

Revisiting Recognition: Buddhist Philosophy in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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"Buddha helps us up while lying down."
-Alice Walker, *A Poem Traveled Down My Arm*

This quote from the 2003 poetry book from Alice Walker expresses with persuasion what I often refer to when examining discussions of cultural identity and the uniqueness and intersection of African American, Indian, and Japanese literature. I conflate these versions of fiction and nonfiction because modern discourse of the distinctiveness of African American works of writing that have lured some attention is not only about literature but also about the social belonging of literature and its claims on the past. Such works include Walker's *The Color Purple* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. These novels provoke attention for their influential origins in the elevation of a specific version of the progressive African American narrative; They also expand the conversation of the authors' practicality in recognition of engaging resistance against westernized views of the Self.

Writing about Buddhist philosophy and linguistics is key to furthermore include these texts into a dialogue about Hegelian dialectics, which was derived from and influenced by Indian, Chinese, and Japanese Buddhism.¹ Dialectical, in this paper, refers to those passages which deal with philosophical and doctrinal subjects, and cannot only be understood in terms of the reasoning of ordinary discourse. This concept is relevant because *The Color Purple* reflects Walker's dialectical reasoning. Her interaction appears to have an underlying similarity with that of the Vipassana movement in American Theravada Buddhism, which advocates mindful awareness of one's senses and dialectical negation as a method of demonstration of *śūnyatā* (emptiness). I cannot, in this moment, claim Walker herself engaged in *reductio-ad-absurdum* thoughts in the novel like the Indian Buddhist leaders. Though, I see to make a case that her texts may be analyzed and comprehended based on the dialectical context, out of which Buddhist practitioners like Nagarjuna vindicated the Madhyamika approach to enlightenment.

This piece addresses three main ideas for future exploration in resituating the case of African American Buddhist Literature (AABL); The sections also offer illustrations of applying AABL as a method for advanced examination in dialectics. I offer three relative methods to analyze further the dialectical manifestation inherent in most things and how Buddhist dialectical discerning applies to contemporary issues in society.

First, dialectical reasoning in the novel cross-examines the construction of understanding. It requires the ability to suggest numerous and synchronized narratives and epistemologies. Walker unravels and explores positive and negative developments that attempt to regulate the relationship between people and land; therefore, her novel falls into the interdisciplinary practice of engagement. Observing class systems, even “Siddhartha, observing this hypocrisy... decid[ed] there had to be a better way” (Walker 2004, 195). The method may be useful to change the logic regulating society and does not accept a necessary and uncomplicated transferring of subject matter onto a universal notion. Secondly, this change becomes realized through the unrelenting quest of multiple means of engagement. These methods reverse, rethink, and relocate universalities. Central to the concept of Buddhist dialectical thinking is a refusal to consume the other; It requires that philosophers, theologians, practitioners, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and literary critics go beyond themselves and formulate exchanges that move beyond voyeurism and expenditure. Finally, Walker often writes about transforming social and dogmatic theory into practice; More occurs in her dialectical manifestation than rhetoric. She offers a form of deconstruction because her narrative is not only composed of negative symptoms. She also offers hope in the form of transformative and enlightening experiences. Such moments include Celie’s friendship with blues singer Shug Avery also known as Lillie. Even so, their relationship becomes dualistic later into the novel. This dualistic connection is also a propelling force in Celie’s enlightenment. Her sexual identity actualizes as that of a woman who loves a woman. In her case, she loves Lillie—a powerful love that aids Celie during her path to healthy self-actualization.

The Color Purple embodies a mode of maintenance of all things, a recognition, and calling to the justification that shows how AABL is a quest of impartiality and munificence. My interest is in the linguistic and cultural dimension of this work, which raises questions that go further than the field of literature in their effects. I use the linguistics and implications of the story to illuminate several challenges concerning the issue of intellectual and social identity. In different ways, the negotiations in these works communicate to the reader a collective message: the impracticality of resolution to the question of identity. The structures suggested by the characters’ descriptions in a global space or social space are qualified by recognition of transformation—social, historical, as well as of place, and the undetermined deferral subsequently of any supposition on the investigation of identity. Ego construction bolsters

