

## CONSTRUCTING A NEW HISTORICIST IDENTITY: the role of Nettie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Janice Inês NODARI

### New Historicism: a historical approach to the study of literature

In the 1980's, a new movement in Anglo-American literary studies claiming for a return to historical scholarship in the academic field of literature emerged. This movement may have not affected African-American literature significantly, but caused certain uneasiness in the field of literary studies since it intended to move beyond the narrowly formalistic or text-centered approach to literature that had been in vogue for long. It was called New Historicism.

In order to find definitions for New Historicism and to learn what the enabling assumptions behind its method are, some propositions, as listed below, can be taken into consideration. Certain uneasiness is identified when it comes to defining this criticism. The critic and literary historian D.G. Myers, however, enlightened the topic in a pedagogical way. According to him,

[t]he New Historicism, as by general agreement the movement has come to be called, is unified by its disdain for literary formalism. Specifically, leaders of the movement describe themselves as unhappy with the exclusion of social and political circumstances (commonly known as the “context”) from the interpretation of literary works. [...] It has been a response not to literature but to literary studies (MYERS, 2001, p.01).

When he refers to “social and political circumstances” while defining New Historicism, one may immediately recall feminism as well. This political, cultural, economic and literary movement “appeared to hold out the hope of transforming literary criticism into and agent for social change” (2001, p. 01). However, feminism had no distinctive method of its own, making it complex for the feminist critics who knew what they wanted to say about a text, but had to adopt other interpretive strategies in order to make the ideas appear. Deconstructionism and Poststructuralism were used to meet the

needs of those critics, but did not prove sufficient to attend all the requirements; thus, New Historicism “appeared to offer a distinctive approach, a rigorous method, along with the opportunity to salvage one’s political commitments. Indeed, at times, the New Historicism seemed almost designed to methodize the political interpretation of literature” (MYERS, 2001, p. 01). In addition, it has also set off an enthusiasm for historical research.

Bu what are the enabling assumptions behind New Historicism? According to D. G. Myers, (2001, p. 02-03), the movement establishes itself upon four main contentions:

1. Literature is historical; it is a social and cultural construct shaped by more than one consciousness. It may be inferred also that literature is not an individual representation but a collective one, like a tale of many voices;
2. Literature must be assimilated to a particular vision of history;
3. Man himself is a social construct, an intertwined composition of social and political forces, like any work of literature;
4. The historian/critic is trapped in his own “historicity”, therefore a modern reader can never experience a text as its contemporaries did. Thus, the best a modern historicist approach to literature can hope to accomplish is to use the text as a basis for the reconstruction of an ideology.

These assumptions remind a reader of the need to differentiate between historical and fictional facts. The historian and literary critic Hayden White offers a helpful distinction between these two terms when he states that while historians are concerned with events which can be assigned to specific time-space locations, events which are (or were) in principle observable or perceivable, fictional writers are concerned with both historical and imagined or hypothetical events. However, both historians and writers of fiction share the same form of discourses and the aims in writing, for both wish to provide a verbal image of reality (1989).

In his *Metahistory* (1973), White added that while History has been concerned with fact, Literature dealt with fiction, and these would be the boundaries between the two disciplines. However, since history or stories have been written about history, the first distinction does not seem enough. He then coined the term meta-history to refer to these

last events in writing, which blurred the disciplinary distinctions between Literature and History. White questioned the fiction in History, while we are used to questioning the realism of literature.

Nevertheless, it became conventional among historians to associate truth with fact and regard fiction as the opposite of truth. However, “history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation”, since facts do not speak for themselves but are spoken through historians. (WHITE, 1989, p. 122)

It is precisely the case with *The Color Purple* (1982) which is designed as if it were a tale of many voices (justifying the choice for New Historicism to shed some light on its plot), and a portrait of fact and fiction intertwined, making the reader question not only the fiction in the official History but also the realism in this literary work.

