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The introduction to this Guide offers a summary of Alice Walker’s life and her major professional achievements as well as an overview of the Guide’s content and lines of enquiry.

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The opening chapter of this Guide examines the conception and reception of The Color Purple and its adaptations. The first section considers Alice Walker’s commentary on the novel’s conception, drawing on her essay ‘Writing The Color Purple’ and various interviews. The chapter then examines a range of reviews of the novel. It includes the influential responses of Gloria Steinem and Trudier Harris, both of whom established viewpoints taken up in later readings of the novel. This section places a particular focus on those reviews that engaged the issues that would fuel subsequent debate: the novel’s generic identity; its treatment of black masculinity; its representation of Africa; its ‘utopian’ ending. The section ends by looking at Steven C. Weisenburger’s detailed assessment of the novel’s reception and canonization. The final sections of the chapter outline responses to Steven Spielberg’s controversial cinematic reworking of The Color Purple and the musical theatre adaptation of the novel.

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which explores the relationship between Celie’s economic progress and the novel’s theological discourse.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Color Purple: Feminist Text?

Chapter Seven addresses issues arising from Walker’s self-designated status as a ‘womanist’ and the novel’s current status as feminist Ur-text. The chapter begins by considering readings that explore the appeal of the novel to women from a range of cultural matrices and their embracing of Celie as a feminist heroine. Trudier Harris questions this categorization of Celie, arguing that she is too passive to qualify as a feminist heroine. Gina Michelle Collins’s reading of Celie’s survival strategies, elaborated in ‘The Color Purple: What Feminism Can Learn from a Southern Tradition’ (1990), is at variance with Harris’s views. This first section of the chapter concludes with the highly influential reading of Christine Froula, which investigates Walker’s engagement with representations of women in Western literature. The second section of this chapter is concerned with Walker’s place in the African-American women’s literary canon. In particular, it explores Walker’s relationship with ‘literary foremother’ Zora Neale Hurston, considering comparative readings of The Color Purple and Hurston’s most famous novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God. The chapter looks at essays by James C. Hall, Diane F. Sadoff and Molly Hite, who take a close look at the politics of Walker’s intertextual relationship with Hurston.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Gender and Sexuality in The Color Purple

The final chapter of this Guide engages with the wealth of critical interest in the sexual and gender politics of The Color Purple. The first section, ‘Black Masculinity in The Color Purple,’ charts opposing responses to Walker’s depiction of black men in the novel. Ralph D. Story and George Stade argue that Walker relies upon stereotypes in her representation of male characters, criticize her handling of Albert’s ‘redemption’ and object to the sidelining of male/female relationships in the novel. As well as examining evaluations of her male characters, this section also considers responses to the hostility generated by Walker’s gender politics. Anita Jones and King-Kok Cheung counter criticism of Walker by suggesting that she leaves us with a tantalizing glimpse of a world where hegemonic gender and sexual politics have lost their currency. This section closes with a twenty-first century reading that sheds new
light on some of these issues, Candice Marie Jenkins’s ‘Queering Black Patriarchy: The Salvific Wish and Masculine Possibility in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple’ (2002). The second section of this chapter focuses on responses to the novel’s sexual politics, with particular emphasis on queer readings. It considers the reaction to Celie and Shug’s relationship in early reviews and explores more detailed readings by Linda Abbandonato, bell hooks and Renée C. Hoogland.

Conclusion

This book concludes by reflecting on the breadth of academic research on The Color Purple while also highlighting those neglected dimensions of the novel which might inspire new readings. The conclusion gives further consideration to the enduring popularity of Celie’s story in the twenty-first century, looking at responses to the novel and its adaptations which have been recorded online. It also discusses the long-term impact of the novel on Walker’s literary reputation and the reception of her later work.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Conception and Reception of *The Color Purple*

CONCEPTION OF THE NOVEL

In her essay ‘Writing *The Color Purple,*’ Alice Walker describes the moment when she discovered the key to the new narrative that she was preparing to write:

■ I was hiking through the woods with my sister, Ruth, talking about a lovers’ triangle of which we both knew. She said: ‘And you know, one day The Wife asked The Other Woman for a pair of her drawers.’ Instantly the missing piece of the story I was mentally writing – about two women who felt married to the same man – fell into place. And for months – through illnesses, divorce, several moves, travel abroad, all kinds of heartaches and revelations – I carried my sister’s comment delicately balanced in the center of the novel’s construction I was building in my head.’

Walker conceived *The Color Purple* as a historical novel that would engage a ‘womanist’ vision of history – a history that ‘starts not with the taking of lands, or the births, battles, and deaths of Great Men, but with one woman asking another for her underwear.’

In her accounts of how she came to write *The Color Purple,* Walker has cast herself in the role of medium – channelling the characters and their story – rather than all-knowing author. According to Walker, the novel’s major characters presented themselves to her and asserted their needs immediately. They ‘refused to visit’ her while she lived in New York, so Walker moved to a rural California town resembling the characters’ home in Georgia. They instructed her to give up all other work in order to write their story. As she prepared to write, she worked on a quilt – her favourite metaphor for her narrative methodology – while the characters became acquainted with one another. In the dedication for the tenth-anniversary edition of the book, Walker again referred to herself as a conduit for the creative, transcendental force embodied by her characters: she thanks ‘the Spirit: Without whose assistance/Neither this
book/Nor I/Would have been/Written.’ She closes the book by thanking ‘everybody in this book for coming’ and signs off as ‘A.W., author and medium.’

Much of the inspiration for Walker’s most celebrated characters sprang from her family history. In a 1986 television documentary for the BBC’s Omnibus program, Walker explained that it was the experience of her step-grandmother, Rachel, who was ‘battered down,’ that most informed the conception of Celie. The character of Albert was based on Walker’s grandfather. The influence of Walker’s aunts asserted itself in the conception of Shug Avery. These were the women who were ‘interesting’ to Walker as a girl because they represented a different narrative from the one that her mother was locked into.