the materialism which, for Buddhism, is deep-rooted in the illusion of Self. Likewise, it is the illusion of our perception of an independent and impartial self which affords the suffering that capitalism turns into materialism. The ego becomes a way to evade *dukkha* (suffering) and a way to avoid the recognition that the Self is empty. Therefore, there is not anything within us to which we can retain. We understand this lack of Self as a knowing that something is deficient to which ego may provide the remedy. Self-image generates a fictitious sense of stability and reinforces the illusion of an autonomous self. Since individuality cannot take away the impression of emptiness, an awareness that there is a bit absent, there is an unceasing effort for further ego constructions, which is the foundation for industrialists constant need to develop concepts of status and identity assimilation or destruction. Some cultural happenings of people impacted by free enterprise are undoubtedly rooted in transoceanic experiences. Through forced and chosen integration of many cultures by African Americans, and a disconnect from a lost African culture, there emerges a necessity to identify with something, or someone recognizable. An inherent desire to have identification beyond the physical markers of a history of oppression exists. Out of perplexed thinking, some believe that anemic, baseless illusion is extant. However, this is delusional rationalization. Until the strategies of illusion carried about by ego, relinquish, and so long as there is misunderstanding about the image of the Self, people, like Celie, become stuck in *dukkha*.

Rita Gross reminds us that when considering identity formation, it is essential to note that Western psychology usually sees the aim of developing a healthy ego, while Buddhists consider ego as the problem of creating ill psychological health. Celie's ego, from a Buddhist viewpoint, is the source of her suffering because of its formation by colonial and social exploitation. Additionally, conceptualizing postcolonial psychological trauma is useful for identifying the method of application necessary for healing through writing and reading; thus, for enlightenment. The significance of language to identity construction is apparent, and I understand that essentially what linguistics and existing literary theory are proposing is that it is possible to be contained within all linguistic occurrences at once, or none of them. Through reading *The Color Purple* and engaging Buddhist and activist thought, I realize that finding an identity necessitates that signifying be demonstrated on the body.

In 2019, I published an article titled "Buddhist Recognition in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*" with the *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*. In that study, I attempted to translate a piece of ancient wisdom so that readers, too, might relinquish clinging aggregates while critically exploring the *dukkha* of Ellison's narrator and his journey to cessation. Most scholars usually translate The First Noble Truth (*Dukkha-ariyasacca*) as "'The Noble Truth of Suffering'" (Walpola 16). The Pali or Sanskrit word *dukkha* denotes 'suffering', 'pain', 'sorrow' or 'misery' (Walpola 17). Though, the word *dukkha* "has a deeper philosophical meaning" (Walpola 17). *Dukkha* also

includes “deeper ideas such as ‘imperfection’, ‘impermanence’, ‘emptiness’, ‘insubstantiality’” (Walpola 17). *Dukkha* is the restraints of the dualistic understanding of illusory experiences. What the article does not address, mainly because Ellison’s book itself does not deal with the matter, is the extent to which the Other, the subaltern, the marginalized, might speak when their agency is not as palpable as Invisible Man’s among people of color and white heterosexual/homosexual men or even homosexual/heterosexual white women. Therefore, this article also sheds new light on the invisible not acknowledged in Ellison’s novel—the Black, queer woman. As a queer woman herself, Walker’s uniqueness is inherently connected to the narrative, although she doesn’t want her experience with Tracy Chapman to influence another’s. I shift from focusing on the black male’s experience to incorporating the black queer woman’s identity, too, by outlining the qualities and context of the genus of AABL as depicted through Walker’s story.

In her book, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness*; she calls *The Color Purple*, a “Buddha book that’s not Buddhism.”¹ Buddha, according to her, refers to one who has attained *Bodhi* (wisdom). *Bodhi* is an ideal state of intellectual and moral achievement that is attained by human means—such as writing. Buddha means enlightened one; so, Walker implies *The Color Purple* is a text that culminated from her enlightenment. Although, the text is not entirely Buddhism because it also encompasses other forms of theology and philosophy not commonly found in a traditional Buddhist practitioner’s text—such as Dōgen Zenji’s *Shōbōgenzō*.³ Walker also practiced transcendental meditation over 30 years ago. In the preface of the 1992 edition of the novel, she claims that *The Color Purple* is about “theology” and “the desire to encounter, to hear from, the Ultimate Ancestor,” whereas many people assume that it is only about incest and spouse abuse.⁴ Walker also notes in the preface that the journey that Celie makes is toward her self-realization as “someone who starts out in life already a spiritual captive.” Walker has “recognized” herself as a “worshipper of Nature,” meditator, and she credits Pema Chōdrön’s teachings on awakening compassion with helping to open her heart.⁵ This idea could not be made more manifest than when Celie and Shug talk about the meaning of God. Shug says, “God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it” (202). Celie applies this definition to her own life:

My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. (203)

Alice Walker’s tale allows readers to contextualize an alternative version of the African American path to enlightenment from a Buddhist perspective;

It requires a relinquishment from “the old white man” — read here as a metaphor for the imposed social order of capitalists. According to the preface, Walker has created a “pagan” transformation of “God from patriarchal male supremacist into trees, stars, wind, and everything else” — this insight reveals the concept of “Oneness” inherent in all of Buddhist philosophy. This negation does not infer annihilation of the differences between things, but the nonduality realized when infinite sentient beings are without Self. The first few sentences of the novel show more clearly that reality is initially beyond affirmation of the distinctions of things and lack negation of same. The absolute reality not only of Celie but also of any human's sentiments of longing becomes exposed.

Walker insists on the preservation of things in the text and in life to determine the flaws and omissions. These inherit negations found within all aspects of language expose shortcomings that result in dialectical materialism. Similarly, in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler explores moments of negation between subjects bound to exigency, where the “I” as subject develops through a battle for agency if the subject is recognizably human: “This struggle with the unchosen conditions of one's life... [exists because] of this primary condition of un-freedom” (Butler 19). For instance, when people internalize anything, it may affect and restrict the journeys one can embark. Celie's first instance of introjecting another's purpose into her being is when the story opens with the memory of her stepfather. He commands her not to “tell nobody but God” about his carnal abuse of her (Walker 3). Early readers see the influence of anxiety, fear, and power over Celie's mental and physical development. She reveals, “He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say, ‘You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't’... When that hurt, I cry” (Walker 3). So, much of the novel is composed of letters Celie writes to God and her sister Nettie. In her first letter, Celie tells 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 3). She does not understand why, at age fourteen, she is pregnant with her second child as the result of rape by Alphonso. The scratched out “I am” shows Celie's shift in self-actualization from present to past. In the beginning, she identifies her present Self — “~~am~~” — by her past debasement — “have always been” (Walker 3). Her perception altered to identify herself as not reasonable and unworthy because she is no longer innocent. The abuse that occurs is a concern considering the problems women develop in patriarchal societies. The results of this reality for Celie are clinging aggregates.

Since Celie is living in the post-slavery racist southern region of Georgia in the 1930s and 40s, then she becomes directly impacted by the colonial history of the Georgia Colony. While eliminating manipulation, oppression, and disillusionment are required conditions to overcome suffering; it is not enough. If there is the illusion of Self, suffering will still occur. Also, it is

doubtful that these aspirations can become realized without dousing the illusion of Self. Overcoming individual *dukkha* necessitates that we overcome societal *dukkha*, and this means that we must oppose the pecuniary, social, and dogmatic origins of suffering as well as its central ontological source. This limited perception of the natural world disallows for the transcendence of life and only allows the various attempts at combining with quality in symbolic ways. The interconnectedness of the natural world, social order, and humanity are supremely vital to the development of the human mind. Celie's mind is affected by several people throughout the story. She reflects the message fed to her throughout her life; namely, that she is insignificant. However, Celie's letters allow her to break down the objectification and silence imposed upon her. She can unreservedly express her experiences in her letters, but she is also physically detached from the incidents. Julia Kristeva devised the idea of "approaching abjection" as a way in which to make oneself subject instead of an object, one must transform into requiring instead of the one required; and, the need is specific to black women.⁶ Kristeva recognizes that to be an abject is to be on the liminal verge of becoming.⁷ An abject is negated to the "I," at the point where identity involves the psyche.⁸ Following this reasoning, Corrie Claiborne in *Brown Buddha(S)* reveals it is actually through despair, degradation, trauma, or the repetition of transcendent influences generated by the trauma that a sense of identity can become realized. Claiborne also claims this notion true so much as the sublime, as Immanuel Kant imagines it, is a galvanizing occurrence. The practice of individuation first involves, in the one pursuing to become a speaking subject, a concept of transcendent separation. As Claiborne shows in her study, black women have no difficulty recognizing and experiencing transcendent disaffection. Still, black women, after years of estrangement and despair, are still only accessible brown bodies through which others come to know themselves. Claiborne argues that black women must carry the responsibility of all substantiation for anyone who seeks to use the impression of black women as the symbol of subjugation. This suppression in the novel is expressed as Celie's dualistic and obstructing incidents.