## The novel

In this paper, Alice Walker’s novel will be analyzed as a form of historical representation and this analysis aims also at showing that the formation of separated communities in the United States was a way of promoting the construction of a racial identity by the African-Americans. In addition, since New Historicism deals with issues related to historical facts, and the formation of such separated communities is one example of a historical fact, along with the interpretation and the different readings that are possible to be made of them, some theoretical accounts of New Historicism may help in this reading.

According to the English professor H. Aram Veeseer,

[...] the New Historicism has given scholars new opportunities to cross the boundaries separating history, anthropology, art, politics, literature, and economics. It has struck down the doctrine of noninterference that forbade humanists to intrude on questions of politics, power, indeed on all matters that deeply affect people’s practical lives – matters best left, prevailing wisdom wets, to experts who could be trusted to preserve order and stability in “our” global and intellectual domains (1989, p. ix).

As a literary criticism, New Historicism offers a wider coverage of aspects usually explored in literary analysis. Moreover, since it appeared to question the customary linearity already established of exploring each theme at its time, the feeling of uneasiness it caused among the scholars seems justified.

According to the professor of English Ross Murfin, one of its main concerns is related to the conviction that historical consciousness may be restored to literary studies.

The new historicist critics are less fact-and-event oriented than historical critics used to be, perhaps because they have come to wonder whether the truth about what really happened can ever be purely and objectively known. They are less likely to see history as linear and progressive, as something developing towards the present (1994, p. 151-152).

New historicists have reminded everyone else that it is difficult to reconstruct the past as it really was, and, therefore, to prove that some events nowadays had their causes in events that took place earlier in history. Slavery can be considered an example of this issue. However, no one will ever have a complete idea of the accomplishments and drawbacks of an event, since most facts presented in history books are based on individual reports proving therefore that the historians cannot claim themselves displaced or disarmed of any opinion. Nevertheless, the help offered by those individual oral stories for the writing of history cannot be denied.

When referring to individual testimonies of history, one may not forget that they may be oriented by an ideology, an issue vastly analyzed in most black writings. Once more New Historicism presents itself worthy since “[a] traditional formalistic approach, treating the text as self-contained, can never locate these ideological operations, also known as “representations”. Only a historicist approach, treating the text as one element in the ideology of an age, can hope to lay them bare”, according to D. G. Myers (2001, p. 03). In this sense, individual testimonies through storytelling and written documents (e.g. letters) like the ones fictionally presented in *The Color Purple* (1982) are worth considering.

The recovery of the original meaning of a literary text is the whole aim of critical interpretation, though this recovery is impossible and New Historicism acknowledges this premise. Thus, a recovery of the original ideology which gave birth to

the text and which the text in turn helped to disseminate throughout a culture seems much easier to be searched than attained.

### **A journey after one's roots**

Many readers' hostility towards Alice Walker rest largely on her third and most polemical book, *The Color Purple* (1982), consisting of 90 letters that Celie, the protagonist, writes to God and to her sister Nettie, and the ones she receives from Nettie; and on its film adaptation by Steven Spielberg. The hostile readers claim that these two works distort black history, demean black man, and leave in its "savage" wake a most deleterious impression of blacks (DIEKE, 1999, p. 01). Against such claims, Walker states that she is committed to exploring the insanities, the oppressions, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women. She also acknowledges that the path to inscribing this womanism is like a dire strait fraught with danger and cultural demons, although she continues committed to antiracism and antisexism. However, as an African-American descendant, this necessity of articulating criticism and solidarity simultaneously is one of the reasons why Alice Walker and a few other women writers are considered the founding mothers of womanism, which happens to be an attempt to get rid of the double oppression of the race and gender trap, along with the effort to show women's writings according to their cultural specificities as representations of a totalizing ethnic or national identity (Walker, 1996).

In defense of her novel, it is worth recalling Walker's words,

*The Color Purple* is not a story against black men, it is a story about black women. The fact that the men in the story are not all good guys needs no justification, for it is not the obligation of any work of fiction to present every possible angle of every possible situation (WALKER, 1996, p. 226).

