

Alice Walker's Jesus: A Womanist Paradox

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Abstract

This paper addresses the tensions animating Alice Walker's fame and infamy as it pertains to Christianity and Black feminists who identify as womanists—a term originated by Walker and adopted by Black Feminist Theologians almost immediately. It asks: who is God in the womanist discourse of Alice Walker? The essay claims Walker's oeuvre offers a progression of thought wherein her womanist philosophy moves from discussions that question African Americans' commitment to the Christian God into descriptions of a singular and definitive God force existing outside that discourse. The author's contemplations begin with gentle questioning of the creator's gender in *The Color Purple* and an allusion to God in her 1983 definition of womanism, which claims a womanist "Loves the Spirit." The relationship of *The Spirit* to the Christian God becomes more focused and potentially more controversial in *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) while Walker's womanist magnum opus, *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004), engages deft references to not only Christianity but also Buddhism as well as Gnosticism and a commitment to the earth as God, the Grandmother Creator. In this last text, humanity's savior doffs the robes of masculinity to don the red clay of Grandmother Earth and self-salvation.

This brief essay examines what the spiritual references in these three texts mean for Christian women who herald Alice Walker as Elder, particularly Black Christian theologians who were the first to embrace womanist thought and position themselves within its epistemological hermeneutic frame. Engaging Walker's novels and the work of one of the first Black womanist theologians, Jacquelyn Grant, as well as womanist, cultural critic Layli Maparyan I explore Walker's womanism as organic philosophy and its God as a Christian, womanist theologian's paradox—a paradox resolved by gazing through the lens of a few key moments within women's Christology during the time Black womanist theologians adopted the term.

mama's God never was no white man.
her MY Jesus, Sweet Jesus never was neither.
The color they had was the color of
her aches and trials, the tribulation of her heart
mama never had no savior that would turn
his back on her because she was black
when mama prayed, she knew who she
was praying to and who she was praying to
didn't and ain't got
no color. (Carolyn Rodgers 1975, 62)

I open this paper with the poem “mama’s God” by the Black Arts poet Carolyn Rodgers. I wish I had remembered it as I prepared to teach a course titled “Alice Walker’s Womanist Thought” in the spring of 2018. Unfortunately, I did not. Instead, in my dedicated attempt to trace the development of Walker’s Womanist vision using only her oeuvre, I focused on what she said in interviews and wrote in her novels, poetry and essays. Although exhilarating, my journey through Walker’s work led me, an English professor and newly ordained minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, to a paradox. I was perplexed and, if only for a moment, I questioned how the first self-identified, Christian, Womanist theologians could adopt a name coined by a sister who did not view Jesus as the second *person* of a tripartite God. Instead, Walker’s female protagonists, who love him, view him as “really the coolest” (Walker 2004, 115). But the coolest what, I ask? This paper traces my journey towards the answer to that question and explains why I ended it with the voice of Carolyn Rodgers echoing in my ear.

Works like *The Color Purple* (1982), *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (1983), *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004) offer the most dynamic progressions of Walker’s Womanist philosophy and Christology.¹ In these texts Walker moves from discussions of God and allusions to “the Spirit” into descriptions of an expansive and sentient God force. Scattered moments of God talk presented in earlier works coalesce in her Womanist magnum opus, *Now Is the Time*, which contemplates teachings of Christianity, Gnosticism and Buddhism while transforming them into a figuration of God Walker identifies as the Grandmother Creator. In this text, humanity’s God doffs the robes of masculinity to don the red clay of Grandmother Earth and self-salvation. The Christian Savior, the Jesus of faith, is a constant figure in each text, but present as an historical figure—a “prophet and human being” not unlike the Buddha or the Islamic prophet, Muhammed (Walker 1989, 146).

Walker begins with a gentle questioning of the creator’s gender in *The Color Purple* and an allusion to the Divine in her 1983 definition of *womanist*, which proclaims a womanist “Loves the Spirit” (Walker 1983, xiii). Layli Maparyan identifies this three-word definitional fragment as the “animating impulse of womanism,” which she calls Luxocracy or “rule by Light.” According to her, Luxocracy exists as an “Inner Light, the Higher Self, the Soul, the God Within...Innate Divinity—as described by mystics and others across cultures, across faiths, and across the centuries, if not millennia” (Maparyan 2012, 3). Evoking notions of “Divine Light” and the

¹ Please note, I am not including in this discussion Walker’s expansion of Womanist thought as *Democratic Womanism*. To do so would be to reach beyond this essay’s primary focus on her spiritual discourse—although separating the two risks creating a false dichotomy.