The Color Purple also embodies notions of moving beyond the imposed and explicit binary that hinders fulsome self-actualization. Incorporating Buddhist philosophy with African American literature helps readers to understand better the dichotomies that arise when identity becomes stifled by negation. The goal of Buddhist practice is "Nirvana" (Sanskrit). It is the annihilation of the longings of the three poisons. It, therefore, involves destroying the illusion of the Self, and this, in turn, entails, a culture which, as an alternative of fostering individual partition and opposition, exalts interdependence and unanimity. The postcolonial dialectics of using the subject terms introjection, Self, and ego emerge as we explore Celie's *dukkha*.⁹ She is in a disillusioned state of feeling; for illustration, she tells herself,

Celie... happiness was just a trick in your case... You thought it was time for some, and that it was gone last. Even thought you had the trees with you... When Shug left, happiness desert. (Walker 263)

The types of Celie's clinging aggregates include grief, suffering, pain, separation from loved ones, and not receiving what is wanted. Each is all desires for how life is wanted to be experienced by someone. Though, the necessity of and obsessing on these conditions of the mind are usually disappointing. This notion is so because all forms of life transform and can, therefore, never honestly remain. The source of this appearance of bondage is the thought of the individualist nature that styles the illusion. Celie initially trusts that happiness and sadness depend on external objects. The truth of cessation must be experienced and not merely forced upon her. These truths are summed up to mean an absence of clinging-aggregates. Furthermore, ending the illusion of Self developed through clinging aggregates removes the central limit to the expansion of compassion, which, for those who have realized enlightenment, would be fair and infinite. This idea is relevant not only because the illusion of Self represents a boundary between the individual Self and all others but also because it establishes boundaries between those with whom the Self or ego identifies and those beyond a constructed social identity.

As a result, social identity, ethnic identity, political, and religious identity reify, and one may become unconcerned about others outside of these constructed realms. Such as the case with Lillie and Germaine, once he goes off to college, and Shug sees him as more of a "grandson" than a lover. Lillie wanted to be desired by someone else so desperately that she forsook a real and long-lasting love for a fleeting experience of requited intimate energy. The expectancy is still a set up for the downfall and lack of fulfillment. The cessation of these cravings is the goal of nirvana. These feelings compared to Celie's desires consist of longing for sense-pleasure (being in love with Shug), craving to be or to unite with an experience and to dominate others (losing self-worth over Shug leaving), yearning to be separated from the world, to be nothing, or to be separated from the pain the world can cause (being deeply unhappy and detached from life because of Shug's absence). In the end, Celie ultimately reunites with her sister Nettie, her children, Shug, and Albert in more loving and positively impactful ways. She had to endure the journey of enlightenment alone, to learn to love herself because of herself and despite herself. Once that occurs, Celie slowly but surely starts talking to "God" out loud and not in letters. She also writes to Nettie instead. She is vocal, nonetheless. To speak, for Celie, is cathartic and empowering. So, too, is the ability for any marginalized voice to reveal itself as present and autonomous.