It was another black American writer, Sojourner Truth (1797–1883), who inspired the use of the epistolary form and the choice of God as the addressee: when Truth ‘cried out’ having lost her children to slave-owners, ‘none but God heard her.’ Truth’s cry is, for Walker, ‘the precursor of a letter to God.’ In a conversation with Sharon Wilson and guest readers of Kalliope magazine in 1984, Walker stated: ‘I can imagine Sojourner Truth saying, “God, what can I do – they’ve sold my children.” Celie is able to write, “Dear God, this has happened to me and I have to tell somebody and so I write to you.”’

Since the book’s publication, Walker has continued to participate in the critical dialogue surrounding The Color Purple, adding and updating her own commentary on the novel through a variety of interviews and essays. New editions of the novel have given her the opportunity to comment on its reception and to reassert her original vision of what has become her most celebrated work. When The Color Purple was reissued in a tenth-anniversary edition in 1992, Walker added lyrics from the song Do Like You by Stevie Wonder (b. 1950) as an epigraph in order to illuminate the ways in which the characters learn from one another and to signal the pedagogical potential of the novel.

RECEPTION OF THE NOVEL

The Color Purple has provided fertile ground for an array of interpretations, many of which emerged from early reviews of the novel. The following accounts capture the diversity of initial responses, engaging issues that would later become the central focus of more comprehensive critical readings: the generic identity of the novel; its representation of black men; the portrayal of Africa in Nettie’s letters; the dramatization of lesbian love; the ‘utopian’ ending.

Some critics seized immediately upon the potential of The Color Purple to transcend cultural barriers. One of the earliest reviews came from
feminist, political activist and editor of Ms. magazine, Gloria Steinem. Walker was working for Ms. when she conceived *The Color Purple*.

It would be difficult to find a more persistently positive review of the book than Steinem’s. Walker herself has recognized Steinem as ‘a real champion’ of the novel. Several critics, however, have taken issue with Steinem’s unqualified praise and have used her review as a springboard for their counter-readings. Steinem notes that unlike many ‘books about the poor and powerless,’ *The Color Purple* ‘is not written about one group but for another, about the poor but for the middle class’ (Steinem’s italics). This novel, she writes, ‘is populist, in the best sense.’ Steinem asserts that readers who recognize themselves in the characters ‘will read and enjoy *The Color Purple*, and she goes so far as to state that ‘it’s hard to imagine anyone in this country this novel couldn’t reach.’

Steinem takes pleasure in the novel’s expansiveness and its economy, and is one of the very few critics to congratulate Walker on her astute handling of plot, claiming that ‘[n]o Russian novel could outdo *The Color Purple* for complicated family relationships, wide scope, and human coincidence.’ However, the novel also offers ‘succinct discussions about the existence of God, the politics of religion, and what’s going on in the daily news, all of which are pure Alice. (There are also many surprises that, as in life, seem inevitable in retrospect.)’ Walker achieves all of this with an ‘economy of words that follows Picasso’s rule of art. Every line is necessary. Nothing could be deleted without changing everything.’

Steinem’s parenthetical reminder that life can dish up surprises seems to pre-empt doubts about the realist credentials of the novel. Writing for the *New York Review of Books*, Robert Towers (1923–95) has difficulty locating *The Color Purple* within the realist tradition, which he presumes was its desired place. He writes: ‘Alice Walker still has a lot to learn about plotting and structuring what is clearly intended to be a realistic novel. The revelations involving the fate of Celie’s lost babies and the identity of her real father seem crudely contrived – the stuff of melodrama or fairy tales.’ (Issues arising from Walker’s engagement with various literary traditions and generic conventions are addressed in more detail in Chapter 2 of this Guide.)

For many reviewers, concerns about plot manipulation and generic identity were outweighed by the novel’s undeniable linguistic power. Most reviewers recognized *The Color Purple* as a turning point for Walker, seeing in its poetry the fulfilment of potential only hinted at in previous novels. For Steinem, Celie’s voice is the ‘successful culmination of Alice Walker’s longer and longer trips outside the safety of standard English and into the speech of her characters.’ Through Celie’s use of black folk speech, Walker ‘takes the leap completely.’ Steinem also alerts
reviewers to the political implications of Celie’s ‘irresistible’ unmediated narration:

- there are no self-conscious apostrophes and contractions to assure us that the writer really knows what the proper spelling or grammar should be, and no quotation marks to keep us at our distance. Celie just puts words down the way they sound and feel. She literally writes her heart out. Pretty soon, the reader can’t imagine why anyone would bother to write any other way.11

Writing for The Nation in 1982, Dinitia Smith hailed the novel as a ‘major advance for Walker’s art,’ identifying its ‘pithy, direct black folk idiom’ as its ‘greatest strength, reminding us that if Walker is sometimes ideologue, she is also a poet.’12 Towers also identifies Celie’s voice as the novel’s greatest strength; he is unable to ‘imagine Celie apart from her language,’ which evokes ‘not only a memorable and infinitely touching character but a whole submerged world.’13

It was the introduction of a different voice, that of Celie’s sister Nettie, that posed a problem for many reviewers. Steinem is one of the few who praised the shift in narrative perspective and geographical location, which transports the reader to Africa, where Nettie has been recording her experiences with the Olinka tribe and the missionaries Samuel and Corrine. Steinem champions the realism of this account, going so far as to suggest that this ‘chapter’ deserves a place in ‘international economics courses’: ‘[Nettie’s] personal, blow-by-blow account of what happens when a British rubber plantation buys the village where she lives as a missionary explains more about the intimate workings of colonialism than many academic tomes have accomplished.’14

Most critics, however, took the opposing view. Towers argues that the representation of Africa ‘lacks authenticity’: this is, he stresses, ‘not because Miss Walker is ignorant of Africa […] but because she has failed to endow Nettie with her own distinctive voice.’ He continues: ‘the fact that Nettie is better educated than Celie – and a great reader – should not have drained her epistolary style of all personal flavor, leaving her essentially uncharacterized, a mere reporter of events.’15

