

**THE COLOR LAVENDER:  
AUDIENCE RECEPTION, ADAPTATION, AND PERFORMANCE  
OF THE COLOR PURPLE**

An Honors Fellows Thesis

by

ELIZABETH MICHAEL MELTON

Submitted to the Honors Programs Office  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as

HONORS UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH FELLOW

April 2010

Majors: English & Theatre

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## ABSTRACT

The Color Lavender: Audience Reception, Adaptation, and Performance of *The Color Purple*. (April 2010)

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Since its introduction to the world, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* has been recreated in other media. Audiences are just as likely to have learned about Celie's journey from the 1985 Warner Bros.' movie or the 2005 Tony Award-winning musical as from the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. Each iteration of *The Color Purple* offers ambivalent representations of Black female experience in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century era of the American South.

My research thus far has placed me in the midst of other audience members enjoying the highs and lows of Celie's on-stage story and behind a desk shuffling through Walker's personal letters and manuscripts. In my research I look at all three performances of *The Color Purple*—the book, film, and musical—in order to evaluate the broader scope of effects created by all three.

The three primary areas of my research are audience reception, adaptation, and performance, which allow me to analyze the impact of portrayed Blackness in *The Color Purple*. In my research I define all three media as performance and analyze specific alterations as the performances shift from novel to screenplay to musical. Interrogating the various adaptations between the three media, I analyze how each director, author, and playwright represented the fundamentals of race, gender and class in their performance of *The Color Purple*. Though the generic differences between literature, film, and the stage are enough to ensure that the representations will be different, I'm interested in the impact of those changes. Using reviews and other testimony of audience experience, I am exploring the potential of each performance to influence personal and social change.

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Thank you to The Melbern G. Glasscock Center for Humanities and Research for an Undergraduate Research Award which made my trip to see *The Color Purple* in Houston possible. Also to the Summer University Undergraduate Research Funding that allowed me to visit Emory University's Manuscript, Archive, and Rare Book Library in Atlanta, Georgia. Shuffling through Walker's manuscripts and screenplays truly was the highlight of this experience. On that same note, the librarians at Emory helped me kick-start this project and eased me into this experience—thank you!

Finally, I want to thank my parents, sisters, and all of my ancestors for supporting me from the beginning and helping make my researching and writing endeavors possible.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	vi
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
II AUDIENCE RECEPTION .....	5
Novel .....	6
Movie .....	9
Musical .....	14
III ADAPTATION .....	18
Adapted ancestors .....	18
Cinematic transformation .....	23
Musical adaptations.....	29
IV PERFORMANCE .....	35
Novel as performance.....	35
<i>The Color Purple</i> in cinema .....	40
On Broadway.....	44
V SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS.....	49
Summary .....	49
Conclusions .....	49
REFERENCES.....	51
CONTACT INFORMATION .....	56

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Dear God,

I am the great-granddaughter of successful white landowners from East Texas and I understand how race defines class in the South. My great-grandfather, a man who did not graduate from high school, worked hard his entire life. He worked hard enough to purchase 3,000 East Texas acres, own a cotton gin, manage several tenant families working on his land, and gain the respect of other community leaders. There were about thirty tenant families on my great-grandparents' property. All of them were Black. Opportunity did not welcome them into the world with open arms, but before I ever had to prove myself or develop my character, I was allotted a free pass. My free pass is a result of my great-grandfather's success, which was ensured by his hard work, gender, and white skin. In the South, your race determines your class, your class shapes the potential for your future, and your gender finalizes the path you may follow. No one understands this better than Alice Walker's character Celie. In 1982, Walker introduced Celie, an African-American woman living in the Jim Crow South, in her challenging and exhilarating novel, *The Color Purple*. Celie's story is set in the age of my great-grandfather, but boasts female heroines unlike any others I know.

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This thesis follows the style of *Text and Performance Quarterly*.

Since its introduction to the world, the novel has been recreated in other media and audiences are just as likely to have learned about Celie's journey from the 1985 Warner Bros.' movie or the 2005 Tony Award-winning musical. It is not often that a great work of literature is adapted for both stage and film, but Walker's novel was able to move beyond the literary to establish Celie's voice in other media and reach new audiences. Each iteration of *The Color Purple* offers ambivalent representations of Black female experience in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century era of the American South. In my research I look at all three performances of *The Color Purple*- the book, film, and musical- in order to evaluate the broader scope of effects created by all three. I focus my research on the audience reception, adaptation, and performance of *The Color Purple* in these three media, to investigate the impact of portrayed Blackness in *The Color Purple*.

Alice Walker's final definition of a Womanist in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* guides my research: "Womanist is to a feminist as purple is to lavender," (Walker, Search xii). I am embracing this connection to Walker's world and know that my world will never be colored purple because there are certain experiences I will never share with Celie. I will never experience rape and abuse at the hand of a guardian, nor will I ever be denied anything because others think "I'm pore, I'm black...[and] ugly," (Walker, The Color Purple 206). My life may not resemble Celie's at all, but I see parts of myself in her. I understand Celie's community, familial ties, the desire to establish a strong sisterhood with other females, and the struggle to resist ideologies. Through the novel,



movie, and Broadway musical I am able to find an intense lavender connection and wonder how others have been connected—there are many shades of purple, after all.

The novel begins when Celie writes her first letter to God at age fourteen. She has been raped by her stepfather and does not understand that she is pregnant. Olivia and Adam, Celie's two children with her stepfather, are taken from Celie and she believes that her stepfather killed them. Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ wants to marry Nettie, Celie's sister, but their stepfather will only allow Celie to marry him. Once Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ marries Celie, Nettie runs away from home to live with her sister. Eventually, Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ kicks Nettie out because she does not return his advances. Nettie says she will write, but her letters never come so Celie believes she is dead.

Harpo, Celie's stepson, falls in love with the strong and independent Sofia. After she gets pregnant they get married. Sofia's strength intimidates Harpo and in an attempt to regain control in the relationship he tries to beat her because that is how he has seen his father treat Celie. All that results is an unrelenting series of fist fights between him and Sofia. The years press on, eventually Sofia gets tired of fighting and leaves Harpo.

One day Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ brings his lover, Shug Avery, home because she is very ill. Celie becomes infatuated with Shug and nurses her back to health. Over time, the women develop a very close relationship and fall in love with one another. It is thanks to Shug that Celie discovers her sister is alive. Nettie went to live with the missionaries who

adopted Celie's children and has written her letters several times every year, but Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has kept them hidden from Celie. Nettie and Celie's children travel to Africa and live with the Olinka tribe.

Sofia finds herself in trouble after a confrontation with the mayor and his wife. When she is in town with her children, the mayor's wife asks her to be her maid because she sees how clean Sofia's children are. Sofia adamantly says no, the mayor slaps her, and Sofia punches the mayor to the ground. She is arrested, beaten, and jailed. It is many years before Sofia sees her children again. When she is released from jail it is only under the stipulation that she will work for the mayor's wife.

With Shug's help, Celie finds her inner strength and leaves Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. She moves to Memphis with Shug and begins making pants. After Celie discovers that Nettie is alive she begins writing her letters to Nettie instead of God. Over time Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ reforms and begins living life with an appreciation for people, including Celie. When Celie discovers that her stepfather died and she has inherited her mother's house she moves home, believing that Nettie and her children will be able to join her someday. In fact, that is how the novel ends: Celie is reunited with her children and Nettie.

## CHAPTER II

### AUDIENCE RECEPTION

I began my journey with *Celie* two years ago in a women writers course, and have been travelling further by studying the transformation of Alice Walker's novel into a 1985 film and a 2005 Broadway musical. When I most need *Celie's* strength, *Sophia's* fire and *Shug's* sex I can pop the soundtrack into my car stereo or slide the DVD into my television and be transported to a lavender world. Though I have researched audience reception of *The Color Purple* novel, movie and musical, I know the only person I am qualified to speak for is myself. Is it possible for me to investigate an audience's response to a performance when my personal reactions are so informed by the ideologies at work in my own life?

