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Minding the Store in Eden: Gardens and Houses in *The Color Purple*

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When Alice Walker writes about a garden in the title essay of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, it is earth as well as metaphor. Her mother's garden is a space that her mother conceives and digs into existence; it is not simply a psychic refuge. Furthermore, it is the source of two political voices: Walker's mother defies the society that denies her right or capacity to create; thus she presents her daughter with a legacy that she is free to decode into a written language. Walker's mother and others like her "handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see."¹

In *The Color Purple* the garden (and its house) assumes more complex dimensions. This fictitious space, at once an Eden, a political platform, and the setting for narrative closure, contributes far more to the text than Walker's mother's garden, which is finally no more than a symbol for creativity and spiritual courage.

The Color Purple is an epistolary novel, a series of letters that the unloved and unlovely Celie writes to God and later to her sister Nettie. When Nettie goes to Africa as a missionary, she writes to Celie, who finds these letters after her husband, Mr. —, has been intercepting and hiding them for years. Celie leaves a family bedeviled by incest to marry a man who brutalizes her. She is freed by Shug, a singer and her husband's lover. With each new start, Celie moves to a new house; and as she gains enough self-awareness to risk imagining and even planning a future, she encounters

dwelling that seem as unlikely as her dreams. Eventually, her world is righted and she triumphs in a seemingly miraculous reconstitution of family, fortune, and self. Deliberately forgotten shacks that harbored incest and abuse, real and imagined houses in Memphis, and an Edenic homestead are the indicators of her progress.

Gardens and houses are linked here to make mythic and architectural entities. They appear only five times, always briefly, and twice, seemingly, as fantasies. No building or garden is presented with many details of its design. How are these places more than descriptive punctuation in the text? What is their structural importance? They provide an interpretation of events; the story that these places tell constitutes a subtext that grounds the fabulous events of the novel in human experience.

What at first seems fantastic—beyond Celie's hopes and dreams—turns out to be the other side of the loss and ignorance that she has always known. Walker tells how oppression can be subverted: fantasies of freedom and power prove to be real, and crushing realities have in fact been faked. At significant moments during these reversals, people enter into possession of gardens and their houses. This possession is an apprehension of space in varying forms and contexts: the outsider's wishful observation, a first attempt at dreaming; a determined occupancy that celebrates self and place as the recovered parts of a whole. The garden and its house are a

historical and a feminist place, a dreamed-of space and a real one. The development of this domestic space—house and garden—in the novel appears at first to be uneven, even incidental; but in fact it accompanies Celie's growing consciousness of her false, lost, and real selves.

House and garden (not to mention field, pasture, piney woods) are at first notable for their absence from Walker's descriptions. This is startling in a novel about the black, rural poor, isolated among nothing else. But when Walker finally uncovers Celie's real family—not constituted at all as the reader or Celie had thought—a homestead is its setting, source, and future.

Celie's articulation of her condition can be schematized as an answering pair of correspondences: absences beget a sort of exile; and, later, with a sense of plenitude comes a reentry, and a possession of place. Celie seems to have been born in exile; her past is a series of deaths, abuses, and sordid shelters that she barely acknowledges. She seems singularly lost, with no childhood idyll to regain, or adult paradise to which she could reasonably aspire. In fact, a real Eden—horticultural as well as spiritual—is at the center of her experience of place and of her self, and when she reaches it, an exile reversed, she learns that it has always been there.

The first mention of place is the shack belonging to Celie's stepson Harpo and his bride Sofia. Theirs is a marriage for love, the first happy union of the novel. Out of context,

Celie's description of the shack seems peremptory: "Mr. ——— daddy used it for a shed. But it sound. Got windows now, a porch, back door. Plus it cool and green down by the creek."² This small observation is significant because of its abstraction. The absent and abstract topography is affected by Celie's life, its horrors so repressed that the physical world itself is edited away. Celie believes that her mother's legacy, her own incestuous children, her sister Nettie, and any chance for love are all lost to her. Harpo's and Sofia's violent but passionate marriage, their tiny shaded house, constitute a space filled with life in a world defined largely by absences. Celie's family is truncated, perverted, and dispersed. Celie herself is abstracted: She will not look at men, including her husband, whom she names only Mr. ———; she can only dream of Shug, whom she never expects to see. Indeed, we discover that until she has met, nursed, and loved Shug, and found herself amazingly united with her and Mr. ——— against a surly brother-in-law, she has refused any sense of place for herself:

First time I think about the world.
 What the world got to do with anything, I think. Then I see myself sitting there quilting tween Shug Avery and Mr. ———. We three set together against Tobias and his fly speck box of chocolate. For the first time in my life, I feel just right. (p. 61)

Until now, Celie's world has not borne thinking about; now she learns, bit by bit, that the absences,

losses, and deformations of her life are all false. Shug recovers Nettie's African letters from Mr. ———, and Celie learns that her "father," who raped her, is only a stepfather, and that her redeemed children are not lost but with Nettie in Africa. All the family she *thought* she had is undone:

My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa. (p. 163)

They are replaced for now by her life with Shug and her hopes of reunion with Nettie and the children.