In her review of the novel, Smith sees Nettie’s letters as little more than a vehicle for Walker’s ‘didacticism’16 when Nettie declares that “the world is changing….It is no longer a world just for boys and men” [CP 136] […] we wince at the ponderousness, the obviousness of the message.’ However, at times the message of Nettie’s letters becomes clouded: Smith notes that the white people who ‘disrupt Olinka society also destroy the old (and presumably bad) tribal patriarchy.’ Smith wonders: ‘Does this mean the white man’s coming is a good thing? I doubt it, but I was puzzled.’17
Smith praises Walker for her powerful depiction of the damage caused by racism in America through the narrative of Sofia, Celie's step-daughter-in-law. In a much-quoted scene, Sofia is in town with her children when the mayor's wife praises their cleanliness and offers Sofia a job as her maid. When Sofia replies, 'Hell no,' she is slapped by the mayor.\(^\text{18}\) Sofia retaliates and is sent to prison. She is released only to be sent to work as a maid at the mayor's house. The mayor's wife allows Sofia to go home to visit her children, whom she has not seen for five years, but decides after fifteen minutes that she can no longer cope without Sofia's full attention and so she ends the visit. ‘No writer,’ Smith claims, ‘has made the intimate hurt of racism more palpable than Walker.’\(^\text{19}\)

Tempering this enthusiasm, however, have been concerns about the novel’s portrayal of black men and the seemingly implausible transformation of Albert. According to Smith, Walker presents ‘relationships between women’ as the ‘chief agency of redemption in the novel.’ Smith detects ‘a note of tendentiousness’ in Walker’s gender politics, however:

- The men in this book change only when their women join together and rebel – and then, the change is so complete as to be unrealistic. It was hard for me to believe that a person as violent, brooding and just plain nasty as Mr. ___ could ever become that sweet, quiet man smoking and chatting on the porch (Smith’s italics). □

In a predominantly positive review, Mel Watkins (b. 1940) rates *The Color Purple* higher than Walker’s previous works of fiction, praising its lyricism and restraint. In a review for the *New York Times Book Review*, ‘Some Letters Went to God’ (1982), Watkins identifies gender politics as the novel’s central theme and attributes the credibility and emotional power of the novel to the ‘authenticity’ of Celie’s ‘folk voice’ which ‘forces intimate identification with the heroine.’\(^\text{20}\) Nettie’s voice fades in comparison: ‘While Nettie’s letters broaden and reinforce the theme of female oppression by describing customs of the Olinka tribe that parallel some found in the American South, they are often mere monologues on African history. Appearing, as they do, after Celie’s intensely subjective voice has been established, they seem lackluster and intrusive.’\(^\text{21}\)

In a review for the journal *Freedomways*, Maryemma Graham declares *The Color Purple* to be an ‘outstanding novel.’ Writing one year after the novel’s publication, she applauds its flawless synthesis of ‘stylistic innovations and an authentic folk voice,’ before going on to question its realist credentials.\(^\text{22}\) Graham has no difficulty with the novel’s structure, which she declares to be ‘masterful’;\(^\text{23}\) for her, the
novel’s authenticity is compromised instead by its sidelong of historical circumstance and simplification of gender politics. She objects to the way in which the novel’s handling of gender politics ignores the interaction of a range of social factors:

- While there is no denying that male supremacy and sexist oppression pervade our society, an analysis that identifies men as the sole source of female oppression and professes that mere personality change in individuals is the remedy is misguided. Gender oppression cannot be separated from racial and economic oppression that Black people experience, and that Black women face in a very special way.24

Graham feels that Walker missed an opportunity to explore this ‘three-way connection,’ especially given the context of the novel where ‘the conditions of land tenancy made Black women easy targets for triple exploitation.’ For Graham, only Sofía’s story approached ‘this broader view of Black women’s oppression.’ However, Graham finds Walker’s characterization of this ‘defiant victim […] somewhat strange, her radical honesty being viewed as atypical for working class Black women.’ Moreover, Graham expresses doubt over the credibility of Celie’s sudden change of fortune: ‘For the majority of black women, in Celie’s time and place as well as today, such a whirlwind shift in fortunes was/is not hardly possible since the causes of their oppression are much more systemic.’25

Many early reviews expressed uncertainty regarding the novel’s focus. Some reviewers perceived a tension between the novel’s exploration of one woman’s personal struggle and its engagement of wider political implications. This observation would also be echoed in other detailed critical readings of the novel. Gerald L. Early (b. 1952), in his review-essay ‘The Color Purple: Everybody’s Protest Art’ (1986), comments on both the novel and its cinematic adaptation. He argues that most of the flaws of both the novel and Spielberg’s adaptation stem from their ‘alienation from history,’ which is betrayed by the utopian ending.26 He finds ‘a great deal of history within the novel itself’ through ‘references to Harlem, [the blues singer] Bessie Smith (1894–1937), African emigration, [the historian] J. A. Rodgers [sic.] (1833–1966), and European imperialism.’ Nevertheless, the ‘historicity’ of The Color Purple ‘seems false and unconvincing, a kind of obvious scaffolding.’27 Like Graham, Early feels that Walker does not do enough to dramatize the lasting impact of social change:

- The bits of history seem undigested and set in the text like lumps. Like the film, Walker’s novel, despite its historical references, really wishes to deny history by refusing to show what change and passage of time mean in a society. This is why the social-protest aspects of the novel, some nicely
worked up bits of grim naturalism, are inchoate and why the utopian ending must exist. Walker decided that her heroine has no real way to work out her problems within the context of history. And salvation history becomes the utter supersession of oppression-history through the assertion of an unoppressed self. The problem this presents for the reader is that Celie does not find a convincing way to reclaim her humanity and to reassemble the values of her world.28

As *The Color Purple*’s popularity amongst readers became ever more apparent, critics began to place the issues of reception and canonicity at the centre of their readings. There can be little doubt that the enduring popularity of the novel has provoked much of the vitriol that has been directed toward it. In a conversation with Sharon Wilson, Walker expressed her own surprise at the novel’s popularity, attributing it to winning the Pulitzer Prize:

- I think that made a lot of people notice [the novel] who wouldn’t have. The media wouldn’t have noticed it particularly had it not won the prize, and to tell you the truth, I’m still rather astonished that it did. It’s not the kind of book that I would have thought anyone in this country – except a very, very few people – would have given a prize to.29

