for long enough to listen to her voice. By far the hardest blow that Celie seems to suffer in the novel (except for the rape which initiates her writing) is when Shug leaves her; in the scene where Shug confesses, Celie regresses. Incapable of speaking, she answers Shug in written notes. But Shug is not Celie's correspondent, and Shug is not the beginning and the end of Celie's life. Celie writes letters that no-one reads, and comes to acknowledge that the only person she can depend on for happiness is herself. It is here that *The Color Purple* parts way with the letter novel not only in content and tradition, but on the most fundamental functions of it as well: it is in her solitude that Celie finds her happy ending. Even if Shug does not come back, even if Nettie never read her letters, Celie has learned to be content. This insight would have been impossible for her if she had been writing with Nettie in a true correspondence. In the second-to-last letter in the novel, in the paragraph in which Celie finds that she can be happy without Shug and figures that this was the lesson she was supposed to learn, Albert talks about his daughters, born to his first wife and raised by Celie. “My girls so far off into mens and religion they can't hardly talk. Everytime they open they mouth some kinda plea come out” (282). This simple statement is by no means incidental: it is an apt description of where Celie might have been if she had not learned to love herself for who she is.

Celie's letters do not reach their intended audience, but their effect on Celie cannot be overestimated: they are a testimony to her existence. Letters to God cannot be mailed, and must – most readers presume when nothing else is mentioned – be kept somewhere where Celie herself can read them whenever she wants to. Because her letters read like such faithful

recordings of Celie's own voice, and because they remain as physical objects in her life, they prove that she is still alive, that she exists even if the world around her marginalises her presence. Still, Celie is liberated in acts of speaking, proving that it is not enough to be able to write letters to prove to herself that she exists, but that recognition from the community around her is necessary as well. It is only when she can make others listen to her that Celie can confront them. Her spoken voice is more powerful than her written words, but her written words imitates her voice so expertly that there is little difference between the two. Celie speaks herself free, but her written voice remains as the physical object that can constitute a novel and become a part of the national canon.

There remains little doubt that the main objective of *The Color Purple* is to give Celie a voice, both in the story-world and in the American literary tradition. In a novel whose ultimate purpose is to be the voice of a muted person, the form that this voice takes cannot be accidental. It is particularly relevant when analysing a work in which the muted voice is narrating from the position of one whose indigenous language has been attacked and perhaps annihilated by foreign occupants seeking to overtake the native culture. *The Color Purple* is rife with colonial problems, and it manifests them in two letter-writers who live in markedly different worlds, but who both suffer in the shadow of white colonialism. One is the embodiment of slavery who liberates herself when she gains the ability to speak out loud the things she could previously only write. The other is a missionary in Africa who discovers that she is powerless to stop the forces exploiting the continent and the people who live there. Celie stands against the society that has defined her language as “inferior” because it is spoken by “inferior” people, and triumphantly preserves her story in the independent and nonconforming language of her resistance. Nettie, representing colonial interests, conforms to its standards of “proper” and educated language, seeking to imitate the white idea of perfection rather than finding a black one. This is, as I discussed in Chapter 3, no new practice in post-colonial writing. In *The Color Purple*, however, we see the use of language mirrored in the use of form. Many people describe Celie's letter-writing as a diary, but as I showed in Chapter 2, this does not seem to be the case; they do at least not fulfil the purpose that most people have come to associate with diaries, real or fictional. Celie claims that her entries are “letters”, and keeping in mind Martens' statement about the weight of genre and Walker's references to earlier letter novels, I believe that that must also be what we, as her readers, approach them as. Nettie's perfect adherence to the conventions that Altman finds in the

classical epistolary novels shows that it is no coincidence that Celie turns away from the traditional use of the form. When Nettie writes in a language she is taught by a colonial organisation, and writes the genre of the colonial powers without challenging its conventions, it is nothing but predictable that a story celebrating black identity – in Africa as well as in America – chooses to repress her voice, and to ultimately cast her as the lesser successful of the two sisters even though she starts on a much better ground than Celie.

The Color Purple is letter novel in which the letters of the main narrator do not read like letters as most readers will expect them. They are so thoroughly coloured by her oral speech that they in fact seem indistinguishable from it, if not for the crucial effect that the letter form imposes on her narrative: she is not a retrospective narrator who knows how her tale ends, and neither is it a stream-of-consciousness narrative in which the narrating appears to take place in the present: Celie is set in a situation in which she experiences first and writes it down afterwards, but she narrates in a manner that makes it unusually difficult to tell the two apart. Celie's spoken language muddles the distinction between past and present, which becomes another peculiarity in comparison with the expected narrative function of the letter novel. However small it is, there is a distance between the experiencing and the narrating self³⁷, but this distance often seems to be non-existent in Celie's letters. Bray believes that free indirect discourse in fact originated from the tension between the past (experiencing) self and the present (writing) self in letter novels: it was from the confrontation between an individual and its previous self that a new notion of consciousness arose (Bray 2). He shows that both the writers of and the writers in epistolary novels often were conscious of the difference between the self that was writing and the self that was experiencing, and finds early examples of free indirect discourse in letters where the writer switches to the voice of his past self without any textual markers of these flashbacks. Gates shows that the similar process is taking place in Janie: it is after she recognises the difference between her outer and her inner self, that she truly starts invading the voice of the narrator in free indirect discourse. Celie never makes any discoveries of this sort: in the pivotal scene of her transformation, the thing that Celie finds is that she exists: "I'm here". The reality of this statement is of course that Celie is not only *there*, she is *everywhere*. The story-world of *The Color Purple* exists entirely as Celie's words, and Celie's words are a tangible presence in it because Celie's letters must exist in this world, as objects that can be touched and seen and read. Unlike Janie's voice, which is

³⁷ See Genette 155, Stanzel 211

spoken and only realised through the presence of a third-person narrator, Celie's letters exist independent of other narrators: the one who decides how to put Celie's word onto the page is Celie herself. This unity is reflected in her narrative voice, in which Celie merges past and present with little effort. Gates argues that it is in free indirect discourse that Walker revises not only Hurston's plot, but her narrative devices as well: it is through free indirect discourse, in which the writing Celie speaks in the voice of the experiencing Celie, that her unique voice emerges.

As has previously been mentioned in this thesis, Ruth Perry made the claim that epistolary novels often concerned the passive, emotional responses to situations that the writers could not influence. This is indeed how the initial set-up of *The Color Purple* works as well. However, Alice Walker has created a character whose only language is her dialect, and who writes it down as best as she can. As Celie's written word is merged with her spoken word, her voice grows in her letters until she can release it upon the world as a whole. Simultaneously, while it is Celie's spoken word that empower her in the story-world, it is her letters that remain in the real world, bound and printed and available for anyone to read. Linda Abbandonato traces the roots of *The Color Purple* back to Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748), and remarks that it stands in opposition to a canon of men writing stories about women and a tradition of silencing women's stories by refusing to publish them – which remains a problem for African-American woman writers (Abbandonato 1107). Black women are voices from the margins, remaining the “other” whether they speak as black or whether they speak as women. Celie is black and Celie is a woman, but more than anything: Celie is only Celie, who goes as far as to censor her abusive husband's last name so his identity does not become part of hers. Celie writes her story without regard for tradition and – because of the private nature of her writing – without having to struggle against a society that has a history of ignoring the voice of black people, and of women, and of black women not the least. The success of *The Color Purple* not only as a novel, but as a film and a musical as well, is perhaps the greatest testimony to the project that Walker seems to undertake in the novel: Celie has not stayed silent.

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