It is possible to claim that most critics' anger remains in the fact that Walker attributes more value to her female characters than to her male ones. Since men and women are not equal but can be complementary, and since the African-American women are supposed to remain men's helpmate to build a black nation, wherein the African-

American women are one-half and the African-American men are the other half, Walker prefers to present a homosexual relationship in her controversial novel, there is no doubt that many readers, mainly those more directly connected to her novel due to their skin color, would feel threatened. Nevertheless, since both men and women are wounded by racism, they could try to get healed and this task may be lighter if faced together.

A familiar motif in Walker's writings is that of the questing self. At the root of most of her writing is the penultimate sense that human life is a journey, a continuing process of growth and discovery. "Quite often the journey takes place on a hard Walker road, the kind of journey on the hard, rocky road of life" (DIEKE, 1999, p. 04).

Walking into peril is exactly what most of Walker's characters and personae are doing as they each seek to navigate their own path of fulfillment, a crooked path gravid with dangers, possibilities, changes, personal adventures, triumphs – big and small – and, of course, occasional setbacks (DIEKE, 1999, p. 04).

Some of Walker's characters show remarkable courage in the face of adversity and abuse. In *The Color Purple* (1982), besides the main character, Celie, her sister also shows fearlessness in the face of adversity. Celie's sister, Nettie, runs away from home, after their foster father tries to abuse her sexually, and goes to the house Celie shared with Albert, a mean-spirited, often brutal man who, having been denied Nettie by her father, married Celie so that she would look after his children, since his first wife had been murdered by a lover and the children needed attendance.

Because Nettie spurns his attention (p. 17), he turns her out of his house. She goes to live with a couple of missionaries, called Corrine and Samuel, that had adopted Celie's children, Olivia and Adam, with her so-called father, without knowing that they were her niece and nephew. They go to Africa, in an imperialistic mission disguised in missionary duty, to help the lost people found there and bring to civilization handicrafts that were not known by civilized people.

Nettie remains in Africa writing letters to but never hearing from Celie since Albert manages to hide all the letters that arrive. Nettie's journey out of abuses and into Africa helps in the construction of her identity as an individual. Later on, something similar happens to Celie when she leaves Albert's house in order to find her own space.

Considering one of the New Historicism assumptions, it can be claimed that both Celie and Nettie construct history in a collective representation, as in a tale of many voices.

Celie and Nettie had been raised by their mother, who happened to be facing mental problems after her first husband's tragic death, and their mother's husband, whom they took for granted was their real father. After their mother's death (p. 02), Celie and Nettie stayed with their stepfather until Celie was sent to marry Albert. It is Celie's first spatial journey and one that continues her previous slavery. Nothing changes for good in her life; she only receives more duties.

Something different happens to her sister when she leaves her father's house. After not finding a place for herself in Celie's and Albert's house, Nettie goes to the city and is helped by a couple of missionaries that take her to Africa. Nettie starts her journey after American roots and her identity as a new historicist is uncovered by the letters she sends to Celie. While Celie stays in a restricted space of action, her sister has an entire new world to uncover.

Celie's place of action, as opposed to her sister's, is a mere domestic one and her ignorance is measured by the spatial limits given to her. This idea is shown by her attitude when Shug Avery recovers her sister's letters, since after observing the letters, Celie struggles to puzzle out the markings on them:

Saturday morning Shug put Nettie letter in my lap. Little fat queen of England stamps on it, plus stamps that got peanuts, coconuts, rubber trees and say Africa. I don't know where England at. Don't know where Africa at either. So I still don't know where Nettie at (p. 116).

To elaborate on this passage, it is worth quoting the scholar Linda Selzer's words as follow:

[r]evealing Celie's ignorance of even the most rudimentary outlines of the larger world, this passage clearly defines the "domestic" site she occupies as the novel's main narrator. In particular, the difficulty Celie has interpreting this envelope underscores her tendency to understand events in terms of personal consequences rather than political categories. What matters about not knowing "where Africa at" – according to Celie – is not knowing "where Nettie at" (SELZER, 2000, p. 01).

