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The Earth in its Fullness: An Ecocritical Analysis of Alice Walker's Works

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ABSTRACT

Walker's first book of poetry was written while she was a senior at Sarah Lawrence. She took a brief sabbatical from writing while working in Mississippi in the civil rights movement. Walker resumed her writing career when she joined *Ms.* magazine as an editor before moving to northern California in the late 1970s. Her 1975 article, *In Search of Zora Neale Hurston*, published on Ms Magazine, helped revive interest in the work of Zora Neale Hurston, who inspired Walker's writing and subject matter. In 1973, Walker and fellow Hurston scholar Charlotte D. Hunt discovered Hurston's unmarked grave in Ft. Pierce, Florida. The women collaborated to buy a modest headstone for the gravesite.In addition to her collected short stories and poetry, Walker's first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, was published in 1970. In 1976, Walker's second novel, *Meridian*, was published. The novel dealt with activist workers in the South during the civil rights movement, and closely paralleled some of Walker's own experiences.In 1982, Walker published what has become her best-known work, the novel *The Color Purple*. About a young troubled black woman fighting her way through not only racist white culture but also patriarchal black culture, it was a resounding commercial success. The book became a bestseller and was subsequently adapted into a critically acclaimed 1985 movie as well as a 2005 Broadway musical.

Walker has written several other novels, including *The Temple of My Familiar* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (which featured several characters and descendants of characters from *The Color Purple*). She has published a number of collections of short stories, poetry, and other published work. She expresses the struggles of black people, particularly women, and their lives in a racist, sexist, and violent society. Her writings also focus on the role of women of color in culture and history. Walker is a respected figure in the liberal political community for her support of unconventional and unpopular views as a matter of principle.

1. Introduction

When Alice Walker, in her book In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, draws the beautiful comparison that "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (1984:xii), she could not have better expressed the close relation that exists between Feminism and Womanism. However, there is at least one important difference between them, giving Womanism an additional dimension and taking it one step further than (conventional) Feminism: colour.

According to Washington (cf. 1994: 88), it is a characteristic feature of Walker's writing that she, coining the term and defining herself as a "womanist" (1984:167), addresses questions of 'race' in addition to questions of gender. The fact that her works -stories, essays, poems, and novelsclearly express her empathy for the oppressed (black) woman also becomes obvious in The Color Purple through the depiction of the sexual oppression of the black female characters in general, and Celie in particular. Although gender-based problems are undeniably the most important thematic unit in The Color Purple, Walker also brings in questions of 'race', focussing on Celie's sister's (Nettie) letters from Africa. Nettie's experiences, ranging from confrontations with white missionaries, the ethical principles of the native Olinka tribe and the white man's imperialist drive, confirm Bush's view that "Through Nettie's story, the theme of women's exploitation by men is set in the larger context of the exploitative relationship between races and nations" (1988: 1039). However, expanding on the previous interpretation of Alice Walker as a womanist writer, there is still another essential ingredient in Walker's work, which – although commented upon – has been largely overlooked: ecology.

Walker already illustrates the close link between colour, gender and nature in the preface to the tenth anniversary edition of The Color Purple, stating that purple (which evokes associations both of spiritual regeneration2 and lesbianism3) is the "color that is always a surprise but is everywhere in nature" (emphasis added). Expanding on this connection, Walker clearly demonstrates the inextricability of race, gender and nature when saying that "some of us have become used to thinking that woman is the nigger of the world, that a person of color is the nigger of the world, that a poor person is the nigger of the world. But, in truth, Earth itself has become the nigger of the world..." (1999b: 147). In the following I seek to show that this inextricability does not only manifest itself in the form of oppression, but that it can also be used, turning a negative into a positive, as an effective tool for solving problems based on any of the sides of this triangular connection between race, gender, and nature.