My research has placed me in the midst of other audience members enjoying the highs and lows of *Celie's* on-stage story and behind a desk shuffling through Walker's personal letters and manuscripts. There is more at play in this research than collecting data. I am investigating a living author's personal influences, defining real people's honest reactions, and negotiating my own identity against these results. Fortunately, I am not the only person who has recorded their response to the three media of *The Color Purple*. In this section I have collected letters, reviews, and various responses to *The Color Purple* in order to analyze audiences' responses to the three performances.

## Novel

Walker's epistolary structure allows readers to perform Celie's experience as they peruse her letters in the novel. The performative elements of the novel allow readers to connect to the work regardless of gender, sexuality or race. From critics to fans, everyone who has read *The Color Purple* has responded in a specific and personal manner.

Several critics responded very positively to Walker's novel when it was published in 1982. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Jeanne Fox-Alstine's review in the *Chicago Tribune* compares Walker to a "masterly African weaver" for her ability to incorporate a variety of complex themes in the novel. Walker's themes of "racism, exploitation, and the meaning of God" are used to tell a story "about blacks in particular, but humanity in general," (Fox-Alstine). Fox-Alstine identifies the specific topic of the novel, but also acknowledges its broad appeal. Celie's story may not allow all readers to empathize, but it draws sympathy from a variety of readers.

Mel Watkins for *The New York Times* provides a well-rounded review of the novel. He declares the novel "convincing because of the authenticity of its folk voice," and celebrates the "number of memorable female characters," (Watkins). Two weaknesses are also identified in the novel: "pallid portraits of the males" and "Nettie's correspondence from Africa." Watkins found Nettie's letters "lackluster and intrusive" even though they provide a parallel of female oppression in Africa. The review ends

with praise and encouragement for Walker and her novel. This review is emblematic of how most critics received the novel: primarily positive, but aware of slight faults.

Although I have used the Texas A&M University Library Archives for some of my course work, this was my first experience of physically handling the work of an author. When I visited Emory's Manuscript and Rare Book Library I read letters from Steven Spielberg, Quincy Jones, bell hooks, Chinese and Japanese translators, and countless fans. I was able to leaf through one of Walker's manuscript spirals of *The Color Purple*, look at her notes scribbled on the pages of screenplays and musical scripts, personal correspondence, and fan letters. All of the letters were so interesting and managed to capture one person's thoughts at a precise moment in time. The fan letters were very candid and from a wide range of readers of all genders, ethnicities, nationalities, and sexual orientations. A common response among several readers who felt compelled to write Walker was the need to share the book with others.

One of my favorite letters is from Mary Ruth Deutsch, which includes her own and her husband's emotional response to Walker's works. Deutsch writes, "I have walked out of bookstores with tears running down my face because I was too impatient to wait and read one of your poems at home. *The Color Purple* made my husband cry," (Deutsch). Deutsch wraps up her letter by saying that "everyone in [her] family has their own copy of TCP." Thirteen year old Susannah Vesmith read *The Color Purple* at her mother's recommendation and thanked Walker for her "definition of black people at that time

[being] far different from most peoples,” (Vesmith). Vesmith and her mother both agreed that *The Color Purple* told a story that needed to be told. Steven Wilson, a forty year old black man, was introduced to Walker by his eldest daughter. He writes to thank Walker her for providing a “strong dose of blackness and womanist prose,” for his daughters and all of the other important women in his life (Wilson). Similarly, David Kniazuk, a white male college student, “went on a ‘Color Purple Campaign’” after finishing the novel and is happy to report, “over a dozen of [his] friends have read, or are in the process of reading ‘The Color Purple,’” (Kniazuk). Kniazuk’s mission was to spread Walker’s message of love. Each fan had their own motivation for sharing Walker’s novel with friends, but all decidedly were affected in one way or another by the work.

I loved shuffling through Walker’s cards and letters because I came to know her voice so much better, but I feared it because as much as I may want to know her—I don’t and it felt invasive. Still, letters help me hear the voices of those that can no longer speak. My grandma was a poor country girl who loved to read and write letters. When I first came to Texas A&M there was always a letter in my mailbox from Grandma. Today, I have shoe boxes stuffed with cards and notes that I have received from her over the years. Grandma died in 2008, and I can only hear her voice when I read those letters. Even the most mundane letter about the weather and another day at therapy brings her back to life. I am awed by that power. Clearly, Walker understood that power and *The Color Purple*’s hand-written letters allow the audience to bring Celie to life again and again.

Now, back home in Texas, I realize how important it was to read Walker's letters. Up to that point I had only read Celie's letters to God and the correspondence between Nettie and Celie. The epistolary structure is so important in *The Color Purple* because it provides Celie with a means of resistance and allows her to cultivate her voice. Reading Walker's letters took my relationship with *The Color Purple* to the next level. Never before have I been so giddy sitting behind a desk in a dusty library, but as I opened each new box labeled with Walker's correspondence, I felt a rush of excitement and wondered what I would read. Although the reasons for writing are varied, *The Color Purple* has had an impact on their lives and affected those around them as well. Nothing has spoken to me more about the wide reach of *The Color Purple* than the people themselves that felt moved to let Alice Walker know what her work has done.

### **Movie**

The movie has been credited with being "one of the most visually stirring portrayals of black people on the screen," (Davis 18), but does that mean that it successfully portrays "Blackness" to multiple audiences? When the movie came out in 1985, it was greeted by mixed feelings primarily amongst the black community. Some felt that the movie told a long overdue story, while others adamantly believed it supported only negative representations of black males. Critics encouraged the dissention by emphasizing Spielberg's role in directing the movie. Ten years later, Jacqueline Bobo recorded and interviewed fifteen black women as they watched *The Color Purple* for her book *Black*

*Women as Cultural Readers*. Bobo's research gives a direct report on how some women responded to the film.

Janet Maslin's review in *The New York Times* walked the line between critical condemnation and encouragement of *The Color Purple* movie, but settles on making judgments about Spielberg's work. According to Maslin, the "film is an upbeat, affirmative fable in which optimism, patience and family loyalty emerge as cardinal virtues," but "realism and grit, the signal qualities of Miss Walker's story, are all but absent here, being largely irrelevant to what Mr. Spielberg has in mind," (Maslin). Maslin is not the only critic to make the argument that Spielberg's themes stand alone and do not connect with the world of Walker's novel. Vincent Canby found fault not only with Spielberg's lavender shade of purple that is used throughout the novel, "-the shade that dying violets take on just before they turn crumbly and gray," but identified it as "a tribute to Hollywood," (Canby). The movie, "is physically elaborate, prettily photographed, essentially sunny natured and not very threatening even in its most doom-filled moments," but is only satisfying thanks to Spielberg's "mastery of clichés," (Canby). Most critics agree that the movie is entertaining, but Spielberg candy-coated Walker's novel in order to present it from a Hollywood perspective.

Walker confesses that "of all the accusations, it was hardest to tolerate the charge that I hate black men," (Walker, *Same* 6). Protestors stood in picket lines at the movie's debut and Walker was harassed in articles for creating a story that promoted cruel images of



black men. Tony Brown spoke out against the film which he refused to see for a number of reasons, particularly because “The Coalition Against Black Exploitation said it degraded black men, children, and families,” (Brown 296). He supported his decision by saying that he is “too healthy to pay to be abused by a white man’s movie only focusing on our failures,” (297). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) also got caught in the fray. They are often listed in the names of groups with negative comments against the film, but their comments were often misconstrued (Kessel to *PEOPLE* 312). When the film did not receive any Academy Awards for the eleven nominations that they were awarded, the NAACP responded with disbelief and acknowledged they expected better from the Academy (Friendly). In a letter to Alice Walker, Felicia Kessel, the NAACP’s director of public relations, stated they are “hopeful that ‘The Color Purple’ will serve as the turning point for filmmakers, not only to create more films based on various Black American experiences but to include more Black people both in front and behind the camera in upcoming films,” (Kessel to Walker 314).