“Higher Self,” this spiritual energy functions as the telos, or creative center, enlivening the “potential of human spirituality to constitute a highly illumined form of social organization that does not require external mechanisms of control” (Maparyan 2012, xv). By this, Maparyan infers any ideology that circumscribes a particular way of thinking, acting or being in the world, including the ideologies defining Christianity or any other religion. The Womanist idea Maparyan promotes is truer to Walker’s development of Womanist thought in her later works than the mothers of Womanist Theology articulated when reading *The Color Purple* as a Womanist text.

This novel focuses on Celie, a woman who is abused and discarded as a worthwhile human being, broken in spirit and hope. Following a mandate given by her abusive stepfather, “*You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy,*” the sexually abused Celie finds herself silenced to any other ear, her spirit suppressed within her and her access to the Divine Light and a Higher Self dimmed (Walker 1982, 1). In search of rescue and comfort, the character writes to the only god she knows—the god of an alienating form of Christianity, a false and crippling ideology handed to Black people from enslavement, “a God designed to guide and further the desires of another people, a God who thought of blackness as a curse” (Walker 1982, 1992, location 14). Celie addresses her epistolary prayers to a white, male god whom she does not know and who does not exist in history nor within Black women’s self-defined principles of faith. Because this god is an ideological counterfeit, a lie of white supremacy, he cannot answer. Instead of comfort he leaves Celie alienated within cries for help going nowhere to no one. Celie ends this communication when she meets a woman named Shug Avery.

Speaking from her own experience, her own theology, Shug redirects Celie’s understanding of the divine. “God is inside you and inside everybody else,” she says. “You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it...God ain’t a he or a she, but an It” (Walker 1982, 195).² For Shug, everyone shares a universal spirit and origin. In every birth a god-light, or god-spirit, extending from a divine being who is neither male nor female, but an “It,” enters the human realm of existence. With this text, Walker joins other women of the period in questioning the gender of God as well as male-scripted faith and Christology.

Jacqueline Grant summarizes much of this discourse in her 1989 book *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*. She documents three perspectives of the era’s White feminist Christology, identifying feminist theologians as *Biblical Feminists*, who view the Bible as the normative authority for critiquing women’s experience; *Liberation Feminists*, who use women’s experience as normative but still read the Bible as primary authority for interpreting women’s lives; and *Rejectionist feminists*, who critique women’s experience while regarding the Bible as a negative source (Grant 1989, 177). These perspectives resulted in late twentieth century Christological positions that argued against a historical distortion of Jesus as oppressive of women; suggested Jesus was a feminist; decentered Christ to centralize women’s experience or heralded the castration of Christianity by “cutting away the fixation upon the male Jesus” (Grant 1989, 178). By the end of the century, many White women, feminist and non-feminist, agreed with the castration theory, at least in focus, and settled around the position that “healed wholeness is not Christ...[but] it is ourselves” (Brock 1987, 69).

² Although various translations of the Bible present Jesus as saying, “the Kingdom of God is within you,” this does not suggest human connections to the Divine as “adopted children” (a kingdom of heirs) are also gods or possess a god-spirit that makes us ‘little gods’ (Luke 17:21).

Most everyday Black women and Womanist theologians, recognizing their lives were oppressed in ways not experienced by White women, looked beyond all three perspectives and found rescue in Jesus—not the Jesus of White (often racist) indoctrination, but a Jesus they saw as a fully Divine, fully human reflection of the pain and suffering they experienced beneath socioeconomic injustice and White supremacy. Throughout her 1989 book, Grant notes the deficiencies of White Feminism as her primary reason for celebrating and claiming her identity as a Womanist, particularly the reality that the experiences of Black women living at the intersection of race, class and gender are alien to White women’s experiences. For her, and other Black theologians of the era, the word *womanist* was food for their souls, validated their collective memories and (as Walker once commented) felt good in their mouths. So, they adopted it. Walker, however, took up the banner of self-identification in spiritual places by denying the faith portrait of Jesus, leaving the historical figure to speak for itself, a figure the Berkley 1985-1997 *Jesus Seminar* scholars, theologians and laymen determined was silent on most things attributed to him biblically, including his claim to Divinity (Westar Institute nd). Walker expands her contemplations in later texts as she endorses self-salvation above salvation in Jesus.

In *The Temple of My Familiar (Temple)*, for instance, Walker approaches spirituality as the internal insight one gains after unveiling truths hidden beneath both a silenced history and the traditional faith portrait of a God who does not hear Black voices. In concert with Black women who reconceptualize, or ignore completely, the Jesus faith portrait handed down to them, Walker’s novel insists her readers ask probing questions: “How much of this do you really know? How much of this is just sheer indoctrination? Why are you so sure about a doctrine of any sort that was just handed to you; that you did not actually attain out of your own will, your own dreams, your own desires and your own desperation” (Wilson Center 2015, 1:13).