Walker has never concealed her love of nature, which was one of the reasons why, when contemplating it, she finally did not commit suicide: "I realized how much I loved it, and how hard it would be not to see the sunrise every morning, the snow, the sky, the trees, the rocks, the faces of people, all so different" (cit. in O'Brien, 1994: 58). Defining herself as a "worshipper of Nature" (1984: xii), and brought up by parents who "were both rooted in the earth. Both faithful to their love of Nature, [and] the beauty of the seasons" (1996: 37), Walker's fiction is suffused with a concern for the environment which was fostered by a series of events in the 1970s and 1980s that were detrimental to the environment. As Pepper (cf. 1984: 16) points out, at the beginning of the 1970s there was a growing concern about the evident postwar deterioration of the environment that was accompanied by a period of sustained economic expansion. Worried about ecological damages due to increased consumption, rapidly expanding populations, and the Americans using huge amounts of defoliants in the Vietnam War, a heightened awareness of environmental problems emerged.

The confluence of an environmentally-conscious upbringing and a heightened public ecological awareness has evidently prompted a strong thematic examination of 'green' ideas in Walker's writing. For example, in her collection of poems Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful4 (1985), Walker explicitly focuses on the environment, as her imagery of nature ("The Desert has its own moon", in the poem On Sight; "A nose that sniffs the essence of the Earth. And knows the message of every leaf", Without Commercials) and the personifications of nature ("Trees of the Desert Have Arms" On Sight; "Not I, said the waters", Who?) clearly show. What is more important, however, is that Walker links these environmental issues to questions of gender and race. In No One Can Watch the Wasichu, she skilfully exposes the interconnection between environmental damage and violating the female by feminising the earth:

No one can watch the Wasichu anymore He is always penetrating a people whose country is too small for him [...] He is always squashing something Somebody's guts trailing his shoe [...] He is scalping the earth till she runs into the ocean The dust of her flight searing our sight.

Thus, Walker perfectly qualifies as an ecofeminist writer, subscribing to the essence of Ecofeminism that "sexism and the exploitation of the environment are parallel forms of domination" (Warren, 1994: i). However, as I have suggested, Walker transcends Ecofeminism by bringing in aspects related to issues of race: the Wasichu is, in the language of the Sioux, the white man, 'he who takes the fat', as Black Elk reports:

With her simultaneous indictment of the damage done to the ecosystem and the white man's racial aggression against a coloured people, Walker proves that she is not only an ecofeminist but, rather, an ecowomanist writer. The leap from Ecofeminism to Ecowomanism is insightfully summarised by Smith (1999: 476): "Just as the term 'ecofeminist' expresses the perception that the degradation of the Earth is of a piece with the subordinating and bullying of women, racial minorities, the poor, and the marginalized, the term 'ecowomanist' expresses the burden of this perception on a woman of color". The burden of this perception is not only interwoven into Walker's poetry, but it also concerns herself directly, as the introduction to Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful makes clear: "I could, for the first time, admit and express my grief over the ongoing assassination of the earth" (1992b: 311).

The Wasichu, the incarnation of this ongoing assassination of the earth, is a recurrent image in Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful. In her poem Who? Walker criticises the white man's colonial/expansionist character that affects nature/humankind at the same time, demonstrating that the former cannot be separated from the later.

Who has not been invaded by the Wasichu? Not I, said the people. Not I, said the trees. Not I, said the waters. Not I, said the rocks. Not I, said the air. Moon? We hoped you were safe.

Similarly, in The Color Purple it is the white man in Africa who 'annexes' the territory of the native Olinka tribe for rubber exploitation. Celie's sister Nettie describes in her letter that "The ancient, giant mahogany trees, all the trees, the game, everything of the forest was being destroyed, and the land was forced to lie flat" (p.144). Apart from managing the territory into ecological disaster, the white man also makes the Olinka pay rent for their own village and finally expels them as the place is allegedly needed as a headquarters for the rubber industry.

