

“Ancestors We Didn’t Even Know We Had”: Alice Walker, Asian Religion, and Ethnic Authenticity

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I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival *whole*, of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to explore the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women.

—Alice Walker, “Interview with John O’Brien from *Interviews with Black Writers* (1973)”

True self-realization comes with a realization of the connectedness to all, the inseparability of the self and the all. That leads one to understand oneself as an earthling, not an American, Canadian, African, or Indian. Beyond that I realize myself as the cosmos, the universe, the whole thing.

—Alice Walker, “A Conversation with David Swick from *Shambala Sun* (2006)”

How did one of America’s best-known writers go from being “preoccupied” with a specific identity—the African ancestry of “my people” and “black women”—to favoring a more cosmopolitan sense of being “an earthling” and even “the cosmos”? To answer this question, it is crucial to explore Alice Walker’s involvement with Asian religions, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism. Throughout her career, Walker develops a metaphor of spiritual descent that casts Hindus and Buddhists as African

Americans' ancestors. This metaphor finds particularly strong narrative expression in *The Color Purple* (1982) and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004). It allows Walker to balance the demands of ethnic authenticity—an often-critiqued but culturally influential concept—with the benefits of incorporating spiritual influences from other cultures. By recognizing Walker's evolving strategy of cross-cultural adaptation, we can see her as an important contributor to current debates about ethnic identity, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism.

Recent debates about the ethics of identity in a global age have dealt with how to prioritize conflicting local and global allegiances. In recognition of this difficulty, Kwame Anthony Appiah states, "cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge."¹ Responding to Appiah, Bruce Robbins suggests that the challenge of cosmopolitanism may be too great because "cosmopolitanism and patriotism might indeed find themselves in unavoidable conflict."² Guided by these concerns, critics have produced divergent assessments of Walker's work. Scholars such as Lauren Berlant and Lauren S. Cardon read Walker's fiction as mainly concerned with ancestral ethnic recovery, without reference to projects of planetary or universal scope.³ By contrast, Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan, and Maria Lauret characterize Alice Walker as a universalist who occasionally glosses over the specifics of the cultural groups about which she writes.⁴

Bridging the wide gap between these two understandings, I argue that Walker's fiction develops a distinctive view of how local cultures and global movements can fruitfully interact. Moreover, this vision depends on concepts from Asian religions. Although Walker's own speeches and essays richly chronicle her longstanding practice of Eastern meditations, critics have done little to analyze Asian religion's special significance in Walker's fiction. By examining how Walker creatively enfolds Asian religions into her sense of African American heritage, we can see Walker build a spiritual cosmopolitanism that relies on claims of ancestral affiliation even when these claims are not literal. I argue that this strategy is Walker's effort to create a new paradigm of cultural authenticity, one that allows individuals and groups to choose their ancestors. Walker's approach seeks to incorporate disparate global influences while still valorizing the figure of the ancestor.

Walker's project to reconcile cosmopolitanism with authenticity gives her a preeminent position among a growing number of artists and intellectuals who promote Asian religions—especially Buddhism—to African Americans.⁵ This phenomenon, which Linda Selzer calls "Black Dharma," has struggled to overcome African American skepticism toward Buddhism in the name of African American authenticity,⁶ a multifaceted and often-contested prerogative to remain loyal to one's ethnic roots.⁷ For white Americans, Asian religions' exoticism is a part of its appeal.⁸ But for many African Americans, Buddhism's and Hinduism's conspicuous foreignness make them suspect.⁹ In this context, Walker's work seeks to show how one can be both Buddhist and authentically black. Walker's corpus, I will show, suggests how certain prominent features of Asian religions have particular relevance for African

Americans. The Asian religions Walker pursues have distinctive doctrines of nonduality, the notion that all subject–object differences are illusory, and that ultimate reality is blissfully devoid of all limiting characteristics.¹⁰ These traditions also uniquely emphasize seated meditation, specific versions of which directly influence Walker’s writing.¹¹ Walker’s work seeks to show that, by transcending subject–object dualism, one undermines racism, and by meditating regularly, one gains the equanimity necessary to process centuries of racial trauma.

