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Abstract

Achille Mbembe's theory from *On the Postcolony* uses structuralism to define Africa in terms of its differences: that is, what the continent lacks, or what is absent when compared to Europe. Mbembe, however, introduces a new definition of Africa to refute Western culture's dependence on social constructs of race that enforce Eurocentric power to marginalize individuals as "other." An analysis of stereotypes in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* pairs well with Mbembe's theories, because Walker's character portrayals in the sections devoted to Africa serve to complicate these constructs of race, and introduce fetishism, objectification, and postcolonialism as well. Instead of accepting Africa's "sense of self," with its own customs, traditions and identities, Walker introduces British and African American missionaries who seek to reinvent the Olinka tribe with Western clothing, religion, and traditions. The consequences then result in forfeiting a long-term culture in favor of Western capitalistic ventures. Mbembe laments Africa's undervalued identity, so he offers examples of its distinctive characteristics that intersect boldly with Walker's traditional and outdated stereotypes. Mbembe's theories contradict Walker's depiction of Africa in an attempt to finally allow Africa to develop an authentic representation of itself in the global environment.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Trajectories of the *Postcolony* in *The Color Purple*

by

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A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

2018

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Thesis Committee:

English

Thesis Sponsor:



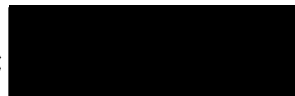
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TRAJECTORIES OF THE *POSTCOLONY* IN
THE COLOR PURPLE

A THESIS

Submitted in partial Fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

KIM SILVA-MARTINEZ

Montclair State University

Montclair, New Jersey

2018

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“At this point, we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is of no historical part of the World. It has no movement or development to exhibit”

—Georg Hegel from *The Philosophy of History* (99)

Trajectories of the *Postcolony* in *The Color Purple*

Social theorist Achille Mbembe confronts Western arguments in *On the Postcolony*, and refutes Africa’s reputation as a continent perceived only through a negative lens. Originally from Cameroon, he is a witness to Western hegemony; thus, he seeks to interrogate European representations of Africa that still exist today. Mbembe depicts the exploitation of those colonized and the power denied indigenous groups. With an often forgotten past, many fail to realize that “Africans have been and are the frontiersman who have colonised an especially hostile region of the world on behalf of the entire human race” according to John Iliffe in his book, *Africans: History of a Continent*” (1). Ta-Nehisi Coates, in *Between the World and Me*, confirms the global heritage of Africa and its ancient civilizations:

I’d read Chancellor Williams, J.A. Rogers, and John Jackson—writers central to the canon of our new noble history. From them I knew that Mansa Musa of Mali was black, and Shabaka of Egypt was black...and “the black race” was a thing I supposed existed from time memorial, a thing that was real and mattered. (45)

Yet, as Coates argues, Africa, despite its impressive legacy, is thought of as inchoate, where European violence, as an intervention, writes much of Africa’s history. Through

several centuries, Africa has been damaged topographically, as well as culturally. Africans were forced to endure almost sixty years of colonial rule as land was partitioned and distributed to Portugal, France, Germany, and England in a historical event known as the ‘Scramble for Africa.’” To explain why Africa is so vulnerable to violence, Mbembe reveals the Western perspective that defines the continent: “When dealing with Africa or with other non-European worlds, this tradition long denied the existence of any ‘self’ but its own” (Mbembe 2001, 2). He emphasizes that he has “tried to ‘write Africa,’ not as fiction, but in the harshness of its destiny, its power, and its eccentricities, without laying any claim to speak in the name of anyone at all” (Mbembe 2001, 17). A similar oppression occurs in Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple*, which is a fictional account of two African American sisters, Celie and Nettie. The events that occur in the African subplot correlate to some historical parallels of this time; and when Nettie’s trajectory collides with colonialism, she witnesses the decentering of Africa and its identity.

Nettie goes to Africa to work as a missionary, and she believes that she is helping her African brothers and sisters to become Christians: “[Corrine and Samuel, the other African American missionaries] spoke of all the good things they can do for the downtrodden people from whom they sprang. People who need Christ and good medical advice” (Walker 1982, 131). Yet Nettie “never dreamed of going to Africa! I never even thought of it as a real place” (Walker 1982, 131). Mbembe speaks to the same thought many also have about Africa: “And Africa, because it was and remains that fissure between what the West is, what it thinks it represents, and it thinks it signifies, is not simply *part* of its imaginary significations, it is one *of those* significations” (2001, 2). Therefore, for many, Africa seems to exist only in the global imagination. Like Nettie,

Walker also wanted to help those in Africa, which she transitioned to a human rights campaign for the elimination of female genital mutilation (FGM) (Walker 1997, 18). She is African American, like Nettie, and raised with Western ideology, which problematizes the African subplot in the novel. Walker, however, rejects aspect of Eurocentrism: Christianity. While *The Color Purple* does have some verisimilitude, Mbembe's theories antagonize Walker's text because her characterization of Africa and the Olinka reflect the stereotypes Mbembe wishes to eliminate. The novel portrays the repetition of colonial violence, the ambiguity of politicized language, and the missionaries' "precolonization" of the Olinka as a holistic representation of Africa; yet for those who have historically internalized beliefs related to these stereotypes, fact and fiction overlap. Since Walker's concepts of Africa initially derive from Eurocentric views, it can then be argued that Walker's tropes reinforce the "decentering of Africa," a term Mbembe uses to explain a rupture in African identity and time. The dilemma here is that Walker's unintentional depiction of Africa supersedes fiction because *The Color Purple* creates an invented Africa that Mbembe resists, and leaves readers with a Western view that still defines the continent.

Africa was almost defenseless in fighting against European imperialism in the latter half of the nineteenth-century, which necessitated violence; previous encounters occurred in the sixteenth century Atlantic slave trade as well, so its vulnerability is well-documented. The transporting of African captives to the Americas also significantly lessened the population at a time when it was trying to increase the number of inhabitants living on the continent (Iliffe 137). Critics often point to the physical structure in African societies and its lack of "states" or nations, which meant a lack of national armies for

protection. However, Mbembe considers this characterization of Africa as a stateless continent “an essential negativity that persists, not due to the absence of a rich archive” (2006, 147). Instead, he offers “at least two main reasons key realities are still blocked from view: Africa as a name, as an idea and as an object of academic and public discourse has been, and remains, fraught” (2006, 147). He also mentions that Africa’s image supplants Said’s thoughts on orientalism, and that “Africa is perpetually caught and imagined with a web of difference and absolute otherness” (2006, 147). In other words, its perception as “other” is so well entrenched in Western thought that no achievement can eradicate this label because “there is the language that every comment by an African about Africa must endlessly eradicate, validate, or ignore often to his/her cost, the ordeal whose erratic fulfilment many Africans have spent their lives trying to prevent” (2001, 5). Mbembe points to “African societies ‘historicity’ ...and the Western history and the theories that claim to interpret it” (2001, 9). This is seen as Nettie is shocked to discover that “there were great cities in Africa, greater than Milledgeville or even Atlanta, thousands of years ago. That the Egyptians who built the pyramids and enslaved the Israelites were colored? That Egypt is in Africa? That the Ethiopia we read about in the Bible meant all of Africa?” (Walker 1982, 132).

Therefore, despite Africa’s physical vulnerability, it is more the word “Africa,” that is problematic. Nettie writes enthusiastically in a letter to Celie: “If you can believe I am in Africa, and I am, you can believe anything” (Walker 1982, 133). This is an example of the second reason Mbembe says “key realities are still blocked from view” (2006, 147). He calls this “presentism,” which he defines “as a discourse on the gap and the lack [that] operates essentially by segmentation of time, excision of the past and

deferral of the future” (2006, 147). In “Africa in Theory: A Conversation Between Jean Comaroff and Achille Mbembe,” he elaborates more on this: “It [presentism] never told us what [Africa] *actually was*. In that sense—and this the second point—presentism was not a form of knowledge as such; rather, it was a model of misrecognition and disfiguration” (Mbembe 2010, 656). It appears that presentism is a deflection, an indirect and equivocal approach to defining Africa. And since Africa cannot count on the linear progression of time, Europe then decided to expand and target Africa as the victim of its colonial domination. Mbembe asserts that “colonial sovereignty rested on three sorts of violence,” (2001, 25) and discusses how each supports and transitions into the other:

The first was the founding violence, [and] this helped create the space over which it was exercised; one may say presupposed its own existence; second, it helped to produce the imaginary violence into authority; the third form of violence was designed to ensure this authority’s maintenance, spread and permanence. (Mbembe 2001, 25)

Africa, therefore, can be considered a space of violence, another enduring theme in its identity. And the world then embeds this stereotype of Africa into its psyche, while recursive images continue to desensitize individuals, and the apocryphal is now recognized as truth.

When comparing the Olinka to historical, physical societies of Africa at the time, both had vulnerabilities in the way they are constructed. The Olinka purposely lacked hard borders within their settlements also. In *The Church in Africa 1450-1950*, Adrian Hastings describes the nature of African habitats, compared to Europe: “there was no sense of state at all. It is with that experience that an African overview can best begin, the

world of the majority of people who lived in stateless societies” (47). Europeans considered this an anomaly, in that no permanent locations exist where peoples lived; therefore, conditions are ideal for colonial expansion. After several years, Nettie notices hints of difference in the village: “But life is changing, even in Olinka” (Walker 1982, 161). Her prescience is accurate, because the British are planning to build a road through their village. Soon Nettie and the Olinka hear unfamiliar sounds in the forest: “A kind of low humming. Then there was the sound of chopping and the sound of dragging” (Walker 1982, 163). Before colonization, African societies functioned successfully; yet their practices of polygamy, polytheism, and communal resources branded them as inferior to the West. Mbembe explains the rationale: “Under colonization, the object and subject of *commandment* combined in a single specific category, the native. In colonial political vocabulary, this description was applied to colonial subjects in general; Mbembe quotes Albert Sarraut and his description of natives as ‘unformed clay of primitive multitudes’ from which colonization’s task was to shape the ‘face of a new humanity’” (2001, 28). Mbembe explains the colonial process: he defines “*commandment* as it was used to—denote colonial authority—that is, in so far as it embraces the images and structures of power and coercion, the instruments and agents of the enactment, and a degree of rapport between those who give orders and those who are supposed to obey (without, of course, discussing them)” (2001, 34). This becomes the social order for the Olinka as they adjust to British occupation.

Therefore, the distinct habituation of the Olinka becomes its weakness; yet they remain a model of unity until they are relocated. Here Walker adheres closely to African history of the time: “Scattered settlement and huge distances hindered transport, limited

the surplus the powerful could extract, prevented the emergence of literate elites and formal institutions, left the cultivator much freedom, and obstructed state formation, despite the many devices which leaders invented to bind men to them” (Iliffe 3). Walker uses the word “tribe” once in the novel, but not to describe the Olinka, but rather “a Northern tribe building a road” (Walker 1982, 163). It is used as a pejorative to portray Nettie’s distress in what she considers the tribe’s disloyalty to their African brothers and sisters, like the Olinka. The word has a mythic connotation and its emergence arrives as “a category [that] came with colonial rule” says Robert Waller in “Ethnicity and Identity” (95). Waller discusses the characteristics that define them: “Tribes were assumed to be primordial: fixed, static, bounded, timeless-and often mutually hostile” (95). He considers “tribe” to be a misnomer because “Africans have identities, but not tribes; it would take much effort before the two came into even approximate alignment; [and] much of the historiography of colonial ethnicity revolves around the explication of this fundamental difference” (95). “Tribe” then, is politicized language, which suggests a stereotype when used in the context of Africa. Here Walker’s language supports the events that occur historically.

Mbembe offers a complex discussion in *On the Postcolony* to the discursive nature of temporality in Africa. In the introduction, “Time on the Move,” he suggests that time is not linear in Africa, but an “interlocking of the presents, pasts, and futures that retains their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones” (2001, 16). This is salient in *The Color Purple*; and although Nettie’s present is in Africa, she brings with her a past of oppression, otherness, and marginalization, which are images she internalizes since childhood: “Miss Beasley,

[her teacher] used to say [Africa] was a place overrun with savages who didn't wear clothes" (Walker 1982, 131). Nettie's past (ancestral slavery) will "interlock" with the Olinka present (indigenous existence) and colonial future (oppression, otherness, and marginalization) to create overlapping temporal zones. Nettie's ancestors suffer internal colonization at the hands of white slave owners; but then Nettie internally colonizes the Olinka through Christian conversion and Western education, and both internalize the lasting implications of these experiences. Yet, as Nettie becomes more familiar with the Olinka, she becomes ambivalent toward Christianity and the Eurocentric image of God, which is counterintuitive to the missionary society's teachings. She writes to Celie about the racial image of God:

All the Ethiopians in the Bible were colored. It had never occurred to me, though, when you read the bible, it is perfectly plain if you pay attention only to the words. It is the pictures that of the bible that fool you. The pictures illustrate the words. All of the people are white and so you just think all the people from the bible were white too. (Walker 1982, 134-135)

Walker, in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, parallels her mother's beliefs about God's appearance: "Well, He was white, his son was white, and it truly was a white man's world, as far as they could see" (Walker 1997, 13). Walker remembers her mother's lack of agency in the patriarchal church, which required women to remain quiet and accept their husbands' beliefs (Walker 1997, 13). As a pantheist, Walker frames Olinka paganism within the guidelines she follows as "a person whose primary spiritual relationship is with Nature and the Earth. And Christianity, we were informed, fought long and hard to deliver us from *that* (Walker 1997,17). When Nettie first arrives in

Africa, the Olinka “have a welcoming ceremony [for the missionaries that] was about the roofleaf” (Walker 1982,152) ...[which] became the thing they worship” (Walker 1982, 154). The teleology of the Olinka culture provides for shared resources to sustain the needs of the village. Roofleaf is essential as a roof covering for Olinka dwellings.

Themes of time and religion are paired to interlock with the characters in Walker’s novel. This creates an intersectionality that transcends time, as each experience has similar trajectories that move in distinct periods of time. Not only does the interlocking occur in the novel, but it also aligns with Walker’s personal history of Africa, the church, and nature, and features the simultaneities of time between the two sisters. Celie moves forward in America; however, Nettie’s progress with the Olinka moves backward, due to colonialism. And although Nettie is fully committed to Christianizing the Olinka, Nettie acculturates the Olinka lifestyle and envisions them as a spiritual family to embrace a Pan-Africanism that unites all black individuals, despite their locations. At the same time in Georgia, Celie struggles with her faith, questioning God’s race and gender, because she, too, has always thought of him as a European white man: “He big and old and tall and graybearded and white” (Walker 1982, 191). Nettie teaches about this white god to the Olinka, despite their own well-developed and organized religion, perhaps forgetting about their traumatic past with white slave traders. Europe continues to elevate the representation of a white man as the physical image of this “one god.” And Nettie, ancestrally, is also a victim of white patriarchy, yet she fails to realize that European Christianity is another form of oppression for those of African ancestry.

The Mbembe text pairs well with *The Color Purple* because he offers a confrontational, yet realistic discussion on the implications of the postcolony. He is adamant in separating “postcolony” from “postcolonial,” to problematize a distinction in the meanings, so that he can eventually originate an authentic definition for Africa. To Mbembe, the postcolony “identifies specifically a given historical trajectory—that of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonization and the violence which the colonial relationship involves” (Mbembe 2001, 102). To define “postcolonialism” is more complex, since several interpretations exist. In *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, (chosen to represent a compilation of thoughts), it is explained as “a performative mode of critical revisionism, consistently directed at the colonial past and assessing its legacies for the present, but also intermittently focusing on those forms of colonialism that have surfaced more recently in the context of an increasingly globalized but incompletely decolonized world” (Huggan 10). The intervention of violence is missing in Huggan’s concept, which is why the specificity Mbembe attaches to his word “postcolony” reflects more of the exploitation, absence, and dehumanization he discusses in his theories. The Olinka are portrayed as a productive, family-oriented, religious, and communal society, and their human experiences correlate to Mbembe’s theory that “the African subject is like any other human being: he or she engages in *meaningful acts*” (2001, 6).

This absence, though, is most enunciative when attempting to define Africa’s identity, and its lack of natural forward movement. Mbembe explains how Africa is often represented: “the African human experience constantly appears in the discourse of our times as an experience that can only be understood through a negative interpretation”

(2006, 1). Africa survives in a circuitous or non-linear existence and colonialism places the continent in a permanent stasis, which encourages its decentering through the loss of stability. Theorist Frantz Fanon explains what time means to the colonized in *The Wretched of the Earth*: “So they [colonialist countries] say the colonized want to move too fast. Let us never forget that it wasn’t such a long time ago that the colonized were accused of being too slow, lazy, and fatalistic” (1963, 35). Fanon, too, makes the argument that the “architecture of another work of his [*Black Skin, White Masks*], is rooted in the temporal,” (1952, 14). Fanon’s ideas on temporal merging inspire Mbembe; Fanon says “every human problem must be considered from the standpoint of time. Ideally, the present will contribute to the building of the future” (Fanon, 14-15). Therefore, temporal abstractions are quite relevant to both theorists, who see time equated with progress for most except blacks. Europe maintains a superiority that disinherits Africa from forward movement to minimize any threat of displacement for itself.

Therefore, an environment exists in the novel that is conducive to the stereotypes and politicized language that Europe uses to target Africa for colonial sovereignty: “Colonialism, as a relation of power based on violence, intended to cure Africans of their supposed laziness, protecting them whether or not they wanted such protection” (Mbembe 2001, 113). The colonized were thought of as nothing more than productive or unproductive bodies at the mercy of “the whip and the cane, [which] also served to force upon the African a concocted identity, an identity that allowed him/her to move in the spaces where she/he was always being ordered around...” (Mbembe 2001, 113). Nettie senses the initial stages of colonialism; and although colonizers may consider Africans as

“lazy,” she recalls the Olinka energy and hospitality toward the “engineers [that]d came to inspect the territory. Two white men came yesterday and spent a couple of hours strolling about the village, mainly looking at the wells. Such is the innate politeness of the Olinka that they rushed about preparing food for them” (Walker 1982, 189). And despite this welcome, “One [inspector] seemed totally indifferent to the people around him—simply eating and then smoking and staring off into the distance—and the other, somewhat younger, appearing to be enthusiastic about learning the language. Before it dies out, he says” (Walker 1982, 190). Nettie’s awareness gives an indication of cultural loss, specifically the Olinka language, through the inspector’s foreshadowing. And Olinka skin color classifies them as inferior to the colonizers. Mbembe demonstrates the politicized language of the word “Black” as a marker of omission in *Critique of Black Reason*. This explain the inspector’s actions toward the Olinka: “It was invented to signify exclusion, brutalization, and degradation, to point to a limit constantly conjured and abhorred” (Mbembe 2017, 6). Ta-Nehisi Coates also argues about the ambiguous nature of the word “black”: “There was nothing holy or particular in my skin: I was black because of history and heritage. There was no nobility in falling, in being bound, in living oppressed, and there was no inherent meaning in black blood. Black blood wasn’t black; black *skin* wasn’t even black” (55). In a literal sense, the word “black,” when used as an adjective to describe, is wholly specious; its power resides in language as the ability to control, isolate, and traumatize individuals.

This recurring theme of power in politicized language is ubiquitous in *The Color Purple*. Nettie’s older sister Celie writes to her in African American Vernacular English, (AAVE) and “facts suggest that AAVE originated as English, but as the African

American community solidified, it innovated specific features,” according to Shana Poplack in *The English History of African American English* (27). However, this can be problematic if readers are not aware of its recognition as a language. In “Ties That Bind: A Comparative Analysis of Zora Neale Hurston’s and Geneva Smitherman’s Work,” Kimmika L. Williams writes that the theory of AAVE as “(1) the language spoken by African Americans [that] can be classified as a language in of itself, (evolving because of the consequences and the history of enslavement, classified as a dialect because of the position of powerlessness of its speakers” (qtd. in Holloway 1-18). Poplack says those who researched examined AAVE saw that “early studies focused (perhaps understandably, given the climate of the time) on linguistic features which were most distinct from StdE. Indeed, their absence from StdE came to define AAVE (negatively), so that the features eventually assumed an ‘AAVE identity’” (26).

This parallels Mbembe’s observations of to see Africa from a framework of absence. Because StdE has been deemed the accepted pronunciation, it then becomes a signifier of socioeconomic class and contains inherent power compared to AAVE. Those not speaking StdE can be marginalized like Celie, who never has the opportunity to complete her education. She remembers how Nettie “be sitting there with me spelling peas or helping the children with they spelling” (Walker 1982, 16). Yet, Celie is not that concerned: “What I care? I’m happy” (Walker 1982, 215). She is aware she does not speak like Nettie, who “read, she study, she practice her handwriting” (Walker 1982, 16). Therefore, Nettie is privileged to go to Africa to teach because she can speak StdE; and since the London Missionary Society is run by European white men, they consider Nettie acceptable. However, when Celie achieves success in her sewing business, she moves

into a higher socioeconomic class and newer friends notice her pronunciation. She hires two sisters to help her; Celie notices that “Darlene trying to teach me how to talk. She say US not so hot. A dead country give-away. You say US where most folks say WE, she say, and peoples think you dumb. Colored peoples think you a hick and white folks be amuse” (Walker 1982, 215). Darlene sees the power in language, but Celie is indifferent: “Every time I say something the way I say it, she correct me until I say it some other way” (Walker 1982, 215). To encourage Celie, Darlene says if she changes her speech, her friend Shug “won’t be shame to take [her] anywhere” (Walker 1982, 216). Darlene asks Shug, “don’t you think it be nice if Celie could talk proper?” (Walker 1982, 216). Mbembe says, “In fact, here is a principle of language and classificatory systems in which to *differ* from something or somebody is not simply *not to be like* (in the sense of being non-identical or being-other); it is also *not being at all* (non-being)” (2001, 4). Mbembe radically delineates how language either qualifies an individual as human, or taxonomizes individuals as non-humans—an extreme marginalization.

Toni Morrison, in *The Origin of Others*, discusses the indoctrination of stereotypes, often taught in childhood, and their enduring power. She describes a short story written by Flannery O’Connor, which Morrison calls “a carefully rendered description of how and why blacks are so vital to a white definition of humanity” (Morrison 20). Morrison uses the example of the word [n-----r] in Flannery’s story, “The Artificial [N-----r,]” and explains throughout the text that, “the word is used constantly, even and when it is unnecessary. Its use is a large part of the education of the young white boy in the story. The insistent and excessive use indicates how important blacks are to the self-regard of his uncle, Mr. Head” (20). The theme of repetition to reinforce

stereotypes is seen here again. The significance of this uncle's exchange is to "educate his nephew in the process of Othering, of identifying the stranger. The hoped-for results in this type of conversation and observation is to exaggerate fear of the stranger" (Morrison 21). Eventually "the education of the boy is complete: He has been successfully and artfully taught racism and believes he has acquired respectability, status. And the illusion of power through the process of inventing an 'Other'" (Morrison 24). Nettie also hears this derogatory word used while waiting for a train in South Carolina, en route to Africa: "One man on the platform asked us where we were going—when we said Africa, he looked offended and tickled too! [N-----s] going to Africa, he said to his wife. Now I have seen everything" (Walker 1982, 135). What is so strikingly similar to Mbembe's view of Africa is the artifice of power Europe believes it has by casting Africa as "Other," seen in both O'Connor's story and the racist white traveler. Coates recognizes these ongoing generational conversations as "the belief in the preeminence of hue and hair, the notion that these factors can correctly organize a society that signify deeper attributes, which are indelible" (7). In teaching the stereotypes to his nephew, the uncle portrays "the reality of 'race' as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world" (Coates 7).

Other challenging areas of language in *The Color Purple* concern connotations of the word "dark" as an adjective to describe Africa and its classic pairing with continent. However, a provocation of a deeper meaning exists. The suggestion of "dark" is used in many forms in *The Color Purple*. Before arriving in Africa as a member of the London Missionary Society, Nettie travels to England to be trained, because "one of the missionaries that was supposed to go...married a man who was afraid to let her go, and

refused to come to Africa with her” (Walker 1982, 130). This confirms that Africa is the unknown and the feared as an association with darkness. Mbembe reminds us that “whether in everyday discourse or in ostensibly scholarly narratives, the continent [is] of the very figure of the ‘strange.’ It is similar to that inaccessible ‘Other with a capital O’” (2001, 5). Coates recalls his wife’s narrative: she was told “that she better be smart because her looks won’t save her, and then told as a young woman that she was really pretty for a dark-skinned girl” (65). Celie also thinks of Africa as something mysterious and hard to imagine. As she reads a letter from Nettie, she notices the front of the envelope, covered with colonial images: “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” (Walker 1982, 190). Africa is clandestine and anonymous to Nettie, too: “But I never dreamed of going to Africa, I never even thought of it as a real place, though Samuel, Corrine, and the children talked about it all the time” (Walker 1982, 131). Yet Mbembe resists the Western definition of Africa:

In several respects, Africa still constitutes one of its metaphors through which the West represents the origins of its own norms, develops a self-image, and integrates this image into the set of signifiers asserting what it supposes to be an identity. And Africa, because it was and remains a fissure between what the West is, what it thinks it represents, and what it signifies, is not simply *part* of its imaginary significations. By imaginary significations, we mean ‘something that is invented,’ that paradoxically, becomes necessary because ‘that something’ plays a key role, both in the

world the West constitutes for itself, and in the West's apologetic concerns and exclusionary and brutal practices toward others. (2001, 4)

Adrian Hastings presents the non-fictional views of British Victorian missionaries in *The Church in Africa 1450-1950*, on whom Nettie's missionary society is modeled: "[Africa] was, in common parlance, the 'Dark Continent.' It was 'dark' because Europeans, or indeed anyone, knew little about it as a whole. It was 'dark' because most of all it was 'heathen' and corrupted all sorts of terrible practices" (299). It is logical to discern how perceptions of Africa originate. The British missionaries are white; however, Black missionaries from America *did* travel to Africa, but in much smaller numbers. The stereotype 'dark' neatly suited the missionaries' characterizations for Satan, "bound up with the realm of the 'Prince of Darkness,' the devil. Finally, [the continent] was dark...because the inhabitants were 'dark.' Their colour mysteriously symbolized all other meanings" (Hastings 299). Even Nettie uses the description in a letter to her sister: "Merry Christmas to you and yours, dear Celie. We celebrate it here on the 'dark' continent with prayer and song and a large picnic complete with watermelon, fresh fruit punch and barbecue!" (Walker 1982, 167). Morrison explains Africa's significance in literature, framed again through the use of the word 'dark': "It could contort itself into frightening, malignant shapes upon which Westerners could contemplate evil," or "imaginary Africa was a cornucopia of imponderables that, like the monstrous Grendel in Beowulf, resisted explanation" (104). Mbembe's interpretation of Africa as the unknown is a convenient location for literary settings, movies, and plays, cast in its only role as antagonist.

Another stereotype in *The Color Purple* is the persistent image of Africa as uncivilized. However, urban areas are centers of commerce, where individuals live in modern cities, adhere to time, and wear regional clothing. When Nettie initially arrives in Africa, she says, “The capital of Senegal is Dakar and the people speak their own language. But I did not like the Senegalese I met in the market. They were only concerned with their sale of produce” (Walker 2001, 141). Nettie is surprised to find a busy metropolitan area after hearing that only “natives” and “savages” live in Africa. But she unconsciously objectifies them with language: “They are the blackest people I have ever seen Celie. They are so black Celie; they shine” (141). Nettie is using Western values to classify individuals by skin color. As Nettie travels away from Dakar, she sees another type of landscape: “Nothing but cacao trees as far as the eye can see. We watched weary families, still carrying their cacao seed buckets in their hands (these double as lunch buckets), and sometimes, if they are women, their children are on their back” (Walker 1982, 142). This is reminiscent of African American slaves working on plantations; Nettie is unaware of the brutality of “King Leopold [of Belgium], who cut the hands off workers who, in the opinion of his big plantation overseers, did not fulfill their rubber quota” (Walker 1982, 237). In contrast to Walker’s fiction, Modupe Labode, in “A Native Knows a Native’: African American Missionaries’ Writings about Angola, 1919-1940,” contradicts Walker’s image. He writes about an actual member of the clergy, the Reverend Henry Curtis McDowell of Chattanooga, Tennessee, who gave this account of Africa:

We are accustomed to think of [it] Africa as the Sahara Desert and jungle of coconuts. I saw about a ½ doz. Coconut trees at the coast and not one since.

I haven't seen or heard of the African monkey yet...As to the natives they are like American Negroes in that they have shades of color. They only need a few more clothes to make them look the same. (4)

This follows that stereotypes contribute to much of Africa's identity. The question that needs to be asked is whether Walker proliferates these images. Since Europe creates the hierarchy with Africa, the stereotypes have inherent power linked to the dominant group. They then become part of the discourse, which evolves into an invented representation of a society's perception of Other.

Mbembe discusses the Western fabrication of Africa through the "African human experience [that] constantly appears in the discourse of our times as an experience that can only be understood through a *negative interpretation*" (1). In *The Oxford Handbook on Modern African History*, Congolese philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe is quoted: "the idea Africa was invented by non-Africans, [and is] serving as a prism through which Europeans refracted images of exotic others and themselves" (Parker and Reid 4-5). The trajectory for African otherness had its birth at least six hundred years ago through the initial violence of the Atlantic slave trade. Mbembe argues that "speaking rationally about Africa has never come naturally," [and is] never seen as possessing things and attributes properly part of 'human nature'" (2001, 1). British missionaries, and at times Nettie, consider the Olinka atavistic. Yet England exoticizes the Olinka by stealing their artifacts, which now reside in British museums. While in missionary training, Nettie notices indigenous art: "From Africa they have *thousands* of vases, jars, masks, bowls, baskets, statues-and they are all so beautiful it hard to imagine that the people who made they don't still exist. And yet the English assure us they do not" (Walker 1982, 139).

Soon the Olinka will no longer create artisanal crafts such as quilts and rugs, because after colonization, the only option available to the Olinka is the sale of their labor. Ania Loomba discusses this premise in "Situating Colonial and Postcolonial Studies":

"Modern colonialism did more than extract tribute, goods, and wealth from the countries that it conquered—it restructured the economics of the latter, drawing them into a complex relationship with their own, so that there was a flow of human and natural resources between colonised and colonial countries" (1101). By politicizing violence through forced Olinka labor, British imperialists have a consistent movement of bodies that are no longer autonomous; Olinka bodies are forced to work, yet remain in a colonial stasis-- the only progress made is for the British. While the West advances because it has sovereignty, Africa is motionless as other; the power to move forward no longer exists. Mbembe explains: "it is in relation to Africa that the notion of 'absolute otherness' has been taken farthest" (Mbembe 2001, 2). With the three elements of time, power, and movement as background for Olinka otherness, it is conclusive they would struggle with a postcolonial identity. Mbembe goes so far as to compare Africa to a "receptacle, or a wastebasket, a garbage can of the 'West's obsession with, and circular discourse about the facts of 'absence,' 'lack, and 'non-being,' of identity and difference of negativeness--in short, nothingness" (2001, 4). The privilege of Eurocentrism has limited vision, but copious power; therefore, the West can define Africa arbitrarily, and this is "in contrast to reason in the West, myth and fable are seen as what, in such societies, denote order and time" (Mbembe 2001, 4).

The Olinka, as a metaphor for Africa, are gradually decentered as the missionaries impose more Western culture on them. Nettie confirms the former

wholeness of Olinka identity: “I think Africans are very much like people back home, in that they think they are the center of the universe...” (Walker 2001, 168). The center Nettie describes is a complete identity prior to colonization. She eventually becomes more aware of European power: “‘Hard times’ is a phrase the English love to use, when speaking of Africa. And it is easy to forget that Africa’s ‘hard times’ were made harder by them. Millions and millions of Africans were sold into slavery—me and you, Celie!” Nettie discovers a schema for British proselytizing: eventual access to African resources. She realizes the interlocking consequences of the past and the present in America and now the Olinka will experience this. Nettie is aware that she is a remnant of ancestral history and thinks about the brutality of their suffering: “Millions and millions of Africans were sold into slavery—me and you, Celie!” (Walker, 2001, 165). However, she says “no one in the village wants to hear about slavery, however. They acknowledge no responsibility, whatsoever. This is one thing about them I don’t like” (Walker 1982, 165). Nettie is complicit in Olinka cultural loss through the reinforcement of its difference compared to the West. Albert Memmi, in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, echoes a similar thought:

“Far from wanting to understand him [the colonized] as he really is, the colonizer is preoccupied with making him undergo this change. The mechanism of the remolding of the colonized is revealing in itself. It consists, in the first place, of a series of negations. The colonized is Not this, is not that. He is never considered in a positive light...” (83)

Nettie remembers Miss Beasley’s lessons on Africa, internalizes the images and then is motivated to *uplift* the Olinka, another Western idea (Walker 1982, 137). Nettie does not

see the binary she creates for the Olinka, as teacher/student. The hierarchy in education causes Nettie to believe her teacher's comments. Through an unconscious mimicking, she reinforces stereotypes she was taught, and unintentionally becomes Miss Beasley, teaching the Olinka about Western culture. When in England, Nettie visits a missionary's home and is so impressed with their hospitality that she forgets what Europe has done to her ancestors: "The churches in England were very eager to help us and some white men and women, who looked just like the ones at home, invited us to their gatherings, and into their homes for tea, and to talk about our work. 'Tea' to the English is really a picnic indoors. We all used the same cups and plates" (Walker 1982, 138). Nettie feels accepted by the missionaries, but this is an artifice to placate her within the Society. This is why the stereotypes in *The Color Purple* are so believable at times—those who have heard these generalizations in school or at home internalize them, and then the text confirms their beliefs.

Because Western standards of education were thought to be universal truths, naturally the missionaries consider Christianity to be the universal religion. Nettie, too, colonizes the Olinka with religion and Western culture. Although the Olinka still self-govern, there is the quiet implication, through example, that Western ideals are superior; polytheism and polygamy are uncivilized. Nettie writes to Celie: "Because women share a husband, but the husband does not share their friendships, it makes Samuel uneasy. It is confusing I suppose. And it is Samuel's duty as Christian minister to preach the bible's directive of one husband and one wife" (Walker 1982, 166). Nettie does not understand that the Christian principles are European-based, so the ban against polygamy is rooted in a Western tradition, more so than a religious tenet. Nettie inadvertently creates the same

experience for the Olinka as her ancestors: the reconfiguration of identity which happened in America to African captives forced to be slaves. Olinka paganism offends the missionaries, who insist on directing the Olinka to monotheism. Nettie says, “They believe in the devil and worship the dead” (Walker, 2001, 139). Mbembe also discusses this as a stereotype of Africa: “these societies are seen as living under the burden of charms, spells, and prodigies, and resistant to change” (Walker, 2001, 4). To further demonstrate Nettie’s power through the Western value of education, she promotes inclusion for young Olinka girls, which upsets many of their fathers. One tells Nettie: “Furthermore, said Tashi’s father, we are not simpletons. We understand there are places in the world where women live differently from the way our women do, but we do not approve of this different way for our children” (Walker 1982, 161). He is disillusioned, yet realistic about the missionaries’ goals: “You Christians come here, try hard to change us, get sick and go back to England, or wherever you came from. Only the trader and the coast remains, and even he is not the same white man, year in and year out” (Walker 1982, 161). The Olinka are accustomed to the missionaries, who have a history of disappointing them; and they are intent on preserving their identities while still possible. Nettie writes to Celie to about her home in the village, and subconsciously discovers her stolen African heritage: “I wish you could see my hut Celie. I love it. Over the mud walls I have hung Olinka platters and mats of pieces of tribal cloth. The Olinka are known for their beautiful cotton fabric which they hand weave and dye with berries, clay, indigo, and bark” (Walker, 2001, 158). Mbembe’s discourse on multiplicities and simultaneities are demonstrated here: The Olinka are becoming more Western, and “Western Nettie” is becoming more African, both caught in an interstitial space between the two continents.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha discusses this phenomenon as merging time passed with present time: “The contingent and the liminal become the times and spaces for the historical representation of the subjects of cultural difference in a postcolonial criticism” (256).

And like the Olinka, Nettie is also a victim of postcolonialism through her stepfather’s theft of the family home. She is unaware of this for years; however, a unifying parallel exists with the Olinka, in that their family homes are appropriated by the British. This creates a rupture in identity and time for both Nettie and the Olinka. When colonialism disrupts this imaginary center, Africa become a traumatized space. Mbembe discusses the importance of stability in Africa in “Pan-African Legacies, Afropolitan Futures”: “Africa has to become its own center. It has to become its own force. Not as a way of separating itself from the rest of the world, but as a precondition for it to exercise its weight among other forces of the world” (Mbembe and Balakrishnan 2016, 31).

Mbembe has created many neologisms in his writings, including the term “Afropolitanism,” which refers to a way—the many ways—in which Africans or people of African origin understand themselves as being part of the world rather than being apart. There is no world without Africa and there is no African that is not part of it” (Mbembe and Balakrishnan 2016, 29). This is the successor to Pan-Africanism, in which the word “black” again is politicized:

[Pan-Africanism is] more of a racial ideology, that Afropolitanism is not, insofar as it takes into account the fact that to say ‘Africa’ does not necessarily mean to say ‘black.’ There are Africans who are not black. And not all blacks are African. So Afropolitanism emerges out of that recognition of the multiple

origins of those who designate themselves as ‘African’ or ‘African descent.’

(Mbembe and Balakrishan 2016, 21)

Therefore, Afropolitanism is a more inclusionary term that is sensitive to diverse global identities. Instead of decentering Africa, it allows for identity with stability.

In 1984, Trudier Harris, an African American professor of English, wrote an essay about stereotypes in *The Color Purple*. She was concerned that certain types of readers only read the novel because of the publicity it generated. Harris uses the term “spectator readers,” to describe individuals 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...” (155). However, does Harris think it is reasonable to include all readers considered “spectator readers” as failing to be sensitive to the narrative’s events? This seems difficult to determine, although she gauges interpretation based on race: “After all, a large number of readers, usually vocal and white, have decided that *The Color Purple* is the quintessential statement on Afro-American woman and a certain kind of lifestyle” (155). Thus, Harris concludes that “spectator readers show what damage the novel can have; for them the book reinforces the racial stereotypes they may have been heir to and others of which they may have dreamed” (155). In characterizing Walker’s images as stereotypes, would readers remember that *The Color Purple* is fictional or believe that it represents an accurate portrayal of Africa?

Harris is especially curious to know what black women thought about the African subplot, but discovers that many were reluctant to criticize the text for two reasons: they perceived it as a betrayal to black women writers; and they were afraid to criticize

Walker when the novel had been praised and loved by so many (155-156). She asked them: “Do [the sections on Africa] work for you? Do you see how they’re integrated into the rest of the novel? Does the voice of Nettie ring authentic and true to you?” (156). Harris found that the “women agreed that it was less engaging than other parts of the novel” (157). Harris thought that the letters from Africa “were extraneous to the central concerns of the novel” (157), and she quoted Mel Watkins, who wrote a *New York Times Book Review* and singled out this section as the weakest part of the novel as “mere monologues on African history” (157). However, what Harris and Watkins could not have known at the time was Walker’s intent to create a trilogy. *The Color Purple* was published as the first part, and it focuses on a plotline in America and Africa. Walker wrote *My Temple of the Familiar* next, and then *The Secret to Possessing Joy*. Therefore, it would appear that Walker did reinforce familiar stereotypes, perhaps not with intent, but for audiences who may recall other representations particular to the audiences’ histories. The trilogy also provides Walker with a social justice platform and her efforts to ban African nations from performing female genital mutilation (FGM) on young women. She discusses her activism as “cultural, political, spiritual-[and] rooted in my love of nature and my delight in human beings. I have been an activist all my adult life” (Walker 1997, xxii). However, several scholars have questioned Walker’s interference in African cultural practices, and wonder if Walker is imposing her Western views without authority. Is she repeating Nettie’s actions? Walker sees it as a mission (like the missionaries), and discusses her participation at a “human-rights-awareness workshop in Boltangana, Northern Ghana, of African men and women who are dedicated to the abolition of female genital mutilation” (Walker 1997, 32). Similarly, the two novels

written after *The Color Purple* follow the storyline of FGM. Walker's biographer, Evelyn C. White, in *Alice Walker, A Life*, discusses a 1993 documentary film Walker made on FGM, and the way Walker is excoriated by "a cadre of activists who branded Alice 'a cultural imperialist' for bringing attention to a practice they asserted was a 'private affair' best left to Africans" (459). Yet some women applauded Walker's efforts and in July 2001, a "United Nations resolution signed by 200 countries pledged to allow women to control their own sexuality and reject harmful practice of female genital mutilation" (460). However, the practice still exists in many African nations. In a 2013 report from a joint commission of UNICEF and UNCPA, statistics show that "more than 125 million girls and women alive today worldwide have undergone some form of FGM/C... and as many as 30 million girls are at risk of being cut over the next decade (based on current trends). To date, the practice of FGM/C is concentrated in 29 countries in Africa and the Middle East" (Cody et al.,1).

The idea of African American missionaries in Africa had its roots in the Pan-African movement, as written by David Killingray in "The Black Atlantic Missionary Movement and Africa 1780-1920s." He shows that "interest in African missionary work [among African Americans] needs to be seen against the back-cloth of the persistent idea of 'back to Africa,' that sense among African Americans, especially those in the United States, of a close identity with African that dates back to the late eighteenth century" (6). In history, as well as in the novel, the black missionaries arrive in Africa prior to British colonization: "African American missionaries were convinced that they had a deep, abiding connection with Ovimbundu [an indigenous group] among whom they worked" (Labode 6). Nettie has the same optimism with the Olinka, and writes to Celie: "Did I

mention my first sight of the African coast? Something struck in my soul, like a large bell, and I just vibrated. Corrine and Samuel felt the same. And we kneeled right down on deck and gave thanks to God for letting us see the land for which our mothers and fathers cried—lived and died—to see again” (Walker 1982, 143). Nettie feels confident about missionary work in Africa because of spiritual bond she hopes to share with the Olinka: “We are not white. We are not Europeans. We are black like Africans themselves. And that we and the Africans will be working for a common goal: the uplift of black people everywhere” (Walker 1982, 137).

However, their hopes for a transnational relationship with the Olinka are never realized. Bhabha discusses his theory of unhomeliness, which is what Samuel and Nettie experience when leaving Africa. They both feel a profound disappointment after their failure to unite with the Olinka as brothers and sisters, and Samuel expresses his sadness to Nettie. She tells him, “The Africans never asked us to come, you know. There’s no use blaming them if we feel unwelcome” (Walker 1982, 237). Samuel answers Nettie, “It’s worse than unwelcome. The Africans don’t even see us. They don’t even recognize us as the brothers and sisters they sold” (Walker 1982, 237). Samuel then becomes aware of Olinka indifference: “That’s the heart of it Nettie, don’t you see. We love them. We try every way we can to show that love. But they reject us. They never even listen to how we’ve suffered” (Walker 1982, 237). Bhabha writes about the detachment Samuel and Nettie feel: “The negating activity, is indeed, the intervention of the ‘beyond’ that establishes a boundary: a bridge, where ‘presencing’ begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world—the unhomeliness—that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations”

(13). Labode, too, elaborates on the dissonance between the indigenous group and African American missionaries: “Because of their difference in culture, the Ovimbundu, in their own terms, did not necessarily see the missionaries as members of their own family. The use of the family metaphor, then, was not fully reciprocated” (7). Although Nettie’s goals for the Olinka are pure, the imposition of Western culture on the Olinka replicates Southern slave owners’ culture on African American slaves. One difference exists in that the Olinka are not forced, but there is still a strong inference that African culture is inferior. The Olinka are given Christian names, educated using Christian principles, taught to model Christian morals, and most ironically, to worship a white god. The female missionaries encourage the Olinka women to wear Western-style dresses because as Nettie says, “They used to wear very little, but the Ladies of England introduced the Mother Hubbard, a long, cumbersome, ill-fitting dress, completely shapeless, that inevitable gets dragged in the fire, causing burns aplenty” (Walker 1982, 190). The patriarchy of the Church has always sought to control female sexuality, and this type of outfit fully desexualizes Olinka women.

Nettie’s experiences do parallel those of actual black missionaries of the time; white missionary organizations commodified and deceived African American missionaries to serve (Killingray 9). He explains how undervalued they were: “Native agents [black missionaries] offered obvious economies. Europeans were expensive as missionaries in terms of training, conditions of service and life expectancy; African Americans cost considerably less, while Africans came at knock-down prices” (Killingray 9). Nettie and Samuel have a similar experience. When they travel back to England, they fail to convince the London missionary society to defend the Olinka

against the onset of British manufacturing. Instead of being concerned about Olinka displacement, the bishop is only afraid of ‘what the natives must think,’ as Nettie and Samuel travel together as an unmarried couple (Walker 1982, 232). The bishop focuses more on ‘appearances’ than the Olinka plight (Walker, 1982, 232). Religion again interferes with female sexuality and the religious patriarchy ignores Samuel’s pleas. The duplicitous nature of the Society is seen in its members’ quest for service medals, as well as commodification: one female British missionary bought an entire indigenous village (Walker 1982, 231). These racial disparities show the lack of power that even Samuel and Nettie have, compared to white missionaries who are able to access to more goods and services than them. By monetizing the value of a black missionary, hints of imperialism surface and the Olinka will soon be indebted to the British owners of rubber plantations. The Olinka will now be valued on their ability to work. European supremacy seizes their religion, their land, and their culture, as all authority, even God, is now white. Walker relates to this: “In the black church we have loved and leaned on Moses, because he brought the enslaved Israelites out of Egypt. As enslaved and oppressed people, we have identified with him so completely that we have adopted his God” (Walker 1997, 21). Walker’s mother also worshipped a white god: “[she] turned toward a frightful, jealous, cruel, murderous ‘God’ of another race and tribe of people...But such is the power of centuries-old indoctrination” (Walker 1982, 20). Therefore, Nettie has adopted the universal standard of Eurocentrism, and in bringing these beliefs to the Olinka, she is spreading a message that their culture is seen as ‘other.’

Walker’s relationship with Africa is seen intimately through the novel, as well as the exploration and identification with a continent that is a part of her identity. “The

Changing Same,' written by critic Deborah McDowell, discusses how Walker, as an author, evolves during the story: "But the Nettie letters have perhaps the most striking and intriguing implications for Walker as a writer, for her discovery of her own voice. For Walker, as for so many women writers, the process of that discovery begins with thinking back and reclaiming her female ancestors" (104). Walker also remembers church leaders' repetitive message: "It is painful to realize that they were forever trying to correct a flaw—that of being black, female, human—that did not exist, except as 'men of God,' but really men of greed, misogyny, and violence, defined it" (Walker 1997, 4). Nettie experiences this when she visits the American headquarters for training: "We were examined by a doctor (colored) and given medical supplies for ourselves and for our host village by the Missionary Society of New York. It is run by white people and they didn't say anything about caring for Africa, but only duty" (Walker 1982, 136). It is only a duty because of the imperative to spread Christianity and gain the trust of the Olinka to then colonize. While Nettie sees it as a commitment to her faith, and as an act of love for Africa, the male leaders trouble her: "The man at the Society says [a particular female missionary] is successful because she doesn't 'coddle' her charges. She also speaks their language. He is a white man who looks as if we cannot possibly be as good with the Africans as this woman is" (Walker 1982, 136-137). Historical accounts partially contradict this; the societies welcomed black missionaries, not to work side by side, but to have a certain effect on Africans. Killingray explains their purpose: "The idea that African Americans could serve as civilising agents in Africa greatly appealed to many whites, especially to white missionaries" (8). At this time in history, some African American leaders wanted to reclaim Africa and this also applies to religion. One leader,

Alexander Crumwell, “argued that ‘The hand of God is on the black man, in all, the land of his distant sojourn, for the good of Africa. This continent is to be reclaimed for Christ’” (Killingray 13). It appears that Europe, American missionaries, and the Pan-African movement all insisted on asserting an ownership of Africa, a consistent legacy in its history.

Mbebme struggles with the concept of a monotheistic god, like the one Nettie introduces to the Olinka. He discusses a concept of uniformity with the group: “The first case is that of the *fantasm of the One*, the fantasm in which a jealous god takes possession, not of a particular individual, but of a collective subject, such that the power infused by the god henceforth circumscribes this collective subject’s connections with itself and with the world. The metaphor best suited to express this will to possession is *monotheism*” (Mbembe 2001, 213). Converting the Olinka links them to education, where the children learn Christian principles. To Nettie, the Olinka desperately need the missionaries’ help: “Today the people of Africa—having murdered or sold into slavery their strongest folks—are riddled by disease and sunk in spiritual and physical confusion” (Walker 1982, 139). Nettie’s judgment of the Olinka is consistent by Western standards, forgetting what she had once so proudly said: “Although once Africans had a better civilization than the Europeans (though of course the English do not say this: I get this from a man named J.A. Rogers) for several centuries they have fallen on hard times” (Walker 1982, 139). Coates also read J.A. Rogers to discover the authentic history of Africa; Nettie succumbs to Western narratives and perceives England positively: “I studied England on a map, so neat and serene, and I became hopeful in spite of myself that much good for Africa is possible, given hard work and the right frame of mind”

(Walker 1982, 140). Nettie does not maliciously colonize the Olinka, but lacks the awareness to know she judges their pagan religion against Eurocentrism.

As I have tried to show, it is important to offer Mbembe's vision of Africa approximately twenty years after *On the Postcolony* was published, and how his prognosis for Africa has changed. In *Critique of Black Reason*, he has more optimism for Africa's future, as "the symbol of a conscious desire for life, a force springing forth, buoyant and plastic, fully engaged in the act of creation and capable of living in the midst of several times and several histories at once" (Mbembe 2017, 6-7). This is possible, he believes, because "a representation of the Black Man, despised and profoundly dishonored, [who] is the only human in the modern order whose skin has been transformed into the form and spirit of merchandise—the living crypt of capital," [and has the resiliency] "to find its new face, voice and movement" (Mbembe 2017, 6-7). Mbembe links colonialism with capitalism here, but warns us not to "reduce the meaning of colonial violence to economics" (Mbembe 2001, 113). Although Walker wrote this from a position of female solidarity, the germane story situated in the middle of *The Color Purple* discovers the long-term, internalized effects of oppression on individuals. In a 2015 interview, thirty years after the novel's publication, Walker discusses the word 'Womanist,' which she coined to reflect "African-American culture, [and the way] women are committed to our collective survival" (K. Williams, 158). The underlying truth of this statement also identifies with postcolonialism, in that colonized groups are also trying to survive in a collective environment. She is concerned that an inveterate situation exists in America: "It's possible America has no heart to change and equates slavery to capitalism" (K. Williams, 159). This is similar to the fate of the Olinka, whose heritage is

decimated when the British acquire their land to build a rubber plantation. Globalization now creates neoliberalism, which overtly sacrifices human life for profits. Those working in this type of economy are usually female, marginalized, of color, powerless, and expendable, like those colonized. Mbembe says, “In the era of neoliberalism, time passes quickly and is converted into the production of the money form” (2017, 3). He connects this to racial limitations imposed by Europe: “as the direct consequence of the logic of self-fictionalization and self-contemplation, indeed of closure, Blackness and race have played multiple roles in the imaginaries of European societies” (Mbembe 2017, 1). We have seen the roles black subjects have been forced to maintain by living in a secondary space within racial borders. Mbembe sees Europe’s power fading, but wonders if it is possible for them to “craft a relationship with a Black man that is something other than that between a master and his valet?” (2017, 7). Africa’s identity, though still decentered due to arbitrary governments and unstable leaders, is nebulous. Mbembe says that “Europe considers itself the center of the earth and birthplace of reason, universal life, and the truth of humanity” (2017, 11). Other writers like Toni Morrison and Ta-Nehisi Coates have created a dialectic to repudiate Western cultural hegemony. However, endemic stereotypes, such as the ones in Walker’s novel, continue to disenfranchise individuals through portrayals etched in Western thought. *The Color Purple* depicts the conventional images, language, and situations which remain fixed in history, social structures, and the media. Mbembe searches for an authentic definition of Africa, but this will only occur when stereotypes, and not identities, are decentered so that they become permanently unstable and meaningless.

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