Trudier Harris addresses the issue of canonization in her provocative review-essay, ‘On *The Color Purple*, Stereotypes and Silence’ (1984), published two years after the novel’s release. One of Walker’s harshest critics, Harris launches a protest against the novel’s canonization, challenging its elevation to the status of Ur-text for black women. She provides direct responses to some of the claims that Steinem made for the novel in 1982. Like Steinem’s rapturous praise, Harris’s disparagement has generated many other critical readings of the book. Individual chapters in this Guide will explore various aspects of Harris’s essay, but the following exploration presents her ‘basic contentsions’ with the novel: the depiction of Celie is ‘unrealistic for’ the novel’s context; ‘Nettie and the letters from Africa were really extraneous to the central concerns of the novel’; the sexual relationship between Shug and Celie ‘represents the height of silly romanticism’; and ‘the epistolary form of the novel ultimately makes Celie a much more sophisticated character than we are initially led to believe.’30 In particular, Harris challenges the representative status that *The Color Purple* has acquired, arguing that this betrays the narrowness of the media’s conception of black writers. She attributes the novel’s success to fortuitous timing:

- *The Color Purple* has been canonized. I don’t think it should have been. The tale of the novel’s popularity is the tale of the media’s ability, once
again, to dictate the tastes of the reading public, and to attempt to shape what is acceptable creation by black American writers. Sadly, a book that might have been ignored if it had been published ten years earlier or later has now become the classic novel by a black woman. That happened in great part because the pendulum determining focus on black writers had swung in their favor again, and Alice Walker had been waiting in the wings of the feminist movement and the power it had generated long enough for her curtain call to come [...] for the media, by its very racist nature, seems to be able to focus on only one black writer at a time. While it is not certain how long Alice Walker will be in the limelight for The Color Purple, it is certain that the damaging effects reaped by the excessive media attention given to the novel will plague us as scholars and teachers for many years to come (Harris's italics). 

Harris objects to the way that the novel has been ‘touted as a work representative of black communities in this country.’ She claims that the reception of the novel ‘has created a cadre of spectator readers’ who ‘do not identify with the characters and who do not feel the intensity of their pain, stand back and view the events of the novel as a circus of black human interactions.’ Such readers ‘show what damage the novel can have; for them, the book reinforces racist stereotypes they may have been heir to and others of which they may have only dreamed.’ A further, ‘detrimental effect’ of the novel’s reception, according to Harris, manifests itself in the reticence of black female critics who, stymied by the media’s reverence for the novel, ‘have seemingly been reluctant to offer detailed, carefully considered criticisms of it.’

Harris blames this reluctance in part on the effect of Gloria Steinem’s review, which she contends inhibited other critics from querying the novel’s merits. Despite taking exception to what she perceives as the often ‘condescending’ tone of Steinem’s review, Harris agrees with Steinem’s evaluation of Celie’s voice as expressed in Walker’s writing, recognizing it as ‘powerful, engaging, subtly humorous, and incisively analytic at the basic level of human interactions.’ However, when Harris divorces this admired voice from its narrative, troubling tensions and contradictions arise. She recalls how she felt listening to Walker read an excerpt from the novel at Radcliffe College in 1982: ‘all of my objections to Celie disappeared momentarily as Walker wove an audible spell over the audience.’ Afterward, though, Harris realized that ‘[t]he reading epitomized one of the central issues in the novel – the war between form and content.’ She finds it particularly difficult to account for Celie’s proficiency as a writer and complains that ‘the degradation, abuse, dehumanization’ documented by Celie ‘invites spectator readers to generalize about black people in the same negative ways that have gone on for centuries.’ Harris dismisses the plausibility
of the development of Celie and those around her. She especially casts
doubt on the ‘years and years of Celie’s acquiescence,’ which, ‘extreme
in their individuality, have been used too readily to affirm what the
uninformed or the ill-informed believe is a general pattern of violence
and abuse for black women.’ The very voice that ‘makes Celie articulate
[...] has simultaneously encouraged silence from black women, who
need to be vocal in voicing their objections to, as well as their praises
for, the novel.’

Harris also objects to Steinem’s applause for the novel’s moral
agenda. In her review, Steinem wrote that in *The Color Purple*: ‘morality
is not a set of external dictates. It doesn’t matter if you love the peo-
ple society says you shouldn’t love, or do or don’t have children with
more than one of them.’ Instead, the novel emphasizes that we must
not be ‘cruel or wasteful,’ and must not ‘keep the truth from those who
need it, suppress someone’s will or talent, take more than you need from
nature, or fail to use your own talent and will. It’s an organic morality
of dignity, autonomy, and balance.’

Harris responds with incredulity:

■ What kind of morality is it that espouses that all human degradation is
justified if the individual somehow survives all the tortures and uglinesses
heaped upon her? Where is the dignity, autonomy, or balance in that? I am
not opposed to triumph, but I do have objections to the unrealistic pre-
sentation of the path, the process that leads to such a triumph, especially
when it is used to create a new archetype or to resurrect old myths about
black women (Harris’s italics). 34

Concerns about the novel’s elevation to black feminist Ur-text resur-
face in later readings. Five years after the publication of Harris’s review,
Tamar Katz compared Celie’s transformation in the novel to Walker’s
trajectory as a writer. In ‘“Show Me How to Do Like You”: Didac-
ticism and Epistolary Form in *The Color Purple*’ (1989), Katz notes
that while Walker manoeuvres Celie from the position of ‘example’
to ‘author,’ the media has manoeuvred Walker, as it did Zora Neale
Hurston, from the position of ‘author’ to the precarious position of
‘example.’ Katz notes that Walker, during the 1980s, was ‘treated as
exemplary’ by the ‘mass media’: she became ‘the black feminist writer’
(Katz’s italics). 35

In her essay ‘Writing the Subject: Reading *The Color Purple*’ (1988),
bell hooks (b. 1952) writes that while the novel ‘broadens the scope of
literary discourse,’ the many ‘meanings’ that it generates for its var-
ious readers are ‘[o]ften’ limiting because they are ‘contained [...]’
within a critical discourse that does not resist the urge to simplify, to
overshadow, to make this work by a contemporary African-American
ALICE WALKER: THE COLOR PURPLE

writer mere sociological treatise on black life or radical feminist tract.' Further extracts from this reading appear later in this Guide.