Now that Celie knows what *is not*, she wants to see what *is*; she begins by visiting her stepfather, with Shug. It is a new start, Celie's third deliberate act for herself, after loving Shug and designing the pants that allow her to work and move more freely. This Easter visit to her childhood home is a pivotal moment in the novel, a fantastic interlude when mythic and quotidian visions bloom together. Celie and Shug are as unprepared as the reader for what they find:

The first thing us notice soon as we turn into the lane is how green everything is, like even though the ground everywhere else not warmed up good, Pa's land is warm and ready to go. Then all along the road there's Easter lilies and jonquils and daffodils and all kinds of little early wildflowers. Then us notice all the birds singing they little cans off, all up and down the

hedge, that itself is putting out little yellow flowers smell like Virginia creeper. It all so different from the rest of the country us drive through, it make us real quiet. I know this sound funny, Nettie, but even the sun seemed to stand a little longer over our heads. (pp. 164–165)

Celie remembers none of this from her childhood, only that at Easter everything flooded, everyone was sick, and that the house "ain't so hot." But it, too, is altogether other than she knew it to be, on a hill she cannot remember, "a big yellow two story house with green shutters and a steep green shingle roof," like "some white person's house" (p. 165). It is surrounded by flowering fruit trees, lilies, jonquils, covered with roses, plunged into birdsong. This is no black man's prison, but a white man's kingdom—that is, with no inherent humility or humiliation—on a hill, with lordly and flood-free perspectives. And it is an Eden, apart from the rest of the land topographically and meteorologically, blooming and singing while all the land around it has only begun to emerge from winter.

Here is the Eden myth inverted: Celie, the chosen one, long abandoned in an outer world where her family, home, and even her mate are abstracted or nameless, chooses to come to the garden. From the outside, not after leaving but before entering, she recognizes it as other, as Eden. It is new, for she has no memory of it, and yet it is the place of her wretched childhood.

It is important to remember that Nettie's letters have redefined Celie's childhood, dismantling its remembered horrors, if not its real brutality. So, in a sense, her family—like the house and garden—is new, other than she has always known it to be, and yet it has always been hers. Is the reconstitution of Celie's and others' selves immanent in this fantastic place, at once Eden and a black laborer's homestead? All that precedes Celie's and Shug's first visit to the childhood home can be perceived as pre-light, pre-self, pre-place. Although Celie cannot imagine her past amid this bloom and beauty, she has at last dared to try to place herself in a context. And, indeed, other contexts that seem more likely and appropriate present themselves after she and Shug leave. Celie describes her visit in a letter addressed for the first time not to God—whom she has imagined old, towering, and white—but to Nettie, who she now knows is alive. She leaves Mr. — and moves to Memphis to live with Shug; she has thus freed herself to love and to act in the world. She recognizes context—environment and circumstances that affect her and that she, in turn, influences—by *choosing* a place, a job, a lover, rather than simply enduring them. This is a new engagement between character and place within the text. Celie the writer (rather than Walker the writer) begins to perceive that her interactions with places are one of the ways she is telling her own story as it unfolds to her.

Celie's life takes on new form and weight. She can love: she has Shug. And she can do: her pants become

a thriving business. Celie describes Shug's house for us: barn-like, pink, dotted inside and outside with statues of people, elephants, and turtles. She no longer denies her place in the world by refusing to name it, as she did for her childhood and her married homes. This matter-of-fact description is not like the wondering, outsider's appraisal that she gave of her stepfather's house and garden. To describe is to claim a distance; Celie shows a new emotional independence here. Indeed, she is firmly enough planted in her life in Memphis to elaborate on Shug's own plans for her dream house.

This architectural fantasy is a feminist archetype, politically and aesthetically charged. Two women, lovers, partners, and friends, conceive it together; it is an exercise in the accord of vision and needs. What emerges is at once lurid and affecting. The building will be of mud or concrete, "a big round pink house, look sort of like some kind of fruit" (p. 188), a womb, belly, or breast. When Celie balks, Shug asserts that link between her place and her body: "I just feel funny living in a square. If I was square, then I could take it better" (p. 189). It is Celie who provides a context, extends the house/body into the world:

I sit down on the bed and start to draw a kind of wood skirt around her concrete house. You can sit on this, I say, when you get tired of being in the house. (p. 189)

Together, they add signs of their particular presences: flowers, Shug's signature elephants and turtles.