The epistolary form of *The Color Purple* allows the story to function as a memoir because Celie tells her story through letters that she writes to God and then to Nettie. Walker conflates Christianity, African spirituality, and

Buddhist philosophy throughout the story, and, so far, we have identified some of those specific strands of Buddhist philosophy while not ignoring the idea that Buddhism does not have one Supreme Being or God. What may be more important is to consider the “God” for Celie as herself. Nettie even tells Celie, “God is...more internal...not being tied to what God looks like, frees us (Walker 261). If Alice Walker calls God ‘mama,’ then she also may imply that God, for her, is everywhere and someone inside, an inner voice of deeper understanding—a consciousness unknown to our ontologically awakened Self.¹⁰ Thus, Celie tells her life story with raw honesty. Through Walker’s characters, readers may witness examples of how it is no longer an only society that is an issue, but conditions permeated into a culture expressed in the literature and linguistic determinism that are separate from and connected to the author. Talking to the universal epithet, Celie contrives to walk with on this plane of existence regulates the description of “God” as a metaphor for Self and linguistic determinism. Linguistic determinism refers to the view, offered by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, that language determines how people think—also termed the linguistic relativity hypothesis. At this moment, we can expound on the application of a word (or group of words) to another word or idea with which it is symbolically but not precisely connected.

Walker explores and exposes the dilemma in the ways interpersonal thinking forms. She also points to new directions as to how commonalities can further theorize in disrupting ethnic, capital, and postcolonial traumas. Through Shug’s voice, Walker illustrates some of these relational occurrences by claiming, “People insane...Nothing built this crazy can last...they building a dam so they can flood out a Indian tribe that been there since time” (Walker 213). The term “people,” in this instance, refers to capitalists, and “Nothing” implies an actual materialistic world built by forcing destruction and emptiness onto something (a group of people) pre-existent to itself. This “Nothing” also implies the nothingness associated with the Buddhist concept of “emptiness,” whereby the thing which seeks to make itself known has no self with which to claim. Buddhist practitioners have told me that this notion is dangerous for anyone to confront and takes years—a lifetime—to realize. Celie also learns her father was murdered by white men because his textiles store drew too much black business away from white merchants. In this moment, Walker exposes persistent and transient unities across diverse political and intergenerational endeavors as well as geographic areas. One reason Shug lures Celie’s consideration of the Indian tribes’ annihilation is because the Native American culture is being destroyed by forces like those destroying the culture of the Olinkas. One result of the destruction of the Olinka culture, nonetheless, is the shattering of its patriarchal regulations imposed upon women. Of interest are the facts and different articulations of unity in confronting expatriate terrain, source deprivation, and racialized social corruption. Because the Civil Rights Era lasted from 1865 to beyond

the 1970s, the African American discourse of the 1970s and 1980s was intended consciously by its formulators as a first significant step on the way to recognition and equality. Unfortunately, much more justice and re-edification are necessary today as impartiality that cannot wait. The metaphors of race, space, and time offer a useful point of inquiry into the question of literary identity as their juxtaposition seems resolute in these various discussions. The array of implications that black women take on is not just a way for 'master narratives' to contain them, but it is also the critical data from which black people reading the texts must construct an identity.¹¹ Claiborne, in her critique, reveals this occurrence means that Black women, therefore, recognize the images of the mammy, whore, and slogger and may become complicit in them, because this is the only description that the English language provides them; A collision in misleading history is what happens when a reader engages with a work of fiction that tells them black means malevolent. Still, the narrative of the Black queer woman is mostly excluded from these articulations of the radical human elements offered as explorations and depictions in the novel.

Reality becomes impractical for Celie in some ways, and undefined. Since there are no hypothetical examples to aid her in visualizing relativistic thoughts like the fourth dimension (unification of time and space), all she has are metaphors. Metaphor is an essential element of dialectical manifestation because metaphors engage the fourth dimension to assist in envisaging relativistic thoughts. Bohnenkamp (2012) reveals this concept also supports the linguistic manifestation of metaphor because the most confusing idea in the relativistic view of life may be the discovery that time and space are neither definite nor divisible. These usually fixed things become relative and subjective. How one perceives space and time become intimately confined into a framework. Time does not stream linearly from past to present-day to future; It exists in a circular path interpenetrated by space like in an ocean. The progressive that one experiences in time are illusory and misleading. Inevitable negations of the Self arise when symbolic representation (words) of an eternal loop (time-based experiences) become rationalized by a limited mind bound to the laws of linguistics. Bound, in this sense, is any form that cannot occur on its own. Both lexical (philological) and grammatical morphemes may be bound. This negation is also known as dialectics, and reality becomes unattainable and indeterminate within this dialectical manifestation. Since there are no abstract forms to help us envision relativistic concepts, all we get are allegories, similes, and metaphors. Therefore, we may examine Walker's metaphorical (dialectical) manifestations in her texts to explain the figurative description of time-based experiences further, as explained by a constrained and yet enlightened mind.

