About This Volume

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Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* celebrates its fortieth anniversary in 2022, a milestone that invites a new generation of literary scholars and students to reconsider this groundbreaking novel. Unlike some other authors or works within the *Critical Insights* series, neither Alice Walker nor *The Color Purple* needs a re-introduction. Walker has been present in cultural conversations for decades, and after the passing of Toni Morrison in August 2019, she now stands as the preeminent writer of her generation. She was a well-known and celebrated author prior to the publication of *The Color Purple* in 1982, but this novel catapulted her to immediate global fame. The book won both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and Walker became the first African American woman to win both awards. Only Katherine Anne Porter, in 1966 with *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*, preceded Walker as the first woman to win both honors. *The Color Purple* also remains significant as one of three epistolary novels to win the Pulitzer in more than one hundred years of awards in the category of fiction.

Since its release, the novel has been recognized as wholly innovative and brimming with life through Walker's extraordinary characterization. It contains a story that captured America's attention as well as the world's, as it has now been published in more than two dozen languages (Tillet 1). *The Color Purple* also inspired a large-scale Hollywood film adaptation released in 1985. It featured Walker's involvement and was directed by celebrated American filmmaker Steven Spielberg. In 2005, a Broadway musical version of the book debuted and has since generated multiple tours, a revival in 2015, and significant fanfare. And in 2023, *The Color Purple* will appear in a new form as a major theatrical film version of the award-winning musical. Altogether, Walker's original novel has inspired

Woman (1981), her fourth autobiographical installment centered on motherhood; Toni Cade Bambara had composed her first novel, *The Salt Eaters* (1980), about Black women's spirituality and healing; Octavia E. Butler had written *Kindred* (1979), a science fiction novel about a twentieth-century Black woman who time travels back into slavery; and Ntozake Shange's choreopoem, *For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1975) had already been circulating for seven years. But *The Color Purple* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction—the first ever given to an African American. And it was met with some of the harshest criticisms from Black America that a Black writer had ever received.

According to literary scholar and critic Trudier Harris, who was probably the first person to have published such a contemptuous criticism of Walker's work, *The Color Purple* should not have been canonized, for its popularity rested on media's superficial influence "to shape what is acceptable creation by black American writers" (155). She explains thusly:

> Alice Walker had been waiting in the wings of the feminist movement and the power it had generated long enough for her curtain call to come. In the 1890s, the chosen one was Paul Laurence Dunbar. . . . In the 1960s, the time was right for James Baldwin. . . . For a brief period in 1981, when a photograph of Toni Morrison appeared on the cover of *Newsweek*, it was her day in the sun. Now, Alice Walker has been chosen, for the media, by its very racist nature, seems to be able to focus on only one black writer at a time. While it is not certain how long Alice Walker will be in the limelight for *The Color Purple*, it is certain that the damaging effects reaped by the excessive media attention given to the novel will plague us as scholars and teachers for many years to come. (155)

Educating through Ethics and Love: Teaching That Black Lives Matter

Carol Blessing

In the twenty or so times I have taught *The Color Purple* at the university level, the book has demanded much of me and my students. It requires deeply painful dives into the historical contexts of the novel's broad eras, educating black and white students about our shared violent U.S. history. Thus, the novel has become increasingly relevant, rather than outdated, in its representation of history that has led to the present moment and the crucial need to reinforce the fact that Black Lives Matter (BLM); Walker becomes a de facto early apologist for the movement. Philosopher Andrew J. Pierce places the BLM movement within the longer history of "black humanism, for which philosophical reflection on black humanity has always been intertwined with political agitation for the recognition of that humanity," arguing that a traditional humanist lens usually omits those who are not white Europeans or their American ancestors (262). Professor Courtney E. Cole, who centers her Media Studies classes on tenets from BLM, observes that the movement has grown to "a black liberation movement with chapters in communities across the United States that work on a range of issues that affect black people" (737). A social justice movement, BLM has at its core an ethical focus—to recognize and correct unjust systems, highlighting the long history of U.S. racial issues that have led to present day inequities as a systemic rather than individualistic foundation of racism.

While Alice Walker wrote her most famous work, *The Color Purple*, in 1982, well preceding the BLM movement, she highlighted the racism that shapes every part of the story of Celie, her family, and others. Walker, however, despite her participation in the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, has received criticism

connotations to the terms *dialect* and *vernacular*, but to the linguist all varieties of a language are equal.

4. Speaking characters in the novel that account for "All Dialogue" include Mr. ____, Shug, Harpo, Sofia, Nettie, Squeak, Grady, Odessa, and Jack.
5. It is important to note that since Celie is the protagonist, she is naturally going to be given more space in the novel.
6. Men used covert prestige to gain power and show solidarity within their speech community, while women tried to garner the overt prestige by elevating their language to the socioeconomic classes above their own.