This section ends with Steven C. Weisenburger’s innovative analysis of the novel’s reception. ‘Errant Narrative and The Color Purple’ (1989) scrutinizes the political implications of the novel’s reception in the light of its inconsistencies, and delivers insight into the common reactions of reviewers of the novel. Noting that these inconsistencies may in fact constitute ‘parts of an authorial design,’ Weisenburger asks ‘what happens when the elemental techniques of narration go astray,’ what these errors can reveal ‘about the socio-cultural horizon of a narrative fiction’ and what the reader’s oversight of these errors can tell us about the politics of reception. Weisenburger demonstrates how ‘[e]rrors’ can serve as ‘windows on narrative techniques, on the “laws of genre,” on political and cultural stresses thematized in the text, and […] on the ways that stresses can be taken as influencing the production and reception of a narrative fiction.’

According to Weisenburger, Walker’s novel ‘commits errors of artifice,’ which ‘themselves point[] to other business – Walker’s social work, or “errand.”’ Initially, he approaches the novel as an exercise in mimesis, identifying those textual errors that undermine its realist credentials: there is in this novel, he claims, an ‘erroneous network of internal determinants such as births’ and ‘the given ages of characters’: for example, if we trace Sofia’s narrative we see that she gives birth to four children over a period of ‘nine or ten months.’

Nettie’s letters complicate Sofia’s narrative even further. Her references to Sofia’s appearances do not tally with Celie’s: only months after she left her sister, Nettie sees Sofia working as a maid when she would have been only nine or ten. Moreover, by constantly referring to Olivia and Adam as ‘children,’ the letters deny their maturation. As Weisenburger notes, Walker herself has registered some of these problems: she wanted to bring ‘Celie’s own children back to her’ but in doing so experienced the ‘largest single problem in writing the exact novel [she] wanted to write.’

In the light of these errors, Weisenburger concedes that Harris perhaps has a point about the novel’s hasty canonization and goes on to explore the implications of the collective oversight of the novel’s inconsistencies. For Weisenburger, Walker’s choice of form makes this oversight all the more remarkable. Unlike most first-person narrations that create the ‘illusion of continuity’ and divert us from ‘temporal ellipses or gaps,’ the epistolary novel ‘calls attention to’ the gaps between the constituent letters. However, readers of The Color Purple simply did not notice these gaps: ‘Countless very sophisticated readers
have taken Walker’s letters to be just as they appear – as the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, a steady stream of emotions recollected in tranquillity.’ They have ‘opted to maintain the mimetic image of an unedited, continuous, documentary text.’ The reception of The Color Purple may therefore be viewed as ‘a cautionary tale about the tenacity of the metaphysics of presence among quite well-educated people.’

Weisenburger attributes most of the novel’s errors to Walker’s ‘consciousness-raising’ agenda: ‘as The Color Purple neared its close, the author’s felt needs – to win her reader’s complicity with, and good opinion of her, consciousness-raising work – had overridden the intradiegetic requirements for mimetic verisimilitude.’ Ultimately, Weisenburger argues, ‘Walker’s “womanist” errand had taken priority over the elements of narrative art.’ Additional reviews testified that Walker had succeeded in winning the reader’s complicity:

- One ecstatic reader claims that by undertaking wholesale cultural reform Walker’s novel becomes ‘a masterpiece that exceeds its limits as a work of fiction’ (Parker-Smith 483). This was a fairly common refrain of Walker’s more ardent supporters, though the novel’s status as a ‘masterpiece’ is not only arguable but even beside the point, which is that in evaluative readings of Purple such claims to greatness are always linked with ideas about the novel’s cultural work.

Weisenburger goes on to compare Walker’s novel to Pamela [(1740–41) by Samuel Richardson (1689–1761)] and Uncle Tom’s Cabin [(1851–52) by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–96)]. Like these works, The Color Purple ‘not only sacrifices mimetic fidelity to the discursive demands of genre, but further sacrifices discursive precision to broader didactic goals.’ Weisenburger reflects that The Color Purple ‘was immensely popular, even effective,’ noting that ‘the record of the book reviewers and scholarly essayists is rife with reader-witnesses who testify to the novel’s didactic power in resituating, clarifying and solidifying people’s lives’ (Weisenburger’s italics).

Taking his cue from Jane Tompkins’s thesis in her exploration of popular nineteenth-century novels, Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790–1860 (1986), Weisenburger proposes a new way of approaching Walker’s novel: ‘to put aside questions about what makes The Color Purple a work of “art” and ask instead what accounts for its mass-cultural popularity.’ He suggests that ‘everything Walker’s detractors have received negatively – her stock devices of melodrama, sensational turns of plot, preachy dialogue, women-in-distress and stereotyped villains – might be apprehended not only as conventions of genre but as instruments of a cultural project.’ The central
question of his reading becomes: ‘What gave the text that semblance of monumental solidity in its culture?’

In order to answer this question, Weisenburger turns to the novel’s theological dimension. The ‘issues of femininity and racism’ that dominated reviews are, according to Weisenburger, ‘just facets of a larger project.’

Walker’s strategy was to reinscribe problems of gender and race in the context of contemporary theology.

Weisenburger aligns Walker’s theological project with the humanist ideology published in the ‘Humanist Manifesto II’ (1973), which placed the rights of the individual at its centre and condemned all forms of racism, sexism, and homophobia.

Many critics have read The Color Purple through the lens of liberal humanism, arguing that it is concerned first and foremost with delivering essential truths about the human condition and transcending social and cultural divisions.

Weisenburger applies the terminology of researchers such as sociologist Robert N. Bellah to place the novel’s ‘contemporary secularism’ at the root of much of its harshest criticism. This secularism, along with ‘the counterculture which so popularly endorsed it in the Sixties,’ was an ‘expression[] of a privileged, hegemonic white society.’

According to Weisenburger, this was the context of ‘many of the more virulent attacks on The Color Purple, condemned as it was for pandering to white stereotypes of the black male, for being soft on the violent realities of racism in America, for blurring history, and finally for achieving sentimental popularity among a predominantly white reading public.’