Gene Siskel had the opportunity to interview Spielberg about *The Color Purple* and provides a few insights into Spielberg’s approach to the film; however, Siskel appears to be writing for dramatic effect and uses extreme phrases to catch the reader’s attention. The language in the article sensationalizes and establishes the negative representation of black men as fact. In summarizing the movie, Siskel describes Celie and Nettie having been, “enslaved and separated by the men in their lives, particularly their brutish father,”

(Siskel). This explanation of the movie distorts the focus of the movie and places emphasis not on Celie's growth, but on the brutish men in her life. Spielberg declares that, "the major change [he] made in the novel was to mostly focus on Celie...the other major change [he] made from the book is that [he] downplayed the lesbian scenes," (Siskel). In an attempt to explain Spielberg's quote about Celie and Shug's relationship, Siskel identifies Shug as "the floozie" and successfully removes any of the character's credibility.

Siskel takes Spielberg's word that those are the only changes he made to the movie and continues by praising Spielberg's inclusion of other "provocative themes," (Siskel). One such theme is the brief inclusion of the classic Dickens tale *Oliver Twist*. Celie reads the novel while Nettie is living with her and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and reads the novel as the character transitions from childhood to adulthood. Spielberg worked Dickens into the movie because he saw a parallel between *Twist* and Celie, but Walker thought the inclusion was "so cutesy and tired as to be alienating," (Walker, *Same* 211). Siskel continues praising Spielberg's development as a dramatic director and is clearly looking forward to Spielberg's next project. There was no attempt for Siskel to understand *The Color Purple*, but as a renowned member of Hollywood's circle, he supports any clichés that may be present in the movie. A two-dimensional understanding of the film results in praise for the director and a highly sensational article.

Jacqueline Bobo's research of black women's reception of *The Color Purple* serves to sum up and support all of the debate and enthusiasm that the film encountered. The fifteen women were from various backgrounds and aged anywhere from their early 30s to late 50s (Bobo 101). All of the women had read the book and seen the movie, but not all in the same order. Some read the book first and saw the movie only once before, or any number of combinations. Bobo watched the film with the women in two different groups and closely recorded their reactions and conversations about the movie.

The woman that Bobo designated Phyllis (she assigned them new names for her research) was in Atlanta when the movie came out (Bobo 129). She noticed that "the movie started women doing a lot of talking, a lot of reevaluating of how they dealt with the men in their lives—if they were either going to buckle under or stand up," (129). Bobo goes on to explain that this is significant because it "underscores the claim that the impact of the novel and widespread coverage of the film was so great that it provided an atmosphere that enabled the women to listen to black female activists who placed the issues...within a broader context," (129). The movie affected each woman differently. Some found it hard to look past the male, white director while others were "just grateful it came out," (131). Bobo found that "reclaiming and reconstructing narratives authenticating black women's histories helps to countermand other strategies working to oppress them," (203). Regardless of the debates and various responses to *The Color Purple*, the movie gained the nation's ear and promoted a dialogue that never would have happened if it had never been filmed.

## **Musical**

On August 23, 2009, not long after I returned from my sojourn to Atlanta, I traveled to Houston to watch *The Color Purple* musical at the Theatre Under the Stars. I had done little to acquaint myself with the musical and went in with few expectations, but I was very hopeful. On a personal level, the musical was extremely fulfilling. From start to finish I was impressed with how the production team maintained the integrity of the novel and managed to produce a beautiful stage musical. Critics promoted negative and positive responses to the musical. Some would say the musical's greatest success to date is attracting a more diverse audience to Broadway (Holloway 79). The musical, not surprisingly in a genre centered on singing and dancing, places much more emphasis on the inspirational elements of the story. Some critics found the song-centered plot hard to equate with Walker's original novel. Overall, the musical's criticisms remained in the theatrical realm and the toughest critics were those that compared it to other Broadway products. The widespread criticism that faced the film was not an issue, primarily because the audience is much more selective for live theatre.

When the musical was performing in New York, LaChanze, the actress who won a Tony for portraying Celie, told *Ebony* Reporter Lynnette R. Holloway "this is the most colorful and lively audience I have ever had, and I love it... by the end, I'm usually just as moved and fulfilled as a lot of people in the audience," (Holloway 82). The energy in an auditorium is contagious and affects everyone in the space including audience

members and actors on the stage. When I saw *The Color Purple* in Houston, there were four stand-out moments when the audience responded verbally to the action on-stage.

All of the moments that I recorded occurred in the first act. Celie's first appearance is as a little girl singing in a tree with Nettie. Upon Celie's second entrance she has not aged much, but is extremely pregnant and rushes on-stage. Several audience members reacted verbally to Celie's second entrance. Not much later Celie reveals that her Pa is her baby's daddy and "mmm..." rippled throughout the auditorium. When Sofia told Celie, "I kill him dead," before allowing her husband, Harpo, to beat her, the audience audibly responded with support for the character. The final moment that I recorded was when Mister's father was visiting and speaking ill of Shug and Celie spits in his glass of water. All four of these moments are integral to the story and are direct adaptations from the novel. Two responses were purely from images while the other two were in response to dialogue. The cheers and applause that echoed around the theater was empowering and clear evidence that the character's struggle resonated with the audience, or at least with some of them.

In a *New York Times* review Ben Brantley described the musical as, "a bright, shiny and muscular storytelling machine that is above all built for speed," (Brantley). Brantley thought the musical struggled to adapt a woman's life journey into a three-hour sequence of song and dance. His primary complaint was that the audience was left unable to embrace Celie's story, but he also identified a, "sumptuousness throughout that... does

bring to mind the enjoyably hokey cinematic ravishments of Steven Spielberg's 1985 film version." Jeremy McCarter, too, felt the musical was a predictable, soft-edged version of Walker's novel that failed to engage the audience. I failed to follow McCarter's argument against the predictability of the musical, since it was in fact an adaptation of a well-known novel. More than the musical's predictability McCarter disliked the final taste in his mouth left from "Miss Celie's Pants" which creates the "impression that Celie's redemption comes mainly from entrepreneurial zeal," (McCarter). This argument is interesting, but it is unsupported since "Miss Celie's Pants" is far from the final song in the musical.

Each performance of *The Color Purple* musical is unique and reaches a specific audience each night. Not only does this increase the range of responses for audience members from night to night, but it also challenges the actors to refresh the performance every night. In 2007, after the musical had already established itself on Broadway, Fantasia, the *American Idol* star, replaced LaChanze as Celie. Charles Isherwood described the musical as "sodden with plot and stuffed with pleasant but generic pop, R&B and gospel music, the show feels like a singing version of a Reader's Digest condensed book," (Isherwood). Even with an unenthusiastic description of the musical, Isherwood found Fantasia, "so terrific that this earnest but mechanical musical is more effective and affecting than it was when it yawned open a year and a half ago at the Broadway Theater." One change in a performer can breathe new life into a musical, or it

can suck the life out of a performance. Critics will continue to review *The Color Purple* and the reviews will undoubtedly evolve as much as the performance and audience does.

## CHAPTER III

### ADAPTATION

Each media of *The Color Purple* has introduced new elements to Celie's journey; through the multiple adaptations audiences have been touched and variously affected. Whether by reading the book, seeing the movie, or experiencing the musical, audiences have been exposed to different representations of Celie's experiences and Black female life in the South of the early 1900s. The process of adaptation began far earlier than the story's transformation for the stage or screen. As soon as Walker began writing, she began adapting the lives of her ancestors for her novel. In this section I will trace *The Color Purple*'s journey from novel, to movie, to musical.