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the exact time, the size of the plantation or the farming practices of each area, but what tended to unify the life of Black women was that they were rarely allowed to have as many children as they wanted, at the time they wanted (Glenn 5). The curtailment of their reproductive rights was rooted in the interest of the plantation economy, which viewed the enslaved as laborers and property. A legal doctrine first adopted in Virginia in the seventeenth century was fundamental to the colonial reproductive rights abuses committed against Black women: the principle of *partus sequitur ventrem* (that which is brought forth follows the womb) stated that a child born to an enslaved mother would also become a slave (Morgan, "Partus" 1). After the slave trade was abolished, plantation owners often relied on this doctrine to increase their capital: through a practice called 'breeding,' they enforced pregnancies in order to increase the number of slaves in their possession. Whether it was the owner or an enslaved man that fathered these children, breeding entailed rape since it took away the enslaved woman's right to consent.

Since enslaved women had no legal standing, they could only rebel against enforced pregnancies through covert means. Their resistance ranged from the use of herbal remedies to prevent conception to self-induced abortion and even infanticide (D. Schneider and C. Schneider 85, 101; Neely 46). Others were concerned not only for the well being but the mere survival of their children as well: they rarely received proper postnatal care, which led to high mortality rates (D. Schneider and C. Schneider 81). A practice called wet-nursing often resulted in the malnutrition of Black newborns since their mothers were tasked with giving the majority of their milk to white babies (West and Knight 37). Enslaved women were also tasked with caring for white children and performing household duties mostly on plantations. Many had no choice when it came to marriage. Some relationships were prohibited and some were forced, but their legal status was not recognized and thus not protected. As the slave trade relied on slaves being frequently bought and sold, families were usually broken apart, which resulted in many mothers being separated from their newborns. All these practices

village employment, without exploiting the environment or human labor. However, when Chacko, her Oxford-educated son, returns home, he takes over the project: "Until Chacko arrived in Ayemenem, [Chacko's mother] Mammachi's factory had no name. Everybody referred to her pickles and jams as Sosha's Tender Mango, Sosha's Banana Jam. Sosha was Mammachi's first name. Soshamma" (57–58). Chacko introduces big machines to transform this small, home-based unit into a proper factory to extract more profits, which eventually leads to the demise of Mammachi's successful business. Whatever the touchable Chacko touches, he turns it into waste. His model airplanes never fly. Rather, they merely clutter his room: "A tail, a tank, a wing. A wounded machine" (56). Despite his first-rate education, he destroys far more than he creates. His approach toward others—whether human or nonhuman beings and things—is a desire to exert control. In the garb of educating underprivileged women, he has sex with them. When Ammu's (his sister) cross-caste relationship comes to light, he asks her to leave the house. Such abuse of power affects those who come in touch with him, but it also affects Chacko internally, which the novel hints at but does not focus on. Except for Estha, all upper-caste men seem to share Chacko's duplicity and damaging ways to engage with others.

In contrast to other upper-caste male characters, the untouchable Velutha seems to embody the very idea of repair and relationality. Despite carrying the stigma of untouchability, he runs the Ayemenem house. When it stops functioning, he makes it function again. Yet, he is not allowed to enter the house, not allowed to touch things (the very things that he makes). Not only with things, but also with human others, he develops real relationships. While Ammu's children seek a father-figure in Chacko but fail, they find a caring, adult, and fatherly figure in Velutha. What they expect from Chacko, they get from Velutha. Velutha at work, or with children and their mother, is someone who understands that his existence is deeply implicated in the other. Unlike Chacko who goes out in the world to cannibalize it, Velutha engages with the world with care, instinctively knowing that his well-being is embedded in the well-being of others.

of Pan-Africanism to further promote Black liberation. According to the Organization of all African states, the African Union (AU),

> Pan-Africanism is an ideology and movement that encouraged the solidarity of Africans worldwide. It is based on the belief that unity is vital to economic, social and political progress and aims to "unify and uplift" people of African descent. The ideology asserts that the fates of all African peoples and countries are intertwined. At its core, Pan-Africanism is "a belief that African peoples both on the continent and in the diaspora, share not merely a common history, but a common destiny." (qtd. in Adi 1)

Blurring the boundaries between Africa and the United States, the film resurrects the history of slavery but also celebrates Blackness. What is happening in Africa (people build a road, go to church, teach children) also happens in the United States. Through these parallels, the film reconstructs Black people's experiences on the two continents as common experiences, emphasizing the necessity to unite to fight against oppression and for equality. While in the United States Celie is abused and silenced, Nettie's letters help her find out more about herself and thus become stronger. Berlant argues that Nettie's letters uncover and celebrate "the fabulous richness of African culture, read as a pan-national phenomenon" (850). W.E.B. Du Bois emphasized that in order to fight racism, Black people from all over the world should unite (Berlant 849). In a similar fashion, *The Color Purple* celebrates Black people as, indeed, *a people*, that has been continuously abused by white people: in the United States, the audience witnesses racial inequality as a result of slavery and oppression; in Africa, the audience observes white people building a road, destroying the church and the school that are so important for the locals. Through Nettie's story, the film thus returns to the root of the problem within Black communities worldwide—the white oppressor. It is the white oppressor who enslaved Black people in Africa and brought them to the United States to toil. It is