Consequently, it becomes obvious that Walker's understanding of 'environment' is not limited to nature but extends to the whole web of human relationships. For Walker, ecosystems do not just refer to the relationship of plants and animals in their habitat but include human beings together with their physical environment. Applying this concept to her poetry, in These Days Walker offers a reflection on her friends' interaction with the environment, and every single stanza, dedicated to one of her friends, ends with the sentence: "Surely the earth can be saved for…" (followed by the name of her specific friend). This optimistic outlook in Walker's poem, I would argue, can be attributed to her perspective of having a holistic understanding of ecosystems, including the animate and inanimate environment. 'The earth can be saved', then, only when applying healthy ecosytems to nature (e.g. by renouncing the commercialisation of nature, as criticised in the first stanza5), to questions of race (e.g. attributing racism to education and not genetics; eighth stanza6), and to questions of gender (listening and talking about people's rights, and not denying or repressing parts of oneself; sixth stanza7).

In this last and perhaps most important poem in Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful, Walker also gives advice on how to learn apply a healthy ecosystem: through love. In accordance with her holistic conception of the environment, love is not limited to an inter-human level but also includes, as the second stanza shows, love of both the animate and the inanimate nonhuman world: "…having a love affair with tiny wildflowers and gigantic rocks". The clearest message that love will provide balanced ecosystems and can

help saving the earth, however, comes at the very end of the poem:

Surely the world can be saved by
all the people who insist on love.

Thus, according to Walker, love is the key to saving the earth, and her holistic concept of love runs like a purple thread through all her work. Love and mutual respect, for Walker, is the way of preventing and solving problems concerning nature, gender, and race. "Don't ever mess over nobody [...] and nobody will ever mess over you" (Walker, 1989: 288) is the central message of her approach, in all respects.

The fact that an all-embracing concept of love can overcome tensions of gender and race is also exemplified by The Color Purple. It is Shug (who seems to be Walker's mouthpiece) and her (sexual and non-sexual) love of Celie that give Celie a new meaning of live, a new identity and a new 'voice', providing her with enough courage to claim her independence. Shug's embodiment of holistic love enables Celie to fight against sexism, forgive her husband all the years of oppression and domestic violence, and finally also helps Celie's husband realise his misogynist behaviour. However, Celie's absorption of love takes a long time, and confirms Smith's claim that in Walker's work "Love is never an unconflicted garden of earthly delights, mystic, romantic, lush. It is, rather, learned, often fought for, birthed in pain." (1999: 472). Celie learns to love peu a peu, and awakens from her oppressed position when she learns about Shug's understanding of God, which is closely linked to the holistic concept of love. Shug fundamentally changes Celie's belief of God in terms of gender, race and, also, nature. Firstly, in terms of gender, Shug explains to Celie that for her "God ain't a he or a she, but alt" (167). As far as 'race' is concerned, Celierealises that she has been blinded by the (patriarchic) notion that "He big and old and tall and graybearded and white." (165). Thirdly, Shug believes that "God is everything [...] Everything that is or ever was or ever will be" (167), and so it becomes obvious that God is omnipresent, in all living creatures and also in the inanimate world. Shug's belief seems to go hand in hand with Walker's pantheistic world view: "Certainly I don't believe there's a God beyond nature. The world is God, man is God. So is a leaf or a snake."(cf. O'Brien, 1994: 75).Shug's concept of love has to be seen in close connection with her love of God, The Spirit which, as Smith (1999: 480) rightly points out, is an "expansive God of trees, air birds, people - an erotic God who 'love all them feelings', who 'love everything you love' [...] just wanting to share a good thing.'". The corollary of this pantheism is, then, that for Walker there is no difference between the earth and The Spirit (to which The Color Purple is dedicated), which is confirmed by her statement: "In day-to-day life, I worship the Earth as God - representing everything- and Nature as its spirit" (1999a: 9).