Celie's difficulty in interpreting the envelope sent by Nettie at first only seems to support claims that her domestic perspective erases race and class issues from the narrative. However, the short passage extracted from the epistolary novel not only delineates Celie's particular angle of vision, but also introduces other features that lead the readers to resituate her narration within a broader discourse of race and class (SELZER, 2000, p. 02).

For where Celie sees only a "fat little queen of England", readers who recognize Queen Victoria immediately historicize the passage. And if the juxtaposition of the two stamps on the envelope – England's showcasing royalty, Africa's complete with rubber trees – suggests to Celie nothing but her own ignorance, to other readers the two images serve as a clear reminder of imperialism. Thus Africa, mentioned by name for the first time in this passage, enters the novel already situated within the context of colonialism (SELZER, 2000, p. 01).

These imperialistic/colonialist relations are shown throughout the novel and Nettie's observations help support the statement. She acknowledges, although indirectly, that the missionary work she was about to join was tied to the national interest of the English people:

...the English have been sending missionaries to Africa and India and China and God knows where all, for over a hundred years. *And the things they have brought back!* We spent a morning in one of their museums and it was packed with jewels, furniture, fur, carpets, swords, clothing, even tombs from all the countries they have been. From Africa they have thousands of vases, jars, masks, bowls, baskets, statues – *and they are all so beautiful it is hard to imagine that the people who made them don't still exist. And yet the English assure us they do not* (p. 134 – my italics).

Although the English were not the only explorers of Africa, this passage undoubtedly shows the exploitation relation established between the English and some African peoples, since it presents a catalogue of the cultural goods appropriated by missionaries from "all the countries they have been" and even from people who no longer exist. Probably these people no longer exist due to the fact that millions and millions of Africans were captured and sold into slavery by Europeans or Americans, and many more died either while being chased by their captors or during the journey to slavery. To be more precise, "by the year 1800, 10 to 15 million black had been taken as slaves to the

Americas representing perhaps one-third of those originally seized in Africa” (ZINN, 1980, p. 29).

According to the researchers Marilyn Miller & Marian Faux, the first African-American probably entered the English colonies of America in 1619 (1997, p. 38). They were in the number of 20 and were not called slaves but servants. However, this term is not accurate, since the former state is a forced one, while the latter is pretty much free and this free state was definitely not the case of the ‘servants’ brought from Africa. Back in Africa there was also slavery, although a very different one. In Africa, a slave could marry, own property, himself own a slave, swear an oath, be a competent witness, and ultimately become heir of his master (ZINN, 1980, p. 27).

Most slaves were seized in the interior of Africa by European and African traders and then marched to the West African coast, where they were sold to ships bound for the colonies. Some were kidnapped by slavers, some captured during local wars, and some were sold into slavery for transgressing tribal laws [...]. The majority of the enslaved were between the ages of 15 and 30, with men outnumbering women about two to one (MILLER & FAUX, 1997, p. 38).

A passage in the novel that shows this imperialistic relation and that could be understood as a testimony on how to exterminate a people is related to the road that was being built by the English throughout the Olinka village to which Nettie, the couple of missionaries and their children were sent to offer help. This road, welcomed at first as all different things are by naive people, gutted the village and transformed the Olinka people from landlords into people who had to pay rent for staying in the Queen’s property as well as a water tax. Some people call this situation progress, but for the Olinka it only brought fragmentation, since man villagers ran away, and sicknesses were followed by deaths. The Olinka villagers older than eight years old also had to work in the fields in order to pay for the barracks, the taxes on the land and to buy water, wood and food that they did not have access to anymore since they were forced onto an arid reservation (p. 239). Any similarity to what happened to the indigenous people in American is no mere coincidence.