Yoshinobu Hakutani in *East-West Literary Imagination* reflects on Celie's letters as appealingly poetic in form. Outside of her connection with Lillie, Celie's letters also offer a compelling narrative description of the space and

time continuum of institutions of discrimination and sexism. Through Celie's writings, Walker names the resistance methods, projections, and other ploys usually used to deal with and combat specific incidents of unfairness and bias. An example of this process manifests in Celie's convoluted yet enlightening relationship with Shug. Hakutani believes Shug may be read as "play[ing] the role of a Zen master" because she urges Celie to be "self-reliant and find her own path in search of truth and happiness" as she teaches Celie about the color purple (Hakutani 221). Shug encourages Celie to explore, accept, and be proud of her mind, body, femininity, and identity. Celie also realizes with Shug's support that one ought to encounter sexuality with the essence of nature. Hakutani refers to the relationship she experiences with Shug as "a natural maternal experience of love" in which both make love "without guilt and repression" and "without egotism and oppression" (224). Although, I would not contend that Walker presents this relationship as "maternal" because it is, indeed, quite erotic. In fact, eradication of egotism and oppression is one of the fundamental values of life taught in Buddhism. Conjuring "heaven," the quintessence of nature, or enlightenment, Celie tells God, "I feel Shug's big tits sorta flop over my arms like suds. It feel like heaven is what it feel like, not like sleeping with Mr. — at all" (Walker 116). Together, Celie and Shug validate an archetypical illustration of erotic openness and reciprocal dependency that allows for them to work together toward self-actualization. They bond to form more concrete identities together and separately from each other. Although, from the Buddhist point of view, someone who is deeply co-dependent suffers from ego. A western thought of ego would have one assume the concept of Buddhist egolessness as associated with someone with extreme reticence epitomized by fragility and no ego structure. This idea is not so. Buddhism does not encourage denunciation of distinctiveness or a sense of Self; It promotes working through mental material by contemplation to avoid a reified person. A healthy self is idyllic for beyond enlightenment. One fact of life is that everyone suffers in various ways. Though people may feel glad about something at one moment, there is no guarantee that the moment will last. Sometimes the same situation that brings joy might bring us grief, wariness, or bitterness.

Often, the feelings experienced in existence translate into symbolic meaning through words. We now return to Celie's and Shug's connection as a model to expound on the concept of co-dependence and happenstance in Celie's path to enlightenment. Initially, Celie feels empowered by Shug and her affection. They nourish and tend to one another's impassioned cares. They also comfort one another and share deep-felt, corporeal revelations about themselves. A theme in this novel is the importance of powerful feminine bonds, which is an overall sisterhood and encourages Celie to identify who she is through the appreciation and support she earns from women like Shug, Nettie, and Sofia. These matrons are idyllic to Celie because they stand up for themselves against evident forces and do not enable men to determine

their lifestyle for them. When Celie gets introduced to Shug in person, she seems cruel when she looks at Celie and says, "You sure is ugly" (44). Again, a moment of PTSS occurs. Her critical way of speaking gives the impression that she is pessimistic and callous. However, she turns out to be a sincere and caring woman. This fact becomes apparent when she falls ill, and Celie takes care of her. In return for the care Celie gives to her, Shug shows her kind nature. Lillie becomes a character of admiration for Celie. She discovers a new outlook on life. Celie begins to feel an inner strength and finds who she truly is. She learns how to love and what it means to be loved. Shug is a figurative missionary in Celie's life, like Nettie and the missionaries in the Olinka. It is Shug who makes Albert stop abusing Celie, and she also helps Celie to find the letters from Nettie. Finding these letters from her sister gives Celie the inner strength she needs to break free from Albert's mental and physical captivity. Shug even tells Celie she brought her to Memphis to "love" and "take care" of her. Shug inspires Celie to create her pants store and makes her feel motivated to find a new way in her life for her passion and creativity, giving her more individual and economic freedom.