For Walker, Hinduism and Buddhism are part of an eclectic, transcultural spirituality that draws from African, Native American, and Asian traditions.¹² However, the question of ancestry reveals a key difference between Walker’s investment in Asian religions and African or Native American ones. Walker’s affinity with African and Native American religion stems largely from her own cultural heritage.¹³ No such connection exists between Walker and Asian faiths. Her interest in Hinduism and Buddhism developed not from a historical tie to Asian populations but from a found affinity with Asian religions. This fact arguably makes Walker’s spirituality not only multicultural but cosmopolitan, following Appiah’s contention that our attention should “stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind.”¹⁴ However, Walker’s writing consistently discusses Asian religions as though their traditional practitioners *are* blood relatives. Her metaphor of ancestry undermines the biological dimension of ethnic authenticity while still validating authenticity’s rhetorical investment in roots.

As her career progresses, Walker brings Eastern religion from the underground to the surface. Walker’s most famous text, *The Color Purple* (1982), imagines Hindu religious principles emerging from African sources, hiding the influence of Asian religions as such. Later, Walker develops a metaphor of spiritual ancestry that allows for a more explicit acknowledgment of Asia, as shown in selected essays and speeches from the late 1990s. This idea gains narrative shape in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004), which dramatizes how Walker’s idea of spiritual ancestry works in practice, as imagined in the spiritual search of Walker’s semiautobiographical protagonist. The novel explicitly involves Buddhism, but it focuses on a multiethnic spiritual seeker who surprisingly uses ancestral South American shamanism to make Asian religions speak to contemporary American minorities. Thus, while Walker grows increasingly open to stating her Asian influences, ancestry continues to be the touchstone through which she validates Asian religions’ relevance for multiethnic audiences.

Walker’s Eastern Alternative

For Alice Walker, political freedom and spiritual liberation are inseparable. Walker has always been, in her own words, “constantly involved, internally, with religious questions.”¹⁵ The “religious questions” of how to understand and connect to the sacred speak directly to Walker’s dedication to “the spiritual survival, the survival

whole, of my people” (40). As many critics have demonstrated, *The Color Purple* enacts Walker’s stated priorities by celebrating African religion.¹⁶

This picture becomes less straightforward, however, when one analyzes the book’s previously overlooked debts to Asian religion. At the time of its publication, no one, including Walker, discussed *The Color Purple*’s Asian influences. But in later years Walker has detailed how she learned Transcendental Meditation (TM), a contemplative practice derived from Hinduism, in the late 1970s and has maintained an active interest in Eastern spirituality ever since.¹⁷ TM’s founder, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, promoted the practice as nonreligious. It does not teach culturally specific Hindu deity worship but focuses on transcending thought and experiencing union with unconditioned consciousness.¹⁸ At first, Walker came to TM to help herself cope with the pain of her divorce in 1976, having heard of the technique from a personal friend.¹⁹ But this personal impetus quickly led to a wish for others to enjoy the same benefits she experienced with TM, a motivation that had a significant impact on Walker’s writing. In fact, Walker could hardly be more explicit about TM’s influence, stating in 2006 that “meditation . . . has helped me write my books. . . . *The Color Purple* owes much of its humor and playfulness to the equanimity of my mind as I committed myself to a routine, daily practice.”²⁰ Elsewhere, she remarks that *The Color Purple* “was actually my Buddha novel without Buddhism,” a comment that makes sense in light of the historical and philosophical continuities between Hinduism and Buddhism (99). Asian religions relate to concerns of ethnic reclamation in Walker’s novels. If we investigate *The Color Purple*, we can see a delicate negotiation taking shape.

In *The Color Purple*, sisters Celie and Nettie change their spiritual orientation from the patriarchal Christianity of their upbringing toward a noninstitutionalized spirituality that shares central features with classical Hindu metaphysics. Chief among these are the beliefs that all phenomena are manifestations of God and that God is impersonal, unconditioned Being-itself.²¹ However, the novel disguises India’s influence on its spiritual themes by implanting Eastern wisdom in characters with no knowledge of Hinduism. Both Celie and Nettie meet a wise person of African descent who helps them realize that the religion of their youth is oppressing them and that a more humane alternative is available.

For Celie, that mentor is Shug, a blues singer who brings an immense reservoir of spiritual resources to personal problems. When Celie is overcome with grief at her father’s death and anger at her husband hiding Nettie’s letter to her, she denounces God as “trifling, forgetful and lowdown.”²² Celie becomes so disillusioned with God’s apparent indifference that she begins to address her letters to Nettie instead of God (192). When Celie explains this choice to Shug, she responds to Celie that God is not the problem, but rather Celie’s idea of God as “big and tall and graybearded and white” (194). In an often-cited passage, Shug offers a more palatable definition of God:

God ain’t a he or a she, but a It.
But what do it look like? I ast.

Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from everything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It. (195)

According to Shug, God is not separate from the world, but “God is everything,” absolutely immanent. God is unconstrained by time, equally present as “everything that is or ever was or ever will be.” Furthermore, Shug believes that this ultimate reality is impersonal rather than personal, as indicated by her preference for the gender-neutral pronoun “It” with a capital “I” over the white male God of Christianity.

These tenets echo several key teachings of Hindu metaphysics as expressed in TM. In particular, Shug's concise catechism resonates with passages from Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's *Science of Being and Art of Living*, a seminal text of the TM movement that Walker likely read. Maharishi declares, “everything in creation is the manifestation of the unmanifested absolute impersonal Being, the omnipresent God.”²³ Not only do Shug and Maharishi agree that ultimate reality is impersonal, but Shug's use of the neuter pronoun “It” with a capital “I” to refer to God also parallels the language of TM. Maharishi, arguing that God and the world are inseparable, writes, “the world is the creation of the impersonal, absolute God. It is sustained by It and eventually dissolves into It” (269). Even if Walker is not deliberately quoting Maharishi in *The Color Purple*, these parallels nevertheless point toward TM's influence on the novel.

Shug's description of God conveys its spiritual importance through its form as well as its content. She delivers a vernacular creed: it bears repetitive, verse-like declarations of what God “ain't” versus what God “is.” Her statements are evenly balanced between three negations—God looks like “nothing,” “ain't a picture show,” and cannot be viewed “apart from everything else”—and three affirmations—God “is everything,” “everything . . . that ever will be,” and can be known by “when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that.” Shug's subtle formalism makes her speech doctrinal without being stiff; she makes a religious invocation without disrupting her or Celie's verbal idiom.

Shug's teachings have such an impact on Celie that they allow her to remain spiritually fulfilled even when she mistakenly believes Nettie is dead. Celie writes, “How can you be dead if I still feel you? Maybe, like God, you changed into something different that I'll have to speak to in a different way, but you not dead to me Nettie. And never will be.”²⁴ For Celie, God is no longer a personal being but rather Being-itself manifested in all things. This belief reflects the teachings of TM that “the unbounded field of Being” expresses itself in the “relative, ever-changing states of phenomenal life” and is therefore always accessible.²⁵ Therefore, Nettie too is an expression of God—indeed is ultimately inseparable from God Itself. Given this perspective, even though Celie thought she was rejecting God by addressing her letters to Nettie instead,

she was actually writing to God all along. This realization allows Celie to once again address her final letter to God: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God.”²⁶ Celie’s definition of God expands from individual “stars” and “trees” to increasingly vast domains of “sky” and “peoples,” progressing to an envelopment of “Everything” with a capital “E.” Celie’s final letter decisively replaces her previous concept of God, limited by racism and sexism, with a life-affirming, all-encompassing belief in universal Being.

Whereas Celie learns TM-like teachings through an African American mentor, Nettie independently develops similar spiritual beliefs inspired by her experiences as a missionary in Africa. But Nettie does not simply learn this view from African religions. Instead she gradually intuits a middle way between Anglicanism and the religion of the fictional Olinka tribe to whom she ministers. Early in the mission, Nettie’s encounter with a roofleaf ceremony plants the seed of spiritual unity in her mind. An Olinka man says to her,

We know a roofleaf is not Jesus Christ, but in its own humble way, is it not God?

So there we sat, Celie, face to face with the Olinka God. And Celie, I was so tired and sleepy and full of chicken and groundnut stew, my ears ringing with song, that all that Joseph said made perfect sense to me. I wonder what you will make of all this? (154)

This moment introduces Nettie to the idea that divinity is not confined to a personal Godhead but can pervade the world “in its own humble way.” At this point, Nettie’s investment in Anglican doctrine prompts her to disparage this dawning awareness as merely the result of fatigue and overeating. But this passage’s appeal to a variety of senses also enacts the beginnings of a spirituality of all-pervasive immanent divinity. These concrete sense experiences are what make Nettie receptive to the idea that the roofleaf is God as well as Jesus Christ. The sight of being “face to face with the Olinka God,” the taste of “chicken and groundnut stew,” and the hearing of “song” suggest that God is manifest in festive, sensual, worldly life. And Nettie’s question to Celie foreshadows Celie’s exploration of Asian spirituality—even though the novel does not call it that—as well.