Meanwhile, in the real world, more specifically in Britain, the Emancipation Act of 1833 legally freed the Africans, although in the British mind they were still morally,

mentally, and physically slaves. This attitude of setting slaves free was politically and economically biased. According to the cultural historian Patrick Bratlinger,

Britain had lost much of its slave owning territory as a result of the American Revolution; as the leading industrial power in the world, Britain found in abolition a way to work against the interests of its rivals who were still heavily involved in colonial slavery and a plantation economy. [...] By mid-century the success of anti-slavery movement, the impact of great Victorian explorers, and the merger of racist and evolutionary doctrines in the social sciences had combined to give the British public a widely shared view of Africa that demanded imperialization on moral, religious, and scientific grounds (1986, p. 186-187).

This ongoing imperialistic attitude could be envisaged in two attitudes: one of them being the fact that now the blame of slavery could be displaced onto others – the Americans, for instance, since the British showed a more civilized and Christian concern towards the black human beings by setting them free. The other one is the apparently justified presence of missionaries that were sent to Africa as representatives of the potential saviors of that nation: the British people. The missionaries embodied the task of trying to teach the Africans to be both religious and industrious, something that could lead to rebellion against the Americans that were still trading slaves and consequently affecting the British economy (BRATLINGER, 1986, p. 187).

Along with the missionaries, some great explorers went to Africa. While the formers had the task of converting the cannibals and teaching them some principles of Christianity, the latter had established, amongst others, the goal of trying to discover the Nile's sources. Their portraits of the Africans are quite different, probably due to the fact that in their paths they encountered representatives of different tribes. While the explorers usually portrayed the Africans as amusing or dangerous, obstacles or mere object of curiosity, the missionaries usually portrayed them as weak, pitiable, inferior mortals who needed to be shown the light and saved from their own darkness (BRATLINGER, 1986, p. 196-197). Of course, the missionaries were tempted to exaggerate the Africans' savagery in order to both justify their presence in Africa and explain the frustrations they were experiencing in making converts, managing thus to win support from mission societies at home, something that Nettie and Samuel, in the novel, tried to do after the Olinka village was destroyed by the British railroad (p. 225).

## Nettie as a New Historicist

Although welcome at first in the African Olinka tribe, Nettie faces prejudice while working as a missionary since she was neither Olink nor a man. In her words:

[t]he Olinka do not believe girls should be educated. When I asked a mother why she thought this, she said:

A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something.

What can she become? I asked.

Why, she said, the mother of his children (p. 150).

Since Nettie was not married and had no children, she was “not much, just the missionary’s drudge” (p. 153). Besides getting startled with these comments, Nettie is bothered by other attitudes she witnesses. One of such attitudes is related to the fact that no one in the Olinka village wanted to talk about slavery, since they acknowledged no responsibility whatsoever, which means, they denied their part of complicity in the fact that many brothers and sisters were sold to enslavers. Another fact that annoyed her is related to the young Olinka girl, Tashi, who tried to please her father in all means possible, never realizing that, as a girl, she would never succeed.

In addition to these, some other customs adopted by the Olinka women puzzle Nettie.

[...] Many of the women rarely spend time with their husbands. Some of them were promised to old or middle-aged men at birth. Their lives always center around work and their children and other women (since a woman cannot really have a man for a friend without the worst kind of ostracism and gossip). They indulge their husbands, if anything. You should just seen [sic] how they make admiration over them. Praise their smallest accomplishments. Stuff them with palm wine and sweets. No wonder the men are often childish. And a grown child is a dangerous thing, especially since, among the Olinka, the husband has life and death power over the wife. If he accuses one of his wives of witchcraft or infidelity, she can be killed (p. 163).

As observed in the quotation above, power for the Olinka is male and women are seen as a target on which men can practice it. Regarding power being male, it is worth recalling the scholar Pia Thielmann’s words,

[...] the Black Power ideology of that time has remained sacrosanct and is in no need of revision. Part of that ideology requires black men and women to pull together. However, the unity of black men and women can only exist if the man leads. Therefore, the woman must “submit”: remain silent on sensitive issues. You do not “disrespect” your man in public, that is, criticize him in public, or speak too loudly about things that matter to you, or interrupt him when he is conversing with friends or colleagues on “serious” issues. A woman must always defer to her man and subjugate her will to his (p. 90) (In: IKENNA, 1999, p. 71).