The issue of co-dependence arises once Shug later leaves Celie for a nineteen-year-old guy named Germaine. Celie writes to Nettie, "My heart broke. Shug love somebody else" (Walker 251). One may consider Celie's *dukkha* as mental bondage formed by the dualistic understanding of illusory experiences. Shug tells Celie she did not think anyone found her attractive anymore except for Celie until she met Germaine. He is crucial in Lillie and Celie's relationship because Celie and Albert become closer during Shug's affair with Germaine. Celie claims, "the old devil [(Albert)] put his arms around me and just stood there on the porch with me real quiet. He ain't Shug, but he begin to be somebody I can talk to" (Walker 250). During this time, Albert realizes for the first time that Celie is good company to have, and Celie similarly enjoys his friendship. He is undergoing his transformation from a brute to decent man. Celie and Albert both loved Shug, depended on her to make them feel something different, and she left them both for someone else at different times. They share a mutual yearn for Shug's love, and so Albert could only respect Celie more because he loved Shug and Shug loved Celie. In the end, if Shug is a Zen master, as Hakutani suggests, then she teaches both Albert and Celie to cling to no one.

When Lillie first dotes on and shares her love for Germaine to Celie, Celie reverts to silence and voiceless interaction. She "went and got a piece of paper...wrote her a note. It said, Shut up" (Walker 254). All the power and strength Celie drew from her connection with Shug immediately vanishes. This occurrence relates to the Buddhist concept that life involves suffering. Existential psychology speaks of ontological anxiety (dread, angst), and Buddhism teaches that suffering is due to attachment. People cling to things in the hope that they will provide a specific benefit. However, Buddhism shows that pain is extinguishable. The Buddhist concept of nirvana is much

like the existentialists' freedom. For the existentialist, freedom is a fact of actuality. So, liberation for Celie is a crucial element in her reality, as interpreted by the electrical signals of the mind expressed in her letters. Finally, Buddhism teaches that there is a way to extinguish suffering. In this instance, Celie must take an assertive role in helping herself become aware of the reality and causes of her suffering. Likewise, she must take an assertive role in working towards improvement—even though it means facing the fears she has been avoiding.

As Celie continues her journey to enlightenment alone, without Shug, she initially reverts to questioning her self-worth. She claims:

Sometimes I think Shug never loved me. I stand looking at my naked self in the looking glass. What would she love? ... My hair is short and kinky... My skin dark. My nose just a nose... My body just any woman's body... Nothing special here for nobody to love. No honey colored hair, no cuteness. (Walker 263)

Celie's attachment to Lillie has failed, and her sister and children are gone. Celie has learned that attachment may backfire. She feels unworthy of love and has lost a sense of pleasure she believed to come from Lillie's love. This section of the story also highlights some PTSS symptoms as Celie expresses dissatisfaction with her "dark" skin, Afrocentric nose and lips, traditionally African kinky hair, and lack of "honey" (blonde) colored hair. She criticizes her natural beauty and, unfortunately, finds no "cuteness" in it. She is a victim of patterns of behaviors resulting from PTSS that include the insufficient development of primary esteem. This incidence is not uncommon today when considering psychological studies of African American children (girls under the age of 10) who prefer to play with white, blonde dolls over the brown doll and even refer to the brown doll as ugly in comparison to the white doll. Though one could deconstruct this study and consider the actual experimenter a flaw in the study, because the experimenters are usually white women, and that fact may affect the choices of the girls.

Overall, we should keep talking about diverse cultural identities even though these exchanges predicate on the supposed futility of the task. Walker reveals her greatest hope for humanity — that "we can wake up" and "rise to the challenge that our global interconnectedness gives us" (190). She thinks and talks about how the people who wrote the Bible didn't know China existed; but now we can connect with all the places to truly "see cause and effect" (190). Walker believes we have an opportunity to truly get to the root of things and to "transform human society" (190).¹² Surely, desolation (*dukkha*) has an essential place in African American literature. Claiborne declares, and I agree, one cannot read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* without also understanding despair and its impact on identity formation. However, theories of suffering break down in African American literature when influential concepts of identity encounter black subjects who visualize

themselves outside of their clichéd portrayals—read here as the black queer woman. As Claiborne reveals, it is evident in reading black women's writings that black subjectivity cannot distinguish itself through the historical knowledge gained from European traditions. Walker acknowledges the circumstance of blackness, and queer femaleness generates a range of selves that questions the constancy of existence and nature. This inclusion is essential during a time when human rights are threatened for people who exist as LGBTQIA or nonbinary people who seek equality.