Olivia, Celie’s daughter from *The Color Purple*, speaking in *Temple* of her adoptive father comments, “My father, Samuel, was a missionary [in Africa] ..., but by the time we returned to America he had long since lost his faith; not in the spiritual teachings of Jesus, *the prophet and human being*, but in Christianity as a religion of conquest and domination inflicted on other peoples” (Walker 1989, 146, emphasis mine). Later, Celie’s granddaughter, Fanny, recalls how Celie and Shug rejected the brand of Christianity that breaks spirits and confines souls. According to her they, like other Black women who felt a need to break free of a doctrine demanding their silence and voluntary self-denial, formed their own church or *bands*. “‘Band’ was what renegade black women’s churches were called traditionally,” Fanny explains, “it means a group of people who share a common bond and purpose and whose notion of spiritual reality is radically at odds with mainstream or prevailing ones” (Walker 1989, 299).

Fanny’s comment redirects the novel’s Womanist focus to the Black women predecessors of Walker’s term *womanist*. These are women like Howard Thurman’s slave grandmother who, instead of revering a canon of sacred texts her masters used to command her docile acceptance of enslavement, created “a canon within the biblical canon” (Jones 1973, viii- ix). In *Jesus of the Disinherited*, Thurman explains his grandmother would not allow him to read the Pauline epistles to her. Paul’s Jesus, (mis)used to justify her enslavement, was not her Jesus. She did not reject Jesus as God, however. Instead of accepting a canon of scripture she understood to oppress the oppressed, she valued her own selection of sacred texts, which included the Gospels, the Psalms, and the book of Isaiah but never the Pauline epistles (Thurman 1981, 30).

In the hearts of Black renegade “saints” of God, like Thurman’s grandmother and the millions represented by the characterization of Shug Avery, Jesus is neither black nor white, male nor female, but fully revolutionary, fully liberationist and fully human. Yet, unlike traditional *bands* of Black women preachers and renegade “saints,” Walker’s characters remain silent concerning the Divinity of Jesus. Walker does, however, lead her readers to investigate the question, insisting, “God” is within everyone and “spirituality [is], above all, too precious to be left to the perverted interpretations of men” (Walker 1989, 300).

Interpretation is the *central force* of perception and faith. It is a force directed along a line of introspection and inspection that joins Christian Womanist thought and Shug’s statement, guiding them both towards ancient discourses defining Jesus as the third person of a Holy Trinity. We find one such discourse in John 10:34, where Jesus quotes an ancient Hebrew text to legalize his claim as the Son of God before those wishing to stone him for blasphemy: “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are “gods”’? (NIV). This statement might seem to diminish the speaker’s claim of Divinity—leveling it, so-to-speak, with similar claims anyone might make—but it does not. Jesus used it with something else as his ultimate goal—his right to claim supreme Divinity.

If we stop reading at John 10:34, we may interpret Jesus as saying we are all gods. We might then agree fully with Shug Avery, adopting a system of belief offering a divine spiritual component, although not Christ-like or Messiah centered, within all humanity. But if we read on and cross reference this verse to its origins, we discover this claim of godliness is lost in death and a continual, generational fall. Jesus was referring to Psalm 82:6 which reads, “I said, ‘You are “gods”’; you are all sons of the Most High” (NIV). The Psalm continues in verses 7 and 8 to say: “But you will die like mere mortals; you will fall like every other ruler. / Rise up, O God, judge the earth, for all the nations are your inheritance” (NIV). Both Jesus and the Psalm speak of rulers and authorities in their role as lords over fellow human beings—i.e. the “perverted interpreters” raising Shug’s ire in *Temple*.

Unfortunately, many stop their consideration of the text without further investigation in order to celebrate their right to claim divinity as “little god’s.” This is the case for New Age spiritualists as well as Shug Avery’s philosophy of *god in everyone*. Such readings may be supported by the biblical text easily if the text is abridged. However, the reference does not refer to all humanity. It speaks to the rulers of a fallen nation (small “g” gods) and calls for a Higher Being (large “G” God) to redeem all humanity through judgement and the rising up or resurrection of a never fallen Son, Jesus, the Christ and second person of the Holy Trinity.