The behavior expected by Black Power ideologists is exactly the opposite from the one performed by Walker as a writer. Alice Walker is reminding throughout her novel both men and women of their failures. She is saying that Black is Beautiful, but not necessarily always right. If white men inflicted great suffering on black men, there is no need in repeating history by having black men making black women suffering.

Throughout the novel, Nettie plays the role of an historian, a social construct; she not only portraying but also elaborates on what she sees. When describing her visit to New York, she mentions that they had to ride in the sit-down section of the train. She gave examples of segregation inside the train when she claimed that “only white people can ride in the beds and use the restaurants. And they have different toilets from colored” (p. 129-130). These passages reinforce that we are probably before the year 1946, the year when the “[c]ourt rules that segregation on interstate buses is unconstitutional” in the United States (MILLER & FAUX, 1997, p. 120), a law that might have been applied to trains as well.

Although this happened only some decades after the end of slavery in the United States, black people had conquered a whole section of the New York City, called Harlem. Also in Africa there was a place, mentioned by Nettie, called Monrovia, which “was founded by ex-slaves from America who came back to Africa to live” (p. 135) Nettie’s testimonies present examples that suggest the formation of hegemonic communities. In the United States, mainly in the west, other ex-slaves settlements were founded after the end of slavery. According to Miller & Faux,

[i]n 1877 Reconstruction ended and conservative whites returned to power throughout the South. African Americans, fearing that their new freedoms might be in jeopardy, turned to the West as a haven from mounting social and political repression. Already in the years immediately after 1865 a few black colonies had been established in

Kansas. Life, though hard, was an improvement over what the former slaves had known. Railroad promoters and land speculators were ready to lure even more migrants. In 1879 alone more than 20,000 African Americans left the South for Kansas. These migrants, known as the Exodusters, created the first, but hardly the last, significant migration of the black population (1997, p. 70).

When in Europe, Nettie observed that segregation was not as disclosed or strong as it was back in the United States, or so she perceived it. In one gathering that she had been to before leaving to Africa, she noticed that white and black people even “used the same cups and plates” (p. 133). However, even though slavery had been abolished, racism assumed vastly more subtle ways, and prejudice was everywhere, many times disguised.

Nevertheless, Nettie does not passively observe the “other culture” as the Olinkan is to her. Despite leaving it transparent to an attentive reader that she notices imperialistic interests surrounding her presence in Africa, she tries to interfere in the “other culture” by teaching Tashi, the Olinka girl, what she knows about the world, posing herself in a superior condition. Despite not being possible to condemn her attitude, since it presents itself a very humanistic one for she believes everyone should have access to knowledge, it interferes in Tashi’s understanding of the culture in which she is inserted. This noninterference doctrine is therefore struck down, posing Nettie as an agent of history not as a portrayer of it. Her attitudes, however, are controversial, as would be any person/character’s attitudes in face to a “different culture” since at the same time she exercises interferences, she is the one who provides snapshots of what she sees to her sister, trying to establish the points in common between the two different cultures. Thus, the role of “non-interfering new historicist” does not present itself unstained. However, what is clearly observed is that she tries to understand and even change the surroundings based on her own experience. She is a social construct, trapped in her own historicity.

The connection between Celie’s life and Nettie’s observations in Africa is clearly identified when we take into consideration the former’s servitude posture and the latter’s remarks about Africa. For instance, it is possible to generalize that the way women are treated in Africa and the way some of them are treated in America were the same. In Nettie’s words:

[t]here is a way that men speak to women that remind me too much of Pa. They listen long enough to issue instructions. They don’t even look at

women when women are speaking. They look at the ground and bend their heads towards the ground. The women also do not “look in a man’s face” as they say. To “look in a man’s face” is a brazen thing to do. They look instead at his feet or his knee. And what can I say to this? Again, it is our own behavior around Pa (p.159).