It therefore is not altogether surprising, given the prevalence of Walker's belief and her criticism that "Men [sic] and their religions have tended to make […] their Gods an objectionable thing, a shame." (1996: 171/172), that she (and Shug and Celie, respectively) reject the Christian notion of a gendered, male God, described (and prescribed) by the "white folks' white bible8 " (166), as a precondition in coming to a full love of the earth. As the reader of The Color Purple realises, the masculine image of God has been (ab-) used as a tool of power for patriarchy's ends. Sinfield (1985: 117) observes that it is a crucial stage in Celie's developing awareness "when she realizes that 'God' is not a way of relieving her oppression, but a major part of that oppression […] : 'the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful and lowdown' " (164). Like Nettie and her husband, "not being tied to what God looks like" (218), Celie's 'awakening' liberates and provides her with her a new 'voice'.

In spite of space constraints, the term 'voice' needs clarification at this juncture. It is important to realise that 'voice', as Yvonne Johnson points out in her book The Voices of African American Women, "is used not only in reference to narrative voice, to 'point of view', but to the process of bringing the self to consciousness, the process of becoming the speaking subject" (1998: 5), and this is exactly what Celie achieves. In terms of perspective, Celie now writes to Nettie instead of God (152) and, initiating her process of self-knowledge, also wants to see her father for the first time in her life (ibid). As if, in a blending of authorial and narrative voice, Celie hears Walker's voice reminding "how much we lose by denying, exiling or repressing parts of ourselves" (These Days), Celie's liberated 'voice' endows her with a new identity and enables her to claim and defend her independence (176), freed from the Christian version of God. It is because of this constructed, masculinized concept of God and love that Walker proposes a pagan, postChristian eco-spirituality which, devoid of any race or gender bias, provides a new 'voice', prompts a re-positioning of the self within the world picture, contributes to a healthy ecosystem and, also, helps Walker define her identity: "The pagan part connects me to all of my roots -my African, my Scottish, Irish, Native American, all connected at that pagan root" (The Observer Review, 25/02/2001).

Since for Walker achieving healthy ecosystems is of paramount importance, she must be seen in close connection with Environmental Ethics, the branch of philosophy which examines the moral foundations of ecological responsibility. Environmental Ethics, as Elliot (cf. 1995: 1/2) points out, is less concerned with prompting an ecological sensitivity than examining its already present moral foundations and implications. Hence, in Environmental Ethics, there are three distinct views of moral responsibility to the environment9 . The first view is anthropocentric and claims that, as human beings are (allegedly) the only morally significant persons with capacity for reason, ecological responsibility is derived from human interests alone. The anthropocentric view maintains that human beings have the duty to ensure that the earth remains environmentally hospitable for supporting future human life and guaranteeing the survival of the human 'race'. The second theory concedes some animals the status of morally significant living creatures and, thus, claims that our responsibility toward the environment also hinges on the interests of these animals. However, as with the anthropocentric stance, environmental obligation is still indirect because the concern for the environment solely derives from human interests. Unlike these two approaches, the ecocentric

view holds that the environment deserves direct moral consideration, has an intrinsic value, and qualifies for moral selfhood. Ecocentrism emphasises that the environment has direct rights and, most importantly, is on the same moral level as human beings.

Against the background of these three branches within Environmental Ethics, it seems safe to surmise that Alice Walker is a follower of the ecocentric view. Whether it be the personifications of nature in Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful, or Walker's conviction that "If we were raised like white people, to think we are superior to everything else God made, we too would behave the way they do" (in her poem These Days), it becomes obvious that in her world view human beings, among themselves and in relation to the animate and inanimate natural world, are on the same moral level. Underlining this connection, Walker (1999c: 307) emphasises her view that "all of creation is of the same substance and therefore deserving of the same respect", and that "we are connected to them [the animals] at least as intimately as we are connected to trees" (ibid: 310). It therefore does not come as a surprise that in The Color Purple Celie identifies with a tree (22) which is the only way for her to stand her empty existence and find an 'ally' expressing a symbolic hope for change. Similarly, Shug's statement "I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed" (167) also shows that Walker ascribes utmost importance to nature, putting it on a moral par with human beings which, in turn, reveals her ecocentric world view and makes her work so central to Environmental Ethics.