The relationship between the Christian principle of “loving” a tripartite God and Walker’s Christology becomes more tenuous, even controversial, in *Now is the Time* where the author reveals a story of *God as father* to be a lie told to children of lost, missing or unknown human fathers. The author’s reference to lost fathers can very well refer metaphorically to the “lost” fathers of Africa whose children now identify as American and as adopted, Christian sons and daughters of God. But there is more to this reference as Walker develops the discussion in the text. Missy, a character raped by her grandfather, explains:

My mom and I lived with him, because my father went off to the army and never came back. If he died there she never told me. She used to tell me God was my

father and that that made me and Jesus siblings. I loved Jesus! Even today I think Jesus is really the coolest! (Walker 2005, 154-155)

Missy loves Jesus because Jesus, she believes, is just like her: a human child who does not know its earthly, biological father but believes God is his or her father. Missy's story alludes to the *Gospel of Nicodemus* (also known as *The Acts of Pontius Pilate*) where fornication results in Jesus's conception. According to that text, Jewish authorities, wanting to persuade Pilate to kill Jesus, claimed he was born "of fornication" (Elliot 1993, 2:3). Juxtaposing this text with Walker's novel suggests that if Jesus is the result of fornication, and not the Divine Son of God, he is not unlike Missy. Certainly, he is not the second person of the Holy Trinity. At least, this is what Walker's text seems to suggest.

Now is the Time expresses a mystical—and, some may charge, New Age Gnostic—vision of Christology and spirituality. The novel probes questions *Temple* and *the Color Purple* raise, thereby, engaging Maparyan's human-to-human-human to nature-human-to-spirit triad of concern and framing it as a necessity for true liberation and individual wholeness (2012, 35). While exploring these connections, Walker introduces a god-force that takes liberties with not only Christianity but also New Age, Buddhist and Gnostic spiritualism. Much like *The Color Purple*, which Walker once claimed is a Buddhist text that is not Buddhist, *Now is the Time* is a New Age text that is not New Age (Busch 2013).

This novel follows the spiritual journey of Kate and Yolo, lovers whose relationship is deteriorating. For respite, they take separate vacations during which each finds spiritual enlightenment and inner truths, which help them find their way back to each other. Yolo travels to Hawaii while Kate's journey leads her to the Amazon. Before beginning her journey, however, Kate enters her private room to "dismantle her altar. The candles, plentiful and varied, honoring deities from the Virgen de Guadalupe to Che, Jesus to her friend Sarah Jane..." (Walker 2005, 11). The scene's description juxtaposes its reference to Che Guevara, the Cuban revolutionary, with parallel references to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Jesus, the Son of God, flanking Che on either side. Kate's dismantling of their "altar" suggests these previously honored "saviors" are insufficient for obtaining the true freedom and salvation she desires. Something more, something deeper, is needed.

Kate finds this *something* in the Amazon where she bonds with other seekers (male and female, including Missy) and partakes of a plant derived medicine called *yagé*. This drink, her indigenous shaman guide promises, will give her access to the "Grandmother" spirit whose unlimited power and wisdom can cure her brokenness. Walker describes Grandmother as "The oldest Being who ever lived. Her essence that of Primordial Female Human Being As Tree" (Walker 2005, 52). Walker's Grandmother spirit is similar to a female creator-spirit in the Gnostic text, *The Sophia of Jesus*. There, Sophia represents the tree of knowledge. She is also analogous to both the human soul as well as God; her name may be considered another word for 'the Christ.' According to the text as recorded in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, Sophia is the female side of an androgynous son, "The first Begetter, Son of God," whom the texts names "First Begettress Sophia, Mother of the Universe. Some call her Love. Now [at the time of the writing] First Begotten is called 'Christ.'" This androgynous "Son of God" is different from Jesus whom the Gnostic text says originates from "Self-begotten [Eternal God] and First Infinite Light [Holy Spirit]." The text continues as

Jesus describes the coming of his own Being: “I [Jesus] came to my own and united them [the Self begotten and the First Infinite Light] with myself (Nag Hammadi 1981, 140-141; 194). Walker filters through these layered identities to offer *Grandmother* as the God of creation, dismissing any reflection on the role of Jesus in the creation of himself.

As Walker’s novel progresses, *yagé* as medicinal nomenclature morphs into more than a signifier of a plant-based drink. It becomes a representation of the Grandmother creator herself, a sentient being who teaches Kate the secrets of achieving healing, wholeness and self-salvation. Through Grandmother *Yagé* and its divine-earth-force, Kate ascends to higher levels of self-actualization. With enlightenment, she achieves levels of spiritual consciousness void of external confirmation. When reunited with Yolo, she describes her moment of enlightenment as solitary yet full of divinity:

I was by myself in this frightening place and SHE [Grandmother] WAS NOT THERE! My heart sank. I had never felt more alone in my life. And then, just when I was on the point of dying of loneliness and lack of direction, I wailed: *Oh, Grandmother, you are not here!* And she said: *But you are*” (Walker 2005, 201).