When she sees the women’s suffering in Africa, it is as if Nettie were witnessing what was happening to Celie in America, without knowing her sister was facing the same. Something Nettie does not distrust is that Celie continues acting in the same subservient way towards her husband. Nettie, on the contrary, does not change an inch her behavior to please other people’s wills and she is not subservient, since even prohibited to teach girls in the Olinka village, she continues doing so (p. 157-158).

Nettie’s main ‘follower’ is the native girl called Tashi that learns everything that is taught to her, even the Olinka costumes that she knows she will never follow. One example of the latter is when Nettie and Samuel are away in Europe trying to gather money to help the Olinka, and Tashi undergoes the facial scarification ceremony and the rite of female initiation, two costumes in her community. The scarification ceremony was believed, by the older villagers, to be the identification as a people carved in the children’s faces, although the children often thought of it as backwards and frequently resisted to the ritual (p. 239). Nowadays, in real life, there are many ancient rituals still being followed by tribes and groups around the planet which look hideous to people outside these groups. Moreover, it is common sense that they will ever be, as long as a group wants to keep its differentiation from another one. It is one more example of history in fiction.

The way men in the Olinka tribe treated women and the way black women were treated by men in the United States are astonishingly similar. In Nettie’s words, “the Olinka do not believe girls should be educated. [...] A girl is nothing to herself, only to her husband can she become something (p. 150). This practice of not educating girls shows that patriarchy crosses the boundaries of the continents, since it appears in the beginning of *The Color Purple* (1982) when Celie’s father, not finding it relevant to her duties, takes her out of school, the first thing she loved in her life (p. 09).

When Nettie is told by Samuel how Celie’s and Alphonso’s (Pa) kids got in his and Corrine’s house, she hears a story that in fact happened to many African-Americans in the United States: a story of lynching and hanging. After the end of slavery, which happened in 1863 with the Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Lincoln, many black people started forming communities and tried to live their lives in peace. However, a

social club founded in Pulaski, Tennessee, called the Ku Klux Klan, spread quickly and began intimidating and terrorizing southern blacks with their organized raids, lynchings, beatings and burnings. According to Miller & Faux (1997, p. 101) “between 1882 and 1900 there were at least 100 lynchings a year. By 1968 more than 3,500 African-Americans would be lynched, mostly in the South. The record year was 1892, when 161 African-Americans were lynched”.

Most lynchings were not, as firstly claimed, the outcome of rape or attempted rape. “Instead the victims were lynched for outspokenness, and lynching was a device used to frighten and intimidate African-Americans both politically and socially” (MILLER & FAUX, 1997, p. 101). This is the case of Celie’s and Nettie’s real father in the fiction novel: he had been hanged because, according to Samuel, “everything he turned his hand to prospered”. From farming he went to selling, then he had opened a dry goods store that competed with the whites’ ones and took their clients. In the middle of one night, he and the two brothers he had working with him were dragged out of their homes and hanged (MILLER & FAUX, 1997, p. 170).

This dry goods store was inherited by Celie after their foster father’s death, since their stepfather had taken it over. By this example in which two different generations owned stores, Walker exemplifies the African-Americans’ ability of trying to achieve economic integration into the American mainstream. Celie’s real father, in the tradition of the American success story, works hard and buys his own property. However, some white merchants refused to tolerate free competition from a black-owned and black-operated business and decided to put an end to it. According to Selzer (2000, p. 09), “[t]he tragic history of Celie’s real Pa thus compels readers to reinterpret Celie’s family history in terms of the historical lack of access of African Americans to the “American Dream”.

### **Building the self**

Toni Morrison argues that identity is grounded in a sense of community, not individualism. For her, the individual life is like the lives of the tribe. (qtd. in MORRIS, 1993, p. 177) A remarkable example of this is Celie, when she teaches Albert how to sew and everything she had learnt through Nettie’s letters about Africa, and they start talking

friendly for the first time (p. 259). Eventually, Nettie returns home, in the middle of World War II, and they finally know each other's 'people'.