#### **Adapted ancestors**

Always write what you know. *The Color Purple*'s first transformation occurred when Walker started recording Celie's letters in one of her many notebooks. Celie's South is the same South that generations of Americans have shared with one another for decades—nothing about it is imaginary. Walker has been compared to Faulkner because she has “not turned her back on the Southern fictional tradition,” and succeeded in writing a novel about the lives she saw around her (Watkins 21). Walker's adaptation of the black Southern experience establishes the power of the novel and this strength has evolved through its transformation into movie and musical. Walker succeeds in recreating an authentic representation of the Black female experience in the American



South by adapting the experiences of her ancestors. All of these transformations of Walker's ancestors seeps the novel in authentic Southern American history.

As soon as I determined that I would be researching *The Color Purple*, I began planning a trip to Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library (MARBL) where Walker's archives were opened in April 2009. Emory's beautiful campus is nestled into the historic streets of Atlanta, Georgia. This was my first trip to Georgia and while I attempted to navigate my way through a variety of streets named after peaches, I tried to understand the land where Walker grew up and her ancestors lived. I felt that if I could connect with Walker's South I would have a better chance to connect with her novel. As I shuffled through Walker's notes, her ancestors began to stand out and I realized that several characters were adaptations of her relatives. Most of the names in the novel are pulled directly from her family tree and several stories are inspired by true events. Celie, Albert, Shug, and Kate were all real people in Walker's life who found their way onto the pages of her novel. This adaptation and incorporation of Walker's ancestors foregrounds *The Color Purple* as an authentic recreation of a Southern story.

Walker's heroine, Celie, begins writing to God after she is raped by her stepfather and finds herself pregnant at fourteen years old (Walker, *The Color Purple* 1). Celie is not only named after Walker's great-great-grandmother, but is a distinct adaptation of the same matriarch who was raped by a white plantation owner and had her first son, Albert, at age twelve (Walker, typescript). There are differences between the two Celies, but

their stories are shaped by a shared experience. In each case a terrible assault results in something beautiful. Walker's novel would have never been written without Albert's birth because Walker never would have been born. Likewise, Celie discovers her voice through writing and is able to eventually reconnect with her children, Olivia and Adam, thanks to her letter-writing. The Celies are symbolically and literally the mothers of the novel and shaped the novel as writer and as matriarch.

Shug is a bit more complicated to understand as she is an adaptation of several ancestors. The actual Shug was not related to Walker, but was her grandfather's lover (Walker, typescript). Walker's grandfather, Henry Clay, was Albert's son and Celie's grandson. Shug's namesake has a very distinct connection with the character because both are lovers. As far as we know the similarities stop there, but Walker has mentioned other inspirations for Shug's sexy characterization. In an interview Walker states that Shug is an adaptation of her aunts who "had wonderful nails, and were all beautifully dressed—just fantastically vibrant women with great perfumes," (Wilson 319). Walker always found it hard to believe that one aunt "worked as a domestic in the North most of life," because it was difficult to "imagine her cleaning her own house, not to mention anybody else's," (Walker, Same 48).

Walker's aunt captures the essence of Shug Avery's flamboyant fashion sense, but also brings the darker side of Shug's celebrity status to light. Shug is a popular singer and her celebrity is large enough to draw an enthusiastic crowd from the black community to

Harpo's juke-joint, but what kind of reception was open to her among white audiences? Walker does not go into great detail about Shug's singing and touring experiences, but no white audience is ever mentioned. Walker's inspiration for the character supports Shug's characterization as a locally successful woman with no way to surpass the color of her skin to achieve further success. No matter how elegantly Walker's aunt dressed—no matter what size an audience Shug entertains—a dominantly white society would never give either black woman a chance. Shug's positive reception in the black community and discrimination in the white community is an authentic representation of a successful and well-dressed black woman.

Kate is Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s sister that appears only twice in the novel, but she is the first to encourage Celie to fight. Her final words in the novel get the ball rolling even though Celie is too afraid to heed them, "You got to fight them, Celie...I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself," (Walker, *The Color Purple* 21). Walker took Kate's name from her grandmother who was married to Henry Clay; however, her grandmother's story was the inspiration for Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s first wife, Annie Julia, who was murdered in a pasture by her boyfriend (28). Walker's notes swiftly summarize what happened to her grandmother: "shot by lover in pasture on way home from church. Died at home after much suffering," (Walker, typescript). In the novel, Harpo relives his mother's murder in a nightmare and Celie's staccato retelling matches Walker's swift notes:

Harpo be trouble with nightmares. He see his mama running cross the pasture trying to git home. Mr.\_\_\_\_\_, the man they say her boyfriend, catch up with her. She got Harpo by the hand. They both running and running. He grab hold of her shoulder, say, You can't quit me now. You mine...He shoot her in the stomach. She fall down. The man run.

(Walker, The Color Purple 28)

Walker's adaptation of her grandmother's death gives depth to a minor character and shows Walker's desire for authenticity throughout her novel. The incorporation of a specific biographical experience legitimizes not only Annie Julia's death in the novel, but Harpo's subsequent struggle as well. This event affected Harpo greatly and follows him into adulthood. No critic can argue that Annie Julia's murder is excessive or melodramatic because it based on a true event.

Walker's authentic adaptation of her ancestors continues with a few other character names, but to a lesser degree. Nettie was Walker's maternal grandmother's name who had an abusive husband; Harpo was a transliteration of Walker's father's nickname and Squeak was a neighbor in Boonville (Walker, typescript). Other names in the novel, like Sophia, were chosen for their sound or symbolic quality.

### **Cinematic transformations**

The movie screenplay underwent several transformations before the filming process could begin. Walker wrote a screenplay called “Watch For Me in the Sunset” and Menno Meyjes, a Dutchman, wrote the final screenplay which he titled “Moon Song.” Walker’s authenticity in the novel is supported and challenged by Meyjes’ screenplay. The final adaptation emphasizes a universal understanding of *The Color Purple* and explores issues that are pertinent to a broad audience. Celie is understood to be a black woman, but this is not the primary way audiences identify her. Each screenplay is different from the novel, but my primary focus will be on the journey to Meyjes’ “Moon Song” and its universal representation of Celie’s story.

The movie adaptation process began early in 1984, when Quincy Jones and Steven Spielberg visited Alice Walker to convince her to move forward with the movie (Walker, *Same* 1). Walker agreed, but wanted the opportunity to write the screenplay. After three months she had a completed screenplay, but it was her first attempt at screenplay writing and she was not healthy enough to continue editing and rewriting it. Walker did not know until long after the movie was finished that she was suffering from Lyme Disease (11). Reflecting on the filming process, Walker admits that her physical weakness kept her from being as active throughout the writing and filming process as she would have been otherwise. Still, she was present on the set during most of the filming, developed relationships with the actors, and enjoyed collaborating with Meyjes and Spielberg.

Elena Featherston, a San Franciscan reporter, visited *The Color Purple* set and interviewed several people, including Menno Meyjes (Walker, *Same* 235). One of the biggest concerns about Meyjes adapting Walker's novel was his gender and nationality. Could a white man connect with Walker's poignant story of Southern Black women? Meyjes believed that, "the book is so good, it transcends any barriers," established by his race and gender. While Meyjes waited for Walker to approve his script he "chain-smoked and paced, never far from the phone," and once she delightfully approved it "he simultaneously felt relief, joy and severe postpartum depression," (236). The result of Meyjes' hard work is a movie recognizable as Walker's *The Color Purple*, but with several significant adaptations. Meyjes' belief in the universality of the text has been incorporated throughout the entire screenplay. Two of the most noticeable transformations are the letter-structure and its effect on Celie's narrative voice, and Shug's relationship with her father.