One of the reasons for Walker's concept of moral equality between human beings, animate and inanimate nature can be attributed to her post-Christian, pantheistic spirituality. As the reader, through Walker's mouthpiece Shug, realises that God is omnipresent ("God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God"; 166), it almost goes without saying that for Walker everything on earth has the same (moral) value, and that there is a direct moral obligation to the environment. There is no hierarchy anymore, as the Great Chain of Being would have it (cf. Attfield, 1983: 149), but there is a feeling of togetherness and equality, and a sense of roundness and circle.

How central the image of the circle is to Walker's work becomes obvious by one of her letters to Quincy Jones, co-producer of the film The Color Purple, in which Walker (1996: 143) points out that she didn't want to see Albert sit on a horse at the end, being separated from the others, because "The feeling of the people is circle, not hierarchy". It is exactly this image of a circle which would also mirror her view of a healthy ecosystem in which the circle brings people and other elements of nature on a same plane. Unlike the Wasichu, who does not fit to the idea of sitting at round tables (see Walker's poem Family Of), others can benefit from the healing effect of the circle which also helps overcome problems of race, as Bush (1988: 1038) shrewdly observes: "When small groups of women succeed in establishing healing circles, these circles begin to intersect and become more and more inclusive. By the novel's end, even Eleanor Jane, the white mayor's daughter, has begun to enter this woman-centred community as an equal, contributing member". In keeping with Walker's definition of a womanist (who "loves roundness"), the circle is central to Walker's work and her understanding of a balanced ecosystem.

When Walker says that "for the Earth to survive, we have to acknowledge each other as part of the family, the same family" (cit. in Smith, 1999: 481), she undoubtedly evokes the image of this all-connecting circle again, where nobody is left out. However, her statement also mirrors another feature:

talking about humankind as "the family, the same family" evokes images of an essential humanism which, in times of postmodern thought and critical theory, is looked at with suspicion. In the introduction to his reader Posthumanism (cf. 2000: 4), Neil Badmington compellingly suggests that the claim that despite the differences of religion, class, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality and language, there is a basic human essence, may be coming to an end which, given Walker's statement, seems to contradict her commitment to the appreciation and preservation of different cultural values. In fact, when Walker states that "I believe the Earth is good. That people, untortured by circumstance or fate, are also good. I do not believe the people of the world are naturally my enemies, or that animals, including snakes, are, or that Nature is" (1999: xxv), she reveals a major inconsistency in her thought. It is amply paradoxical that, on the one hand, the people of the earth are not naturally her enemies but that, on the other hand, exactly the same people are naturally her friends. Technically speaking, Walker's statement is based both on the approval and on the rejection of an essential humanism. Furthermore, her theory is not very convincing given the fact that in our contemporary society there is obviously a considerable number of 'enemies'. Sinfield (1985: 118) touches on this aspect when qualifying Walker's view as "a vision of how people might ideally live, but one which is rendered incapable, precisely by its own pretension to constitute a necessary human truth, of investigating why people do not live like that". Expanding on this aspect, Sinfield's criticism of Walker addresses the fact that Walker allegedly overlooks the "material determinants of culture" (ibid.).