But while Nettie’s experience with African religion is liberating, she does not fully embrace it. Moreover, the ways in which Nettie distinguishes her spirituality from both Anglican and Olinka views hint at TM’s influence on the novel. In the 1973 interview cited above, Walker understands African religion as centering on a belief in “all creation as living, as being *inhabited* by spirit,” a view that the Olinka religion expresses.²⁷ By contrast, the Hindu metaphysics of TM declare that all creation *is* spirit.²⁸ This principle of absolute unity is much closer to what Nettie, paralleling Shug, eventually asserts.

In one of her last letters to Celie before coming home, Nettie reflects, “God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone—a roofleaf or Christ—but we don’t. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us.”²⁹ Nettie’s liberation from Anglican and Olinka metaphysics is complete. The Anglican God, who is by implication more “external” than “internal,” feels remote. On the other hand, the Olinka worship of the roofleaf plant is so immanent that it encompasses a limited range of phenomena. When Nettie explains that “the roofleaf became the thing they [the Olinka] worship” (154), the definite article indicates that the roofleaf is the *only* thing they worship. Both systems, in Nettie’s view, limit God. But although the Olinka religion does not fully satisfy Nettie, her contact with African people is a crucial catalyst in awakening her de facto Eastern spirituality. In effect, the Hindu metaphysical framework Nettie comes to believe in emerges out of Africa.

Nettie’s remarks parallel Shug’s and, eventually, Celie’s belief in ultimate reality as impersonal, all-pervasive spirit rather than a personal deity. But although both Celie and Nettie develop spiritualities strongly indebted to Hindu metaphysics, their mentors are African or African American, not Indian. Why is this? Arguably, Walker does not acknowledge Hindu sources in *The Color Purple* because she wants African Americans to claim this religion as their own. Critics have noted that one of the major aspirations of *The Color Purple* is to speak about Africa without being constrained by European systems of thought.³⁰ The novel largely deals with escaping the yoke of Christianity, but by extension, any foreign religion could undermine this project of ethnic reclamation. Acknowledging Indian sources might dilute, in the eyes of her readers, Walker’s vision of a vital spirituality by and for those of African descent.

But even though *The Color Purple* prioritizes ethnic reclamation, the novel includes chastisements of those who are not concerned with those outside of their own culture. During her missionary trip, Nettie observes that “Africans are very much like white people back home, in that they think they are the center of the universe and that everything that is done is done for them. The Olinka definitely hold this view.”³¹ Later, Shug describes the reservation Indians of the Tuscon, Arizona, area in a letter to Celie: “They so far gone nothing strangers say mean nothing. Everybody not a Indian they got no use for” (268). These passages indicate that whether one is European, African, or Native American, it is not good to not care about other cultures.

The Color Purple thus portrays the tension between Walker’s cosmopolitan interest in Hindu metaphysics and her commitment to celebrating an authentically black spiritual heritage. In a 1973 interview, Walker stresses the importance of maintaining “an openness to mystery, which, to me, is deeper than any politics, race, or geographical location.”³² Walker’s universal “mystery” underwrites her spiritual eclecticism. If the traditions Walker reveres all point to a common sacred experience, there is no need to carefully differentiate between them. This procedure follows a problematic version of cosmopolitanism that, according to Bruce Robbins, seeks to transcend the “affiliations that constrain ordinary nation-bound lives.”³³ But even

though Walker's "openness to mystery" is "deeper than any politics," Walker remains strongly concerned with African American identity as a spiritual refuge. In *The Color Purple*, this priority comes at the expense of acknowledging the unique benefits she has gleaned from Asian mysticism, focusing on one "geographical location" over another. Therefore, *The Color Purple* does not fully reconcile local identitarian concerns with cosmopolitan spiritual curiosity.

From Hindu Transcendence to Buddhist Compassion

As Walker's career progresses, her ideas about spiritual ancestry begin to shift, culminating in a more direct acknowledgment of Asian religion in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*. The complex process by which this shift occurs warrants further discussion, which will in turn contextualize my reading of *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*. *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* biographically parallels *The Color Purple*. Walker writes both novels under the influence of a specific meditation practice from Asia—TM for *The Color Purple* and a Tibetan meditation called *tonglen* for *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*. And both practices start from a personal crisis but broaden into a social vision. In 1993, Walker's mother died.³⁴ To help deal with her grief, Walker listened to recordings of Pema Chödrön, a Tibetan Buddhist nun, teaching *tonglen*.³⁵ Whereas TM aims to transcend all thought in the absolute unity of Being, *tonglen* uses detailed visualizations of suffering beings to arouse visceral feelings of compassion in the meditator.³⁶ The practice is intended to develop one's compassion. One imagines breathing in the suffering of others and breathing out one's own happiness to them.³⁷

This counterintuitive approach actually worked