In the novel, Walker's epistolary structure creates Celie's voice, introduces us to her language, and gives Celie control as a selective narrator. In the movie, Celie's narrative voice still relates events to the audience, but she begins the movie hardly able to read, let alone write letters. Celie's relationship with God is through prayer, not letter writing. Nettie is the character most connected with letters and writing. Nettie teaches Celie to read and letters become Nettie's gift to her sister. When Nettie leaves home to live with Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_ she arrives on the mail wagon and hands Mr. \_\_\_\_ his mail. Later in the movie the only the connection the sisters can find is through letter writing. One of

Walker's famous lines that found its way onto the screen is delivered when Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ forces Nettie to leave. This scene is very physical and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ literally pries Celie and Nettie apart as they cling to one another like Siamese twins. After Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ separates them, Celie yells to her sister to write. Nettie ensures Celie that "nothin' but death can keep me from it," (Spielberg, *The Color Purple*). Letters, both stamped envelopes and the alphabet, symbolize their connection and serve to keep them together when they are forced to be apart. While this is true for the novel, their letter connection is heightened in the movie.

The third scene in the movie is a procession in Celie's mother's funeral and is the first time Celie prays to God. Her prayer is a voice-over narration that serves to move the plot forward and fill in holes. Two changes in scene occur during Celie's first narration and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is introduced with a little personal history. Six of Walker's letters to God are condensed into two prayers. This form of narration is used whenever the movie needs to move forward and new information must be relayed to the audience. Voice-over narration also removes the pen from Celie's hand and she is no longer a writer. Voice-over narration is often used in cinema, but the narrator usually speaks directly to the viewers. Even though Celie begins each segment with the words "Dear God" it is clear that she is speaking directly to the audience to inform them of the current status of the plot. Since the novel's letters are physically in the hands of the reader it is easier to believe that the letters truly are written to God, not just a means to move the plot forward. The prayer narration is a weak nod toward the structure of Walker's novel and

becomes a plot-progressing tool more than serving to establish Celie's voice; however, it initially establishes Celie's central role in the movie (even though she is an extremely passive character). This passivity is increased even further because Celie's primary form of resistance in the novel, her letter writing, is taken away from her. Celie starts weaker in the movie and cannot even read until Nettie teaches her after she marries Mr. \_\_\_\_.

Shug Avery of Walker's *The Color Purple* is a sexy, strong woman who is not afraid to rattle the bars of her Southern community. Meyjes and Spielberg's Shug is still sexy and strong, but both qualities are subdued because she does not pursue an intimate relationship with Celie and she seeks her reverend father's acceptance.

Meyjes' transformation of Shug's character extends even further than the movie. Shug's unease with her lifestyle symbolizes women's unease within patriarchal society, but it also says that women must conform to patriarchal demands in order to understand themselves. These adaptations present Shug more conventionally and acceptably to a broad audience.

Walker develops a physical and intimate relationship between Celie and Shug, but the movie stops at merely symbolizing passion. Walker describes Shug as someone who decides "to give herself and her love where she pleases," but her passionate relationship with Celie is replaced with a platonic sisterhood in the movie (Walker, *Same* 180). There is a single scene in which Shug and Celie share in a chaste kiss, but the focus of the scene is on Celie's self-acceptance not her passion for Shug. Passion is represented by



the red incorporated in the costumes and set, but physical passion is not embodied by the actors. Instead, Shug encourages Celie to stop hiding her mouth when she smiles. For the first time, the audience sees Goldberg's gleaming white teeth and cheerful grin. Even though including the kiss was a bold move in 1985, the movie does not live up to the novel's passion. Conventionality wins out in order to avoid offending the audience and the universal message to love yourself for who really you are is the dominating theme of the scene.

Celie writes to God when "Shug Avery sick and nobody in this town want to take the Queen Honeybee in. Her mammy say She told her so. Her pappy say, Tramp," (Walker, *The Color Purple* 43). Shug's parents are unsupportive in the novel, but Shug is able to cope with their differences in opinion and continues living her life. Celie continues that, "even the preacher got his mouth on Shug Avery, now she down. He take her condition for his text. He don't call no name, but he don't have to," (43-44). Meyjes' combined Shug's ill-opinioned father with the damning reverend and completely left her mother out of the movie. What results is a negative representation of Shug's self-awareness as she must search for acknowledgement and approbation from her father.

There are two scenes in the film with Shug and her father together. In the first scene, Shug visits her father at his church. Shug is nicely and modestly dressed covered head to toe in a pink dress, hat, tights, and shoes while her father starkly contrasts her dressed all in black. Shug is the only one to speak and reminisces over flattering memories of her

father trying to gain his attention, but he never looks at her once during the entire scene. Shug ends saying, “it’s alright. Well, I know you can’t say nothin’ to me anymore cause things so different.” The scene ends with both characters literally and figuratively shutting doors on each other. There is no basis for this scene in Walker’s novel.

The second scene with Shug and her father begins with Shug singing at the juke-joint on Sunday and her father preaching about the Lord driving the prodigal child home. After the reverend declares that God, “can drive you home to truth and he can fix it for you, if you trust him,” the choir begins singing “God’s Trying to Tell You Something.” The scene switches back to Shug who is unable to continue singing “Celie’s Blues” and picks up with the choir at the phrase, “speak, Lord.” As the hymn goes on to sing about being lost and listening to the Lord, Shug leads everyone at the juke-joint into the church where she embraces her tearful father. This scene is extremely uncharacteristic of Walker’s novel and completely contradicts Shug’s words in the novel when she asks Celie, “tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping him to show,” (Walker, *The Color Purple* 193). The parade to the church creates the feel of everyone at the juke-joint packing up and going to a revival instead of propelling Shug’s words from the novel that “God is in you and inside everybody else,” (194). Meyjes transforms one of Walker’s most independent and womanly characters into a needy and unsatisfied little girl. All he had to do was introduce an unforgiving and religious father.

### **Musical adaptations**

Countless novels have made the transformation from bound pages to the silver screen, but it is far less common for a novel to join the singing and dancing world of musical theatre. Only a true classic is capable of surviving all three media. *The Color Purple* presented challenges and opportunities to the musical's production team and every element had to be properly adapted for the stage. Perhaps the most daunting task of song-writing was in the hands of a three person team: Allee Willis, Stephen Bray, and Brenda Russell. A wiser and stronger Walker, at least where a collaborative adaptation is concerned, worked with the creative team and was eager to get everything right with this adaptation. This is my favorite adaptation of *The Color Purple*, even though there are a few scenes underemphasized from the novel. Overall, what resulted is a musical that is a culmination of the best elements of the novel and movie, plus heightened parallels that are more subtle in the other media.

I have identified the novel's epistolary structure as one of *The Color Purple's* defining elements. The musical carries on the importance of Celie's letters in a more direct way than the movie, but primarily follows the movie's use of Celie's letters as prayers and identifies letters as Nettie's connection to Celie. Upon entering the theater I was struck by the scrim facing the audience. Celie's first letter to God was scrawled across the curtain that was made to look like torn parchment. Instantly, the musical was tied to Walker's novel. It was wonderful to witness the epistolary structure coming full circle and see it incorporated on-stage. The first act ended after Celie discovered Nettie's

letters, and new skrim descended featuring one of Nettie's letters from Africa. This helped establish the two acts and served as a reminder of the origins of the story.

Celie's letters to God are incorporated throughout the musical in songs. Songs often serve the same purpose as the voice-over narration in the movie and work to move the plot forward, but the goal is for them to fit seamlessly into the action on-stage. The first time the audience hears Celie say "Dear God" is as she begins giving birth to her second child, Adam. Throughout Celie's anguish the chorus sings, "God works in mysterious ways," establishing that Celie's journey is going to be difficult, but there is hope. After Pa takes Adam away Celie continues her prayer to God and speaks the first paragraph from the novel. Although there are portions of dialogue written by Marsha Norman, there are more dialogue segments taken directly from Walker's novel than in the movie. Still, all of the songs are completely original to the musical and usually spin-off of one line from the novel. This is true for the final song, which is a reprise of "The Color Purple." The beginning of the song matches the start of Celie's final letter in the novel, "Dear God, dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples, dear everything, dear God." The song continues with metaphors of Celie's connection to the earth and God and ends with a philosophical celebration of how far Celie has come from the beginning of the musical. This is a great example of how a musical adaptation can heighten the theme of a narrative, instead of focusing on the final details. The musical does not provide an epilogue on what the characters are doing now, but it leaves the audience feeling uplifted and affected.