In Selzer's words,

*The Color Purple* closes with a celebration of kinship, its concluding action composed of a series of family reunions: [...] and the novel's two narrators, Celie and Nettie, are joyfully and tearfully reunited. Even Albert and Celie are reconciled, his change of heart signaled by his earning the right to have his first name written. Coming after Celie has achieved both economic independence and emotional security, the reunions at the end of *The Color Purple* testify to the importance of kinship to the happiness of every individual. Appropriately, then, when the two sisters fall into one another's arms at the end, each identifies her kin: Nettie introduces her husband and the children, and Celie's first act is to "point up at [her] peoples...Shug Avery and Albert" (2000, p. 243).

Celie is self-sufficient in the terms of her acquired skills as a seamstress or in those of her inheritance of her father's house and business, both of which stand as legitimate symbols of practical female independence. She becomes her own master, totally self-dependent. Nettie has also built a self, since she has found her roots in Africa and could understand her own life by experimenting a culture which was so different yet had given origin to herself.

Although a modern reader can never experience a text as its contemporaries did, Walker poses a meaningful narrator in Nettie since she successfully portrays what she experienced of life in Africa to the reader, despite her intentions and acts of interference in the local culture caused by her belief of equality. Moreover, to an attentive reader her portrait helped in the construction of a clear and broad vision of a people that vanished in history though unwillingly left roots in all continents. This reader may also wonder whether the truth about what really happened can ever be purely and objectively known and in this sense her contribution is sufficient.

## Bibliography

BRATLINGER, Patrick. "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent." In: GATES Jr., Henry Louis. (ed.) "**Race**", **Writing and Difference**. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986.

DIEKE, Ikenna. "Introductions: Alice Walker, a Woman into Peril." In: DIEKE: Ikenna. **Critical Essays on Alice Walker**. Westport, Connecticut, and London: Greenwood Press, 1999.

MILLER, Marilyn & FAUX, Marian. (eds.) **The New York Public Library American History Desk Reference**. New York: A Stonesong Press Book, Macmillan, 1997.

MORRIS, Pam. "A Return to Women in History: Lesbian, Black and Class Criticism." In: MORRIS, Pam. **Literature and Feminism**. Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1993.

MURFIN, Ross C. "The New Historicism and The Dead." In: SSCWARZ, Daniel R. (ed.) **James Joyce *The Dead*. Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism**. Boston and New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1994.

MYERS, David Gershom. **The New Historicism in Literary Studies**. (ed.) D. G. Myers. Available at: <http://www.english.tamu.edu/pers/fac/myers/historicism.html>. Accessed in May 7th, 2001.

SELZER, Linda. **Race and Domesticity in *The Color Purple***. Available at: <http://www.sistahspace.com/sistory/writers/walker/race.html>. Accessed in Dec 10th, 2000.

THIELMAN, Pia. "Alice Walker and the 'Man Question'." In: DIEKE, Ikenna. **Critical Essays on Alice Walker**. Westport, Connecticut, and London: Greenwood Press, 1999.

VEESER, H. Aram. (ed.) "Introduction." In: VEESER, H. Adam. **The New Historicism**. New York and London: Routledge, 1989.

WALKER, Alice. **The Color Purple**. Orlando: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1992. [1982].

\_\_\_\_\_. **The Same River Twice. Honoring the Difficult**. New York: Scribner, 1996.

WHITE, Hayden. "New Historicism: A Comment." In: VEESER, H. Adam. **The New Historicism**. New York and London: Routledge, 1989.

WHITE, Hayden. **Metahistory**. The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe. The Johns Hopkins University Press: London, 1973.

ZINN, Howard. **A People's History of the United States**. New York, Cambridge, Philadelphia, San Francisco, London, Mexico City, São Paulo, Singapore, and Sydney: Perennial Library, 1980.