However, I think it is a maladroit criticism to argue that Walker is not aware of the fact that radically different material conditions of existence can produce incompatible subjectivities, and that politics and culture can have an effect upon an individual's sense of self. Instead, I would rather argue that the key to understanding her concept lies, once again, in ecology. As has become obvious, Walker's world view is ecocentric, and not anthropocentric, as classical Humanism would have it (cf. Badmington, 2000: 3): in Cartesian thought humans are seen as the centre of the cosmos because they are the only living creatures capable of reason and moral values ('I think, therefore I am'). However, Walker's ecocentrism holds that the whole environment has a moral standing. Although she talks of "the unindoctrinated Human Heart where everything is profusion, chaos, multiplicity, but also creativity, containment, and care" (1996: 171/172) and does not seem to refute the idea of the Family of Man, Walker is seriously questioning its supremacy.

Similarly, with regard to the concept of God, classical Humanism holds that God is no longer the central figure (cf. Badmington, 2000: 4). With Walker, however, It still is. God is just redefined, de-gendered and de-coloured, into an omnipresent and love-giving Spirit, but 'It' has the same central position for her. The fact that she often uses the essentialising generic pronoun 'we' in her poetry (e.g. "We are all splendid descendants of Wilderness"; Without Commercials or "Were we black? Were we women? Were we gay?" Each One, Pull One) does not imply that she is not aware of the cultural, racial and gender differences that exist. In fact, in her poem Song she describes the diversity of coloured people ("their skins are pink and yellow and brown [...] some have full lips, some have thin"). That Walker is aware of the fact that different cultures can produce different subjectivities is not only shown by the description of the completely different cultural values of the Olinka tribe, the white missionaries and the Afro-American community in The Color Purple, but also by Walker's statement that "our response to 'strangeness' or 'specialness' depends on where we are born, where we are raised, how much idle time we have had to watch trees. (1999c: 307, emphasis added). Walker's 'essentialism', I would argue, can rather be attributed to her holistic approach to problems of 'race', gender and the environment: everyone should participate in applying balanced ecosystems to the environment which then, in turn, can change personal subjectivities, just as in Shug's, Celie's or her husband's case. It is therefore that Walker looks beyond the parameters of classcial humanism and proposes, much in the fashion of Roland Barthes (cf. Badmington, 2000: 11-13), a 'progressive' humanism, invalidating the belief that there is a same unchanging human essence and maintaining the notion of the diversity of different cultural values.

2. Conclusion

In this essay I have analysed questions of gender and 'race' in Alice Walker's Horses Make a Landscape More Beautiful and The Color Purple through an ecocritical lens. I have shown that both texts are not only pervaded with problems of 'race' and gender, but are also closely linked to environmental concerns and thus cannot be seen outside an ecological framework. Illustrating that Walker sees sexual oppression and exploitation of the environment as parallel forms of male exploitation, I have demonstrated that she clearly qualifies as an ecofeminist writer. However, by linking misogyny and environmental exploitation to racial oppression, Walker transcends Ecofeminism and proposes a spiritual ecowomanist attitude to overcome tensions of 'race' and gender. I have shown that this spiritual Ecowomanism rejects the Christian belief of anthropocentrism with its 'white', masculinised construction of God, and sees the belief in the (redefined) omnipresent Spirit and its holistic concept of love as the key to authenticating one's 'voice' and saving the earth. As Walker's pantheism goes hand-in-hand with her love of nature, she puts both animate and inanimate nature on a moral par with human beings, which reveals her ecocentric world picture, symbolised by a circle, and places her work at the heart of contemporary Environmental Ethics.

Finally, expanding on the notion of the circle, I have countered the argument that Walker believes in a classical, essential humanism, denying the specificity and diversity of cultural values. Instead, as I have shown, she proposes a 'progressive' humanism which concerns all human beings and includes the notion that culture, politics and economics can produce fundamentally different subjectivities. It is within this progressive humanism that Walker intends to apply balanced, healthy ecosytems, suffused by affection and love, to questions of gender and race. And, in a time when BSE and food-and-mouth disease demand the urgent need to redefine humankind's relationship with nature, it might well be that it is only through Walker's approach, in which "animal life is the spiritual equivalent of oxygen" (Ziegenhals, 1988: 1037), that 'the earth can be saved for us'.

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