Spielberg's movie will always be the first to establish performance norms for *The Color Purple* and all performances that follow must respond to it in one way or another. There are moments in the musical that have identifiable cinematic influences and other times choices were made as a response to the movie. During Nettie's banishment, the Siamese imagery is reintroduced and the physicality is heightened like in the movie. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ physically separates the girls and throws Nettie off of his property. The novel does not describe any physical struggle when Nettie leaves so this moment is taken from the film adaptation. From a performance point of view it makes sense to heighten the visual at this moment because otherwise the audience may not recognize Nettie's leaving as significant.

The musical allows Shug to reclaim the self-confidence and sexy demeanor that is subdued in the movie adaptation. Walker's Shug is unafraid to pursue a relationship with whomever she chooses, thrilled to sing her songs all night long, and inspired to rejoice in her own spirituality. Elisabeth Withers-Mendes's played Shug on Broadway and came up with her own ways of defining the character: "Shug is proud. Shug does not take crap. Shug reads through B.S., and calls it out when she sees it. Shug is honest... Shug is sexy. Shug loves love. Shug loves Celie," (Funderburg 101). The musical revels in Shug's sexuality and her relationship with Celie.

Two of Shug's songs are "Too Beautiful For Words" and "Push Da Button." Both songs focus on Shug's relationship with Celie; however, "Push Da Button" is performed as a

public juke-joint song and loses the intimacy that the phrase is introduced with in the novel. “Too Beautiful For Words” captures the intimacy between Celie and Shug, but it really only accomplishes as much as the movie’s “kiss scene” because the primary goal is to instill Celie with self-confidence. Shug is showering compliments on Celie and tells her, “But when I see what’s in your heart all the rest is blurred, the grace you bring into this world’s too beautiful for words,” (Funderburg 142). All of the song-writers wrote it as an alternative to the movie’s famous song “Sister” that Shug dedicates to Celie in the juke-joint, but they decided “it would be more personal if it happened in the room between the two women,” (49).

“Push Da Button” follows “Too Beautiful For Words” and Brenda Russell explains that they, “got the concept from Alice’s book, of course, and [they] just wanted it to be a really raunchy, fun song for Shug, just to have a real good time,” (Funderburg 50). In the novel, Celie and Shug discuss their sexual experiences and Shug is astounded to find that Celie is still a virgin, which she defines as someone who has never climaxed. Shug explains, “right down there in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody. It git hotter and hotter and then it melt. That the good part. But other parts good too,” (Walker, *The Color Purple* 77). This moment in the novel serves as the impetus for Celie and Shug’s increased intimacy that eventually leads to their lesbian relationship. “Push Da Button” revels in Walker’s phrase, but counsels solely heterosexual relationships. The song first speaks to the women in the crowd as Shug sings, “Now there’s something ‘bout good lovin’ that all you ladies should know,”

and then it moves on to tell “what you men need to hear,” (Funderburg 145). The musical allows Shug to pursue her sexuality, but she is primarily restricted to her heterosexual relationships. Shug and Celie share a kiss, but it occurs after the juke-joint scene where emphasis is placed on Celie drinking. Because Celie has been drinking her inhibitions are weak and the kiss appears to be a one-time drunken incident. The musical heightens the circumstances around the kiss not the passion between Shug and Celie. All in all, Shug and Celie’s relationship remains fuzzy and open to interpretation. Once again, Shug and Celie are denied the passionate relationship that Walker created for them. The musical embraces Shug’s sexuality, but does not allow the actors to perform the intimate connection between the women. The musical, like the movie, falls short of presenting Walker’s novel.

The musical successfully stages the beginning of the second act to help the audience follow Nettie’s developing Africa narrative. The staging interweaves the American and African experiences and works to unify the characters. Celie becomes part of Nettie’s world and literally follows her on-stage as she learns about Nettie’s time in Africa. Celie participates in the “African Homeland” songs and dances and takes on a much more active role than simply that of a reader. Celie’s participation embodies the experience of the reader and supports the argument that a reader’s position is not passive, but active. This argument is made even more powerful when the novel’s influence is considered.

Several struggles are brought to light in *The Color Purple*, but Walker expects the readers to personally draw plausible parallels. The musical mirrors the Olinka struggle against colonization with Sophia's arrest and imprisonment. As Celie reads Nettie's letters, Celie follows the action in Africa. Once the Olinka warriors are defeated and finishing their dance, Harpo runs on-stage and tells Celie that Sophia has been beaten by "the Mayor's men" because she told the mayor's wife "Hell no!" when she was asked to work as her maid. The Olinka warriors are embodying their battle through dance and Sofia joins them on-stage. The dance ends with the Olinka warriors and Sofia's defeat. The audience identifies Sofia as a warrior because they see her standing and falling along side the Olinka warriors. Sofia and the Olinka warriors are unified through their battles and everyone understands that the race relations battles in America are not so different from the colonization happening to the characters' brothers and sisters in Africa. This stage image was extremely successful and allowed two stories to not only be told simultaneously, but also woven together.



## CHAPTER IV

### PERFORMANCE

Schechner divides performance into two categories: “is” and “as.” According to Schechner, “there are limits to what “is” performance. But just about anything can be studied “as” performance,” (Schechner 30). Cinematic theater and stage theatre are unquestionably understood to be performances, whereas a novel is not; Walker’s novel, however, uses performative qualities that enable a universal audience to engage intimately with the text and perform Celie’s experiences. I am reading Walker’s novel as performance in order to explain its universal appeal to audiences and its successful adaptation into a film and musical. All three performances of *The Color Purple* enable audiences to enter Celie’s world, share her story, and identify with her struggles and hopes. This connection with the audience is strengthened and made possible once each media is understood as performance.

#### **Novel as performance**

Walker’s use of an epistolary structure in *The Color Purple* allows Celie’s voice to be established as an echo of Walker’s ancestors. This act of recreating the voice of Walker’s ancestors presents *The Color Purple* as a puppet, or tool, to be utilized by Walker and readers. Walker may not have intentionally set out to write a performative novel, but the epistolary structure establishes a strong first-person point of view that allows for a ventriloquism and characterization of Walker’s ancestors, which results in a

performance of the text. In turn, this performance authenticates each reader's connection to Walker's text and Celie's experiences.

*The Color Purple* is defined as an epistolary novel because the story is told through a collection of letters. The letters are primarily written by Celie to God and her sister, Nettie, but as the novel progresses, several of the letters are addressed to Celie from Nettie. Using an epistolary structure places the action and narrative in the hands of the main character. Readers do not have to negotiate a narrator's interpretation of events, but hear things directly from the primary letter writer, Celie. This first-person re-telling of events allows the reader to understand Celie's world better than if an outside source were reporting the development of the characters.

This structure allows, "epistolary novels [to] enhance the sense of reality since they adopt a form that is commonly used in everyday life," (Zhou 288). The very first letter Celie writes to God begins "Dear God, I am fourteen years old. ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me," (Walker, *The Color Purple* 1). This first paragraph prepares the reader for the structure and style of the novel. The cross-through of "I am" clearly articulates that Celie is in control of what appears on the page, but no further words are crossed-out in the novel. Walker uses this technique to establish that the character's voice is in control and may choose what appears on the page. As the letter continues with, "Last spring after little Lucious come I heard them fussing. He was pulling on her arm. She say it too soon,

Fonso, I ain't well," it becomes clear that Celie is not writing for an outside audience. Celie is writing for herself and for God, both of whom already know what has happened. The audience is left on their own to determine who "he/Fonso" is referring to. This further establishes Celie's voice and control of the narrative. Walker's diction and spelling add to Celie's characterization. She is young, poorly educated, and eager to be completely honest with God. Readers are placed directly into Celie's world and are able to closely follow her private correspondence.