If identity is not a pragmatic Self offered of culture, then it may be constructed in alternate ways through literature to satisfy circumstances specified by its author. This philosophy is a potent counterbalance to the assimilation tendencies into which one may be socialized but may ultimately be an inadequate response to an imperializing culture that presents itself as a universal worldview. Far more effective, in my view, at least, are to compare studies of Hegel, Marx, and Husserl. From these sources of dialectical thinking developed the view that dialectic could be the process through which the alienated Self can respond to discriminatory suffering in a healing way. Likewise, Fanon believed awareness of the cultural and economic forces that shape humans' identities, and an appreciation for the pre-conscious configuration of Self that phenomenology can reveal is valuable to the sufferer of marginalization. It is the elusiveness of cultural identity that is the main force behind its perpetual quest: to overcome cultural ambiguity through a reliable figuration of social space that renders meaningless the imposed form of partisan and collective belonging. The dilemma of language and cultural identity as if it is just about aesthetic and literature is limitlessly going in circles, chasing after uniqueness, even as it becomes more immaterial as cultural practices develop entwined across a variety of spaces. This comparative praxis causes new collective meanings as well as new recognitions of transformations. Literary claims upon narration seem unpersuasive when they endure blasé to this unique recognition.

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Notes

¹ See: Taylor, Jack. "Ralph Ellison as a Reader of Hegel: Ellison's *Invisible Man* as Literary Phenomenology." *Intertexts*, vol. 19 no. 1, 2015, p. 135-154. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/itx.2015.0008.

² At Emory University, which is home to the Alice Walker Literary Society and her archives, Walker has sat beside the Dalai Lama onstage, examining spirituality

and inventiveness. She has traveled to and written about Buddhism and spirituality in South Africa, India, Japan, China, and Rwanda.

³Shōbōgenzō (正法眼藏), ("Treasury of the True Dharma Eye") is the title most used to refer to a collection of works written in Japanese by the 13th-century Buddhist monk and founder of the Sōtō Zen school, Eihei Dōgen. The term shōbōgenzō can also be used as a synonym for Buddha Dharma, as viewed from the perspective of Mahayana Buddhism.

⁴Walker recently claimed she is a Buddhist, and she has paid great homage to African spirituality and philosophy. For ten years, Vipassana teacher and author Jack Kornfield came to Walker's home in Berkeley to teach her and a dozen other women meditation practices. The affinity of understanding was recognized and freely incorporated in a sangha not tied to a traditional Buddhist arrangement.

⁵Pema Chōdrōn is an American Tibetan Buddhist. She is an ordained nun, acharya, and disciple of Chōgyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Founded by Chōgyam Trungpa Rinpoche in 1984, Gampo Abbey is a Western Buddhist Monastery in the Shambhala tradition, in Nova Scotia, Canada. Pema Chōdrōn supports groups of vulnerable people to not only heal and grow but also to thrive and flourish in their respective communities.

⁶ See Quiet Brown Buddha(S): Black Women Intellectuals, Silence and American Culture, a dissertation by Corrie Beatrice Claiborne.

⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York Columbia University Press, 1982)

⁸ See bell hooks' essay "Postmodern Blackness" in *Yearning: Race, Gender, And Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990) 23-31.

⁹ Discourse of Postcolonial Dialectics is explored in Asha Varadharajan's *Exotic Parodies: Subjectivity in Adorno, Said, and Spivak* (University of Minnesota Press), Pallavi Rastogi's *Postcolonial Disaster: Narrating Catastrophe in the Twenty-First Century* (Northwestern University Press), and Michael Gorra's *After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie* (University of Chicago Press).

¹⁰ Beliefnet.com "Alice Walker Calls God 'Mama'."

¹¹ See "Toni Morrison Interview on Her Life and Career (1990) at the web link <https://youtu.be/53F0IFMSwpc> for more discussions of the 'master narrative.'

¹² See: Reed, Wendy, et al. *Circling Faith: Southern Women on Spirituality*. The University of Alabama Press, 2012. *Project MUSE* muse.jhu.edu/book/22509.

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