While Walker ‘may well have been attracted […] to the subversive dialogism of the epistolary form’ as a way of disconcerting ‘patriarchal codes,’ ultimately she ‘wound up writing an essentially centrist, familiar fiction’ (Weisenburger’s italics).

Thus, Weisenburger identifies the novel’s primary audience as the ‘great American mass of humanist, new age believers – secular or church-going.’ In Celie’s voice they find verification of their feeling that ‘the grey-bearded old white God has passed away,’ and ‘[w]ith Shug,’ who outlines a pantheistic philosophy to Celie, ‘they easily assent to a contemporary naturalist theology.’ It was therefore ‘inevitable[]’ that the novel would pose problems for ‘fundamentalists who decry the apparent moral relativism of such sentiments,’ for ‘leftist readers who decry the book’s lack of any “realistic” historicity capable of translating her fiction into something politically useful,’ and for ‘Afro-American critics.’

Weisenburger’s research sheds an interesting light on the critical reception and cross-cultural appeal of The Color Purple. Many of the issues he raises will resurface in readings explored throughout this Guide.
ADAPTATIONS OF THE NOVEL

Steven Spielberg’s *The Color Purple*

This subchapter surveys the critical reception of Steven Spielberg’s cinematic adaptation of *The Color Purple*. In commercial terms the film was a huge success, but it provoked some of the most hostile responses from critics and viewers in the history of cinema. In her essay, ‘From Walker to Spielberg: Transformations of *The Color Purple*’ (1993), Joan Digby writes that ‘the film grossed over $94 million on its first run, which boosted paperback sales’ of the novel. It premiered in New York in December 1985 and in the United Kingdom in August of the following year. It was nominated for eleven Academy Awards, but won none. In *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult* (1996), Walker was ‘relieved’ that those involved with the film went home empty-handed, being ‘aware of the kind of black characters who had been anointed before. Maids and other white family retainers.’ She writes that the lack of awards ‘felt very clean,’ especially considering that the Academy opted to applaud *Out of Africa* (1985), a ‘reactionary and racist’ film.

The idea for adapting Walker’s most beloved novel was suggested by Steven Spielberg, the director of blockbusters such as *Jaws* (1975) and *E.T.* (1982), and music producer Quincy Jones (b. 1933). Walker originally had many reservations about the project, but after speaking with Jones and Spielberg over the course of several months she approved the film and agreed to participate as a consultant. Ultimately, she gave her consent after conversations with various family members and trusted friends about the paucity of full and realistic representations of black life in American cinema. The consensus was that American film-makers ‘just never know what to do with black people. They’re used to getting what they know about black life from *Gone with the Wind*’ (1939). However, literary critic and friend Barbara Christian (1943–2000) wondered if this might ‘change’ if the film industry was given the opportunity to dramatize Walker’s material. Walker considered all of the people who might not read the book but who might attend a screening of a film.

When she had agreed to the project she set about writing a script, but she did not take well to the adaptation process. Contrary to popular belief, she completed her screenplay but it was never used and she gave her whole-hearted approval to the final script written by Menno Meyjes (b. 1954).

Much of the criticism of the film focused on departures from its source material. Film critic Pauline Kael, while noting these departures – Spielberg ‘soft-pedals the lesbian side of the Celie and Shug romance’ and presents the men as ‘less threatening’ – argues that
it is in fact the attempt to ‘be faithful to Walker’ that harms the film most. She compares ‘the people on the screen’ to ‘characters operated by Frank Oz,’ but adds that ‘they’re not much phonier than the people in the book.’ The difficulty for Spielberg, Kael claims, that he is unable to ‘give the material the emotional push of that earthy folk style of Walker’s’; ultimately, he lacks Walker’s ‘conviction.’

The release of the film reignited earlier debates about the novel to such a degree that, in the words of critic Jacqueline Bobo, ‘the two works have become almost interchangeable in many people’s minds.’ Digby notes the disparity between the largely positive response of cinemagoers to the film and the negative reaction of the critics, some of whom regarded it as ‘a sanitized white version of a black text.’

The simple fact of Spielberg being the director had given rise to early concerns in many observers. The Omnibus documentary devoted to Walker includes an interview with Spielberg in which he explains why he was initially attracted to the project. His remarks are telling: he emphasizes the universality of the novel and states that he would not have adapted it if ‘racial questions’ had been at its centre. Indeed, he senses that the novel ‘leaps over any sort of [...] racial questions.’ Spielberg’s interpretation was reflected in the movie’s much-derided tagline: ‘It’s about life, it’s about love, it’s about us.’

Others waited until they had seen the film before denouncing the choice of Spielberg. Writing for the New York Times in 1986, Vincent Canby (1924–2000) drew from Spielberg’s commentary on the novel to sustain his criticism of the film:

The film’s publicity notes quote Mr. Spielberg as having called the book ‘a very strong emotional read.’ A read? It’s a tour de force, but what Mr Spielberg has made of it is a cinema equivalent to a ‘read.’ His ‘Color Purple’ is a ‘see.’ It is physically elaborate, prettily photographed, essentially sunny natured, and not very threatening even in its most doom-filled moments.

While negative reviews of the novel were often tempered by admiration for Walker’s linguistic prowess, critics of the film found little to praise and much to condemn. Many felt that Spielberg had presented the worst dimensions of the novel in visual form, justifying initial reservations about Walker’s representation of the black community and, in particular, black men.

Writing for the Carolina Peacemaker in 1986, journalist Tony Brown (b. 1933) drew from negative responses to the film to offer his own evaluation of it, despite admitting that he had not seen it and had no intention of doing so. In the article ‘Blacks Need to Love One Another,’ Brown confirms that he has encountered people who have seen the
film and declares: ‘[they] have lived what I’m sure my reaction would be.’ Just as Harris had worried that the media’s racist reception of black writers conditioned the positioning of Walker’s novel as the novel about black female experience, Brown expresses concern that, owing to the scarcity of films dealing with ‘black themes,’ Spielberg’s *The Color Purple* ‘becomes the only statement on black men.’