The diction and language of Walker's novel clearly establishes Celie's voice and identifies her as a Southern, black woman. In an interview with Alice Walker, Sharon Wilson referred to the language in the book as a "folk dialect," whereas down-to-earth Walker termed the language "black folk English," (Walker, Interview 320). Walker's use of a black dialect allows the audience to literally hear the words as Celie writes them, even though no one is audibly speaking them. The language in Celie's letters presents a distinct voice and establishes Celie as a performer of her own story. Celie's control of the narrative allows her to present this story to the reader, but only to the extent that she allows. The epistolary structure and Walker's style allows for a quick and easy conversion of the novel into a series of monologues. With little to no preparation, Celie's letters can be performed by anyone.

Walker's novel makes a compelling and interesting live-reading because its structure allows for a swift transformation into a performance text. In the case of a live-reading,

the novel is a tool for the performer to access the audience. I prefer to think about it in terms of ventriloquism, a style of performance that became popular in the days of vaudeville. There are two important elements to a successful ventriloquist's performance: the performer (ventriloquist) and their puppet. The ventriloquist must manipulate the puppet and convince the audience that the puppet is speaking of its own accord. Once the ventriloquist separates their identity from the puppet, the puppet may say anything. The ventriloquist creates a dialogue with the puppet, but is released from the responsibility for anything offensive the puppet may say, which it invariably always does. As a type of performance, ventriloquism "can be utilized as a metaphor...for generating ideas and organizing phenomena of key philosophical interest," (Goldblatt ix). With this in mind, *The Color Purple* novel has been created and used as a ventriloquist's puppet by Alice Walker and her readers; both establish a relationship with the novel that allows them to enter into a world without being responsible for it.

The voice Walker creates for Celie in her novel is modeled on "the way [her] parents speak," (Walker, Interview 320). Celie's voice is an echo of Walker's mother and grandmother's voices. Walker's motivation for "capturing" this way of speaking was to record a brief glimpse of history for her daughter who did not get to spend as much time with her family in Georgia. In her notes and writing, Walker explains a deep desire to connect with her ancestors and she was able to achieve this connection by writing *The Color Purple*. Walker is the ventriloquist and the novel serves as her puppet. There is a direct link between the performativity of the novel and the oral linguistic tradition that is

so strong in African American culture (Witzling 388). The novel allows Walker to perform the struggles and joys experienced by her ancestors.

In literature, racial ventriloquism is a term that refers to an author writing a character of a race different from his or her own (Witzling 390). Through this experience the author revels in an experience with the other. Walker includes white characters in her story, but there is no ventriloquism of race because Celie relates all of these incidents to the reader. The lens is still that of a black woman and one which Walker can relate to. Walker is not ventriloquising another race in *The Color Purple*, but the global reach of the novel allows readers to project Celie's voice. Through the successful characterization of Walker's ancestors, audiences are able to pick up Walker's novel and, in turn, become the ventriloquist. Specifically, it is the folk dialect in which the novel is written that allows readers to utilize the book as a puppet and re-create Celie's experiences.

Walker's novel has been distributed world-wide and readers do not all share Walker's heritage or background. Readers that are not black females become racial ventriloquists as they connect and perform Celie's experiences. The racial ventriloquism that occurs on the part of the reader does not challenge the authenticity of Walker's novel. Instead the authenticity of each reader's performance becomes the focus. It is true that not all readers can perform an authentic performance of Celie's blackness, but readers can perform their own authentic version of her story. As a reader, my performance of Celie is authentic in part because I am a Southern woman living apart from my sisters. The

readers as performers may not be able to empathize with all of Celie's experiences, but the role of the performer is not to empathize, but to sympathize with the character. The intimate connection that occurs through performance counteracts the reader's divulgence in an experience with the other. Performance allows a non-black reader to connect to Celie and she no longer becomes an other. The intimate connection that occurs during this performance decreases the importance of Celie as a black woman and emphasizes that she is a human suffering, hoping, and living.

### ***The Color Purple in cinema***

Two years after Walker published *The Color Purple* in 1982, the process of adapting her award-winning novel for the silver screen began (Walker, *Same* 1). In 1985, the movie, produced by Quincy Jones and directed by Steven Spielberg, was released. Three of the movie's standout stars are Whoopi Goldberg as Celie, Oprah Winfrey as Sophia, and Danny Glover as Mr. \_\_\_\_ (Berry and Berry 183). Goldberg and Winfrey were gaining popularity as a comedian and talk show host, but both were respectively new to the movie world and received Academy Award nominations. Although the movie did not win, it was nominated for eleven Academy Award Nominations and made more than \$100 million at the box office. At the time its box-office success made it "the highest-grossing black film ever," (182).

Famous faces, sensational stories, and lovely locations make movies memorable. *The Color Purple* is no exception to the rule. The cinematic performance of Walker's famous

novel was created in the mid-80s, but will be able to outlast all of the famous names who had a hand in its creation. Movies excel at providing spectacle for the masses at affordable prices. In the world of performance, cinematic magic is the most accessible. The elements of mise-en-scène will forever support the authenticity of the movie, while the cinematography will always establish relationships and heighten the drama. On any given day I can go to a movie theatre to catch a newly released treasure or I can pop in and revisit a DVD that I have seen hundreds of times. Like a novel, a movie can be reproduced and distributed world-wide. Movies are select moments of performance that are compiled and forever frozen in time. Every single Warner Bros. DVD of *The Color Purple* starts with Celie and Nettie running through the fields and ends with their reunion at the conclusion of the movie.

The elements of mise-en-scène and cinematography shaped the final performance of *The Color Purple*. All of the elements of mise-en-scène and several cinematography elements are present in the collection of scenes following Harpo and Sofia's wedding. The section I am looking at begins with a pan of Sofia and Harpo's property near their house and ends with Sofia marching out of the cornfield after confronting Celie for having told Harpo to beat her.

Mise-en-scène includes the structural elements of the film, including setting, costume/make-up, lighting, and staging performance (Pullen). The setting of the Harpo/Sofia marriage segment really allows the audience to see a lot of Mr. \_\_\_\_'s

property, particularly where Sofia and Harpo live. *The Color Purple* was not filmed on a Hollywood lot, but was filmed in Union and Anson counties in North Carolina (Berry and Berry 182). A film crew is able to capture performances in true locations, unlike the novel or musical. Nothing is left to the imagination, but everything is presented directly to the audience. This segment shows the audience Harpo and Sofia's house, garden, Mr. \_\_\_\_'s hay field, corn field, and goat pen. Spielberg used five different farm locations for a collection of scenes that is just under four minutes long. The on-site setting provides an authentic representation of the characters' world.

Likewise, costumes in this segment establish the authenticity of the time period and occupation of the characters. All of the characters wear work clothes, but Celie and Sofia's dresses appear too clean and crisp. The most significant change in the segment is Sofia and Harpo's post-fight make-up. Oprah Winfrey, Sofia, appears on screen with a faint black eye, while Harpo, played by Willard E. Pugh, has a fat lip and swollen eye. Harpo's bruises are worse than Sofia's and the make-up reinforces Sofia's control and dominance in the relationship because she is physically stronger and a better fighter. This is the turning point of this segment and Sofia confronts Celie for telling Harpo to beat her. The success of the scene depends on the believability of the make-up. The bruises do their job and the audience once again believes in the authenticity of not only the make-up, but in the quarrelling couple.



Lighting and staging work hand in hand in this segment to further establish the authenticity of the characters' work. Except for a brief scene shot inside Harpo and Sofia's house, all of the scenes are shot outside. The lighting is hardly noticeable, other than it appears to be a normal, sunny day outside. This lends credibility to the characters' actions as they work from scene to scene. Everyone except Harpo is working throughout this segment. Mister is pitching hay and tending to goats, Sofia and Celie tend the garden and take care of the curtains. Harpo follows his father and Sofia around trying to be heard. The final confrontation between Sofia and Celie takes place in the corn field. Sofia comes barreling through the high stalks of corn and interrupts Celie's business of raising a scarecrow. Overall, the segment serves to show that the characters really are working to keep the farm up and that there is a power struggle between Sofia and Harpo. The final scene is about the confrontation between Sofia and Celie so neither character is working, but focusing on the discussion.