Kate recognizes she, like the *Yagé*, is Grandmother, a god-force present in every created thing and living being brave enough to move beyond tradition and ideological indoctrination to discover it. As a woman born with the spark of divinity within, Kate is able to save herself without the hand or help of other gods or ideological frames. All she needs is nature and an awareness that everything is connected human-to-human-to-spirit-to-nature. She is what Maparyan calls “non-ideological” and whole—the embodiment of Walker’s Womanist vision.

Although *Now is the Time* mentions religion by name only twice (*The Church of Religious Science* and *Church of God and Christ*) it speaks frequently of Buddhism, opening and ending with mention of it. In fact, many readers attribute the spirituality in this novel to Walker’s Buddhist training. Some Buddhist, much like early Christian Womanist theologians, adopt her brand and name their spiritual practice Buddhist-Womanism (Medine 2016, 17-28). Walker, however, resists the singular association of her Womanist brand of spirituality with Buddhism, declaring “I am not a Buddhist or any other kind of ‘ist” (Wilson Center 2015). One, insisting upon labels, might say Walker’s brand is of tri-spiritual origins. This, even she acknowledges: “I was raised as a Christian. Now I love Buddhism and I love earth religions” (Harris 2010, 7).

This conflation of spiritual viewpoints causes Walker’s novel to transgress its origins in both Christianity and Buddhist spirituality. *Yagé*, the drink at the core of Kate’s experience, for instance, is another name for the plant-based intoxicant Ayahuasca, which is a drink made of plants that hold within their tissue “supernatural forces.” These forces imbue the plants with a divine power that frees the soul and “liberates its owner” (Walker 2005, 214). Although Kate learns, after a few experiences with *Yagé*, that through her development she does not need the intoxicant to commune with the divine within, her original “medicinal” indulgence in and dependence upon it violates the Buddhist belief in avoiding intoxicants and invalidates her spiritual journey as Buddhist. The practice invigorates the Womanist triad of concern, however, by honoring its human-to-spirit-human-to-nature foundations.

Although Walker uses insights from Buddhism, she is not confined to it. She also claims to be “delighted to have the Gnostic gospels and the Nag Hammadi scrolls” at her disposal—texts that allow her to disavow the exclusivity of a masculine, Christian Godhead (Beliefnet 2007). These writings provide discourses on the *god within* that appear in almost every Walker text published since *The Color Purple*. And, although Gnosticism informs her concept of humans as “little” gods advancing toward perfection, Walker does not limit such growth to “secret” knowledge but welcomes nature as a guiding god-force.

Walker’s Womanist spirituality is fluid, organic and broadly encompassing. Like the Gnostic philosophy she loves, Walker “is not much interested in dogma or coherent, rational theology” (Robinson 1981, 10). Though her novels’ flow from Christianity to Buddhism to “New Age” Gnosticism, Walker’s Womanist thought creates its own voice, allowing her to incorporate elements of everything she feels reflects her dreams, her desires and her desperation. To label her would be violation. In fact, Walker rejects external labeling. “I have a hard time accepting labels that people hand me,” she says in a 2015 interview, “I want to know what it does. I want to know, if you take it back to 1718, what would it do then? ... [womanism] comes from a community. [Its] not just mine” (Wilson Center 2015).

With that said, I end my journey in search of Alice Walker’s Jesus and relax perplexity’s hold on understanding. Walker’s Jesus is not the faith image I was seeking in her work; but to be a true Womanist, MY Jesus does not have to be Walker’s Jesus or anyone else’s for that matter. Experience, interpretation and faith informs that alone. In the tradition of Carolyn Rodgers’ mama as well as the stirring of my own soul, *my* Jesus reflects *my* “aches and trials, the tribulation of [my] heart” (Rodgers 1974, 62). Yet, Jesus, like womanism, is not just mine. No label can confine either, and no ideology can control either—not even religion.

Therefore, I join *my* foremothers of ages long gone—the original womanists who broke through race and gender oppressions to interpret the Bible for themselves. I join Carolyn Rodgers’ “mama.” I join Howard Thurman’s grandmother and the grandmother to whose memory Jacqueline Grant dedicates her book, *Black Women’s Jesus*—a grandmother who, “in the stillness of a coma, [w]hen she heard the name Jesus, moved.” I believe she moved not because “the Bible told her so,” but because her faith and her experience of it proved her Womanist spirit could defy the difficult and unbearable by achieving the impossible “in the name of Jesus,” the second person of the Holy Trinity.

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