The same issue of the *Carolina Peacemaker* featured a ‘rebuttal’ to Brown’s article by Anita Jones. She expresses incredulity that Brown can condemn with such authority a film that he has never seen and notes a double-standard at work in his appraisal: the ‘shallow images of black men’ in films such as *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972) were rewarded with ‘top-forty songs of worship.’ Brown refused to revise his position. Speaking to *Newsweek* magazine later that year, he denounced Spielberg’s adaptation as ‘the most racist depiction of Black men since *The Birth of a Nation* and the most anti-Black family film of the modern film era,’ but he refused to confirm whether or not he had seen it.

Spielberg’s film has also been derided as an ‘infantile abomination,’ ‘the first Disney film about incest,’ a ‘superbly realized feminist cartoon,’ and a ‘hate letter to black men.’ Upon its release the film was boycotted by the NAACP, although the organization eventually altered its position, giving Spielberg the Image Award in 1986. Many critics complained that the film’s departures from Walker’s text had distorted its identity politics. They took exception to the evasion of the sexual intimacy between Celie and Shug – this crucial development in Celie’s life takes the form of a single, chaste kiss – and deplored an added scene that sees Shug, a character who requires no redemption in the novel, appeal to her preacher father for forgiveness.

Jacqueline Bobo’s research, presented in ‘Black Women as Cultural Readers’ (1988) and ‘Sifting Through the Controversy’ (1989), sheds an interesting light on the film’s reception. Bobo views the controversy surrounding the film and the novel as a construction that conditioned subsequent responses to both works and gave licence to those unfamiliar with either to dismiss or attack them. She writes that both Walker’s novel and Spielberg’s cinematic adaptation ‘became inflammatory subject matter because there were those who did not like them rather than because the content of the works was offensive to everyone in the audience.’ She adds:

- The distinction is a subtle and fine one, yet is important. If a cultural product is presented as controversial, this view affects the way in which it is perceived and its worth evaluated, initially, by an audience. The predominant reading, or meaning construction, of *The Color Purple* is that the works negatively depict black people, especially black men. Although the works
are open to a variety of readings, this particular reading became ‘relatively fixed’ at the moment they were constructed as controversial. This interpretation is especially true for those who have not seen the film and/or have not read the book.68

Tracing the reception of the film, Bobo observes that the negative responses of some black people were initially of little concern to reviewers. However, as protests against the film increased, ‘the tone of the critiques changed.’69 The most vocal protestors were black men. In ‘The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers’ (1988), Bobo records the responses of the black women viewers she interviewed, emphasizing the ‘different perspective’ that they brought to the film.70 Their responses confirmed that Walker had achieved one of her primary aims in supporting the adaptation: aware that ‘their specific experience, as Black people, as women, in a rigid class/caste state, has never been adequately dealt with in mainstream media,’ these viewers ‘were able to form a positive engagement with The Color Purple.’71

In ‘Sifting Through the Controversy’ (1989), Bobo reports one woman’s statement that the reason why so many people took exception to the film was that they ‘felt it was an airing of black people’s dirty laundry.’ This prompted another woman to respond: ‘We don’t always have to pretend that everything is hunky-dory. It could be that if I tell somebody and they tell somebody else then maybe I can get some answers to some problems I have.’ Another response was to ask why outrage at sexist portrayals had been saved for this film: ‘Where was all this hue and cry when the Blaxploitation films came out?’ one woman viewer asked.72

This subchapter closes with a consideration of a review-essay by Wayne J. McMullen and Martha Solomon, ‘The Politics of Adaptation: Steven Spielberg’s Appropriation of The Color Purple’ (1994). The essay suggests reasons for the disparity between the public’s response to the film and its critical reception, arguing that Spielberg ‘reframes’ Celie’s story ‘through the lens of comforting American mythologies.’ Drawing from the terminology of critic Kenneth Burke (1897–1993), McMullen and Solomon identify the film as a ‘“terministic screen” for Walker’s novel,’ stating that ‘it selects and reflects certain elements in that work, but it also deflects our attention from other themes and aspects.’73

McMullen and Solomon identify two main reasons why the film appealed to American audiences: the film ‘stimulates a sense of satisfying repetition of a work, a pleasure inherent in adaptations,’ and ‘adaptive changes’ made by Spielberg ‘simplify psychological and social issues in Walker’s novel,’ thus ‘promot[ing] a sense of psychological reassurance about persistent tensions in American life.’74
This reading explores two ‘significant’ departures from the novel: ‘a shift to a different type of narrative from epistolary to melodrama and a shift in emotional focus through the eclipsing of Celie’s voice.’ While Celie’s story is ‘one of growing self-empowerment against the forces of sexism and racism,’ the film offers a ‘melodramatic’ narrative of an individual who successfully triumphs over interpersonal and economic adversity. Like other melodramas, the heroine’s success results not only in personal glory, but also in the restoration and reaffirmation of the social order’ (McMullen and Solomon’s italics).75 This ‘melodramatic cinematic strategy’ manifests itself in the opening credits: ‘Whereas the reader of the novel is immediately introduced to Celie’s bleak, desperate plight, the viewer of the film sees a rural idyll, full of flowers, tall grasses, and children at play’; this ‘contrast […] illustrates Burke’s terministic screens; Spielberg selects out certain elements in the work but deflects our attention from other themes.’76

According to McMullen and Solomon, concerns about Spielberg’s handling of the novel’s gender politics are justified: the ending of the film sees the ‘restoration’ of patriarchy: Shug goes to her father’s church to seek forgiveness, singing ‘a Christian hymn,’ thus giving ‘the patriarchal voice’ back to ‘the white father’; and it is Albert who single-handedly organizes Nettie’s return. This sense of ‘restoration’ is compounded by the overlapping of both scenes:

■ Spielberg cross-cuts Shug’s procession into the church and subsequent reconciliation with her father with a sequence of shots depicting Albert’s actions to bring about Nettie’s return from Africa. He sustains the thematic connection between these shots aurally: the singing voices of Shug and the congregation are the soundtrack for Shug’s reconciliation as well as Albert’s efficacious actions. □

However, the film ignores Celie’s new friendship with Albert and his assimilation within her womanist community: ‘[s]eparate from the reunion he helped instigate, Albert’s exclusion from Celie’s extended family seems to be atonement for his “crimes.”’77

Other crucial elements of the novel are displaced through the ‘obscuring of [Celie’s] voice,’ which ‘occurs in three ways: removing Celie’s distinctive and crucial angle of vision, obliterating her sexuality, and oversimplifying her emotional life.’ In key scenes that do not directly involve Celie, such as the castigation of Albert by his father, she is ‘marginalize[d] to the position of an onlooker.’ Moreover, the viewer is ‘deprived of Celie’s evolving sense of herself,’ in particular her sexuality:78 ‘Shug’s arrival in the film is delayed, and her relationship to Celie is largely devoid of erotic tension.’ By the time Shug kisses Celie, the film ‘has left the viewer unprepared for the display of physical
affection. The eros of this scene comes as a surprise to some viewers, who have had no clue to Celie’s latent lesbianism, nor to Shug’s bisexuality.79

McMullen and Solomon do not lay the blame entirely at Spielberg’s feet but recognize that his tactics were informed by ‘[v]arious social and cultural factors’: ‘his adaptations are largely typical of Hollywood practices that are guided by an acute sensitivity to the marketability of a film.’80 By stifling Celie’s ‘dialogue with God and herself,’ the film ‘obscures’ her story of ‘self-empowerment through relationship and community’: instead, Spielberg presents Celie as ‘an example of the American dream. Persistence, hard work, and capitalistic acumen secure her eventual triumph. In short, for Celie the patriarchally controlled system works.’ Ultimately, Spielberg’s film ‘recasts Celie’s story to fit cultural myths rather than highlighting her alternate path to power in its racial and sexual specificity.’81

Walker herself has been asked many times to justify her involvement with the film and to explain why she approved the addition or editing of particular scenes. The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult features a journal entry dated December 6, 1985, that documents Walker’s concerns about the film’s handling of the novel’s identity politics: having watched the film once, she describes it as ‘slick, sanitized and apolitical’ and picks up on some of its ‘anachronisms’ such as the buggy driven by Shug’s father.82 She regrets the lack of recognition of ‘Celie’s industry’ and all that it entails, and she ‘resent[s] the imposition of Shug’s father between her and “God,”’ but at the same time she finds the music to be ‘wonderful.’83 Although the final scenes were ‘moving,’ she was disappointed that Albert was not ‘up on the porch.’84 Regarding the film’s handling of Celie and Shug’s sexuality, Walker has stated that she would not have tackled it in the same way as Spielberg but that she was not particularly perturbed by his approach which did not prevent viewers from using their ‘imagination.’85

The Color Purple: The Broadway Musical

Some of the concerns raised by critics of the film version of The Color Purple resurfaced nineteen years later with the presentation of the Broadway musical. The idea for this latest incarnation of the novel came from television and theatre producer Scott Sanders. When he read The Color Purple, he sensed immediately that it ‘had music in its soul.’ On watching the film, he felt that ‘Steven Spielberg and Quincy Jones could feel the music trying to break out.’ Sanders presented Walker with the idea of a musical adaptation but she ‘politely declined,’ expressing her desire to ‘move forward rather than go back to something she had spent considerable time with.’86 However, she finally gave her endorsement,
as did Spielberg. The musical’s official website recognizes the influence of the film as well as the novel; this theatrical adaptation comes ‘from the classic Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Alice Walker, and the moving film by Steven Spielberg.’

The musical opened in September 2004 at Atlanta’s Alliance Theatre and moved to Broadway in December 2005. It closed in February 2008. It was nominated for eleven Tony Awards (winning one) and was recognized by the NAACP Theatre Awards. Oprah Winfrey (b. 1954), who played Sofia in the film, Quincy Jones and Harvey Weinstein (b. 1952) joined Sanders as producers. The music, which consisted of a range of genres including jazz, blues, gospel and African music, was written by Brenda Russell (b. 1949), Allee Willis and Stephen Bray (b. 1956). Marsha Norman wrote the script.

Promotion for the musical again played on the universal appeal of Celie’s story. The website tells us that The Color Purple is ‘The Musical About Love’ and describes it as ‘an inspiring family saga that tells the unforgettable story of a woman who – through love – finds the strength to triumph over adversity and discover her unique voice in the world.’ Through its ‘joyous score,’ it tells ‘a story about hope, a testament to the healing power of love and a celebration of life.’

Audiences flocked to the musical adaptation of Celie’s story, emerging from theatres with warm reviews. Critics were less enthusiastic and queried the omission of particular dimensions of the novel and even the film. In his review, Wendell Brook notes that the Broadway version of the musical writes out the pivotal scene in which Millie, the mayor’s wife, clashes with Sofia: a scene that made its way into the film and the production at the Alliance Theatre. LaTonya Holmes, the understudy for the parts of Celie and Nettie, has asserted that the musical deals more directly with Shug and Celie’s sexual relationship, but many reviewers agreed that it did not go far enough. Speaking to Holmes, Brook concurs that the musical ‘show[s] more of the relationship,’ but adds that ‘Shug’s breakout song, ‘Push Da Button,’ is more about catching a man than satisfying a woman.’ Writing for New York magazine, Jeremy McCarter found that ‘the lesbian element in Celie’s story gets swept aside. The love she shares with Shug in Walker’s book is dispatched here with a couple of timid kisses and some platitudinous lyrics.’ He also felt that the musical gave too much emphasis to Celie’s status as entrepreneur: ‘The show leaves the impression that Celie’s redemption comes mainly from entrepreneurial zeal.’ Ben Brantley (b. 1954) of the New York Times agreed: ‘Devotees of Ms. Walker’s novel would be better off thinking of this show less as The Color Purple than as, say, “Celie: A Woman of Independent Means.”’ Brantley found much in the musical to remind him of the film but could detect few traces of the novel: ‘there’s a sumptuousness throughout that, while hardly true to the harrowing
bleakness of the early chapters of Ms. Walker’s novel, does bring to mind the enjoyably hokey cinematic ravishments of Steven Spielberg’s 1995 version.

It is clear from this chapter that the novel and its adaptations continue to provoke strong reactions and to polarize opinions. The rest of this Guide focuses primarily on critical readings of the novel. It begins with one of the most contentious issues that emerged from early reviews: the question of the novel’s generic identity.
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