The segment begins with a pan of the property and Sofia and Harpo's house to establish the characters' relationship with the setting. Each following cut to another location is easy to follow because of this establishing shot. The scenes progress as Harpo continues unable to control Sofia. The segment builds to the moment in the final confrontational scene when Sofia says, "You told Harpo to beat me." As Sofia stomps through the corn field toward Celie, the audience is unable to see her face until she arrives and the camera closes in on her face for the delivery of the confrontational line. The scene swiftly cuts to a close-up of Harpo's face as he lies to his father about the bruises. The focus returns to

Sofia and the camera maintains a close shot of her face as she speaks to Celie. Sofia is literally “in Celie’s face” and the audiences’ due to the close-up. This intensifies the drama of the situation which in turn strains Celie and Sofia’s relationship.

### **On Broadway**

In 2005, twenty years after Spielberg’s movie adaptation of *The Color Purple*, Celie’s journey was revisited and produced as a Broadway musical. This transformation of Walker’s novel was spear-headed by producer Scott Sanders (Funderberg 14). A large group of creative artists were responsible for shaping the musical and bringing Celie’s story to new life. Allee Willis, Stephen Bray, and Brenda Russell wrote the songs, Gary Griffin served as director, and Marsha Norman fashioned the script (18-21). Later in development, Oprah Winfrey’s name was added to the list of producers and catapulted the musical head-on into success. Now in 2010, the musical is still reaching audiences as it tours throughout the country.

Staged performances are ephemeral, live, and shared experiences that are performed for one specific audience. To explain further, this means that the same script, songs, dances and blocking are performed at each performance, but no two performances are ever exactly alike. There is a greater opportunity for the audience and performers to connect because it is a shared experience. This means that the musical is far less available than the movie, and it will only be available for a certain period of time, which may make the performance experience more moving for individual audience members.

Even though most productions attempt to consistently present the same events and actions at every performance, changes occur over time due to the nature of live performance. This consistent fluidity of the performance makes it difficult to trace or explain specific moments in a scene because they may be different every day.

Inflections, timing, and accuracy are all important elements to the delivery of lines and can completely alter the interpretation of a scene. Likewise, the current production of *The Color Purple* will not always be the only staged representation. In time, the rights will be released and theatres across the nation will undertake their own productions. The evolutionary potential of a theatrical stage production is endless. This medium allows for a more intimate experience with the text and characters because it gives countless artists and performers the opportunity to sink their hands into the social and political issues facing the characters. Who knows what a production of *The Color Purple* will look like ten years from now?

There are also elements included in *The Color Purple* musical that allow the performance to join the musical genre: dance and song. The movie incorporates songs that are part of the diegetic sound, but there is also non-diegetic sounds like background mood music that the characters are unaware of. All music in the musical is intended to be used by the characters in order to tell their story. The success of the songs relies on the ability of the audience to suspend their disbelief, but this is necessary in all musical theatre. Musical theatre aficionados recognize that people do not usually burst into song

and dance in real life, but sporadic singing and dancing is the foundation for musical theatre. These elements are classified under Aristotle's sixth poetic: spectacle.

Musicals are all about spectacle—the more “oohs and ahhs” from the audience the better. *The Color Purple* achieves this spectacle with the performance of twenty songs split between two acts. Each song is sung by dynamic voices, dressed in bright and colorful costumes, while standing amidst a beautifully designed set. The musical starts with a dynamic number that quickly establishes Celie's situation. When the curtain rises, Celie and Nettie are sitting in a tree singing and clapping. As soon as they finish the chorus begins singing “Mysterious Ways.” The chorus represents a crowd at church and they sing how “God works in mysterious ways.” The costumes are beautiful, the voices are powerful, and the movements are truly inspired by the spirit. The choreography is primarily focused on creating dynamic groupings on the stage and each actor moves individually, as if the spirit were moving them. Throughout the song the audience learns about Celie's abusive stepfather and she appears for second time—pregnant. At this point, Celie's life is centered on an abusive relationship and is not a pretty story to tell. The audience still witnesses Celie's pain, but as the preacher says, “none of us know what the Lord's got planned for us,” (Funderberg 114). The song establishes hope and the audience is able to enjoy the beautiful music and lovely visuals in spite of the abusive context.

One of the most spectacular song and dance segments in the musical is the song “African Homeland” that welcomes the audience back from intermission. Acrobatic movements, a vibrant African-inspired backdrop, and scantily clad dancers provides a feast for the eyes as the audience and Celie learn about Nettie’s time in Africa for the first time. Celie physically follows Nettie around the stage and joins in the dancing. This is another moment when the musical embodies the symbolism. Celie is only reading Nettie’s letters, but the letters allow her to connect with Nettie and she literally follows her. Nettie and Celie are dressed in western garb, but all of the dancers and singers are wrapped in blue strips of fabric, beads, and appear to have spirals painted on their bodies. The female dancers appear to be topless even though they are wearing full body leotards. The African characters provide an extreme contrast to the conservatively dressed Nettie and Celie. Not only are the dancers’ costumes interesting, but their movements across the stage are extremely exciting. The other songs in the musical do not provide opportunities for large dance numbers, so “African Homeland” has to make up for the deficiency. This segment stands out from the entire show and is the only time the musical explores Nettie’s experiences in Africa. “African Homeland” is particularly spectacular because it is an extreme shift from the other songs in the musical.

The final song is “The Color Purple” and truly ends the musical on a high note. The entire cast is on-stage for a picnic, Nettie and Celie have just been reunited, and the only appropriate action is to burst into song. Celie takes the lead and sings her last prayer to God, the stars, the trees, the sky, and everything else (Funderberg 177). In the first song

“God works in mysterious ways,” but now that Celie’s journey is coming to a close the final song asks you to “look what God has done.” Celie speaks out on her own, the entire cast surrounds her and stretches across the stage to support her as they sing the final words of the musical and the end of her prayers: “Amen.”

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

#### Summary

The three media of *The Color Purple* (novel, movie and musical) reach audiences that respond intimately to the various representations of Celie's journey. All three media present adaptations of Walker's ancestors. The novel presents an authentic adaptation of true Southern life while Spielberg's movie presents a film that celebrates the universality of Celie's story. Gary Griffin's musical introduced song and dance to the mix in order to heighten symbolic parallels and spectacle. The epistolary structure of the novel allows for a ventriloquism by the reader that results in an authentic and personal performance of Celie's experiences. Cinematic performance of the movie establishes authenticity through the elements of mise-en-scene and the cinematography establishes relationships between Walker's original characters. Finally, the musical revels in spectacle to present a specific, ephemeral experience for the audience.

#### Conclusions

All of my researching experiences have brought me closer to the works, author, characters and ancestors, but what is my intent? I know that I am researching something that has spoken to me, but I feel drawn to challenge this connection. bell hooks visited Texas A&M in October 2009, as I was beginning to write this thesis. She spoke about love and resistance. I could not get *The Color Purple* out of my mind, but her words struck a chord personally as well. All I could wonder was whether I was so interested in

*The Color Purple* because its performances allowed me to undergo an experience with a black female other. I turned to bell hooks and was faced with the possibility that my analysis of *The Color Purple* was based on white supremacy. It is not easy to look in the mirror and wonder if I am racist and simply using the hardships of a black woman to feel better about myself. Fortunately, hooks also says that “acknowledgement of racism is significant when it leads to transformation,” and I know I have been transformed (hooks, *Feminist* 56). Challenging my intent allowed me to assure myself that my interest was well-placed. What I have found is that regardless of the specificity of the novel telling a black female’s story there is a universality to audience reception. Walker’s novel, Spielberg’s movie, and Gary Griffin’s musical resonate with audiences despite gender or race.



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