Shug wonders where Celie is in all of this, and Celie at last produces a sign of herself, even though it is a whimsical response to Shug's own animals:

And how us know you live here too? she ast. *Ducks!* I say. (p. 189)

The house is not an escapist fantasy, but a place where act and pleasure are synonymous: "Us talk about houses a lot . . . Talk about how to make the outside around your house something you can use" (p. 189). The space they have shaped and filled is animate, empowered to transcend its quotidian functions: "By the time us finish our house look like it can swim or fly" (p. 189). It is the first epiphany for Celie, the manifestation of her new, joyful initiative as a woman and a worker.

For all their appeal, neither Shug's house nor their shared dream house is Celie's home; she must find and restore that particular place around her newly found self. The space that is finally hers—her stepfather's property—seems at first the least probable of the possible homes. Why not the houses of her childhood and marriage, or Celie's Memphis house, or even the fantasy house that they could surely afford to build? The Edenic place actually holds the formative and lasting elements of all of those relinquished homes. Her stepfather dies, and Celie—not his young wife—inherits his house on the hill. This is the last of the seemingly miraculous revelations that restore Celie: she finds her family reconstituted through Nettie's letters; and she discovers her sexuality in her love

for Shug. Finally, it seems that a homestead is bestowed upon her almost as gratuitously as if the fantasy round house had sprung from its piece of paper.

Over and over in this novel, particulars are left unnamed and unaccounted for. This abstraction is appropriate to Celie's separation from the world and from a sense of self, and it sets a mythic tone: monstrous men are unnamed, monstrous children disappear, squalid homes and labors are implicit but never detailed. The two places that Celie describes with engagement—the dream house and the stepfather's farm—are both, in her mind, fantasies. The house on the hill marks the ultimate mythification of the particular; it is an inverted Eden where recognition welcomes rather than banishes. Here, too, is Walker's final demythification. The property is an organic part of Celie's life: just as she has always had a family and the capacity to love, it has always been hers and Nettie's through their mother's will. Their stepfather had torn down the original shack, rebuilt on the hill, and appropriated the new house, with its land and small store, until his death.

Although there are now simple explanations for a feminine dynasty and the lordly homestead that Celie could not connect to her remembered childhood, the tone of the novel is nonetheless mythic. It ends in a cluster of feminist and mythic images. The last scene of discovery and reunion plays itself out in a circular pattern that extends from Celie at its center, outward to Shug,

children, and Nettie, and at last to the men at the periphery, redeemed by their learning to love on Celie's terms. All are in turn embraced by the house at the center of its remarkable garden and orchards, on a hill that dominates and centers the surrounding countryside.

Lest we float out of the book with this beatific and static vision, I wish to remark that there is a dynamo that powers the fairy-tale ending: this Eden is no downtrodden laborer's fantasy, but substantial, a white man's house, as Celie herself noticed at her first view of it. It comes to her with her dreams of family and love, and with its promise of a life completely other than what she has known, certainly; but, beyond the gardens and Edenic climate, she acquires worldly power: property that includes good farm land and a store where she can establish her business.

Celie is no longer an observer of Eden; she is at its center, affirming the power of continuity in family, place, and work. You *can* go home again, and it will not be as you thought it was or thought it had to be. It will be immanent, an extension of what you have become, a context for a new and recovered self. Celie's last letter begins in exaltation, an embrace of all the world:

Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God. (p. 251)

But we should notice that her very last words are wry, almost breezy, the sort of tiny, particular myth-making that is part of ordinary,

contented moments of a day: "Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt" (p. 251).

In this story hopes for love, unity, and power are not dreams, but the illuminated side of oppression, loss, and absence. The human harmonies at the end of the novel are accompanied by the architectural harmonies of the site on the hill, which had held and witnessed Celie's dreadful past, and seemingly vanished with it. Her new life is as much a result of changed perspectives as good fortune. The house on the hill has been rebuilt, this time to dominate its surroundings in form and perspective. The revelation of place accompanies the revealed and revised truth; Celie's original place, once hellish and now Edenic, precisely frames the fact and potential of her new life.

Notes

- 1 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p. 240. All further page references will be given in the text.
- 2 Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, Pocket Books, 1983), p. 40. All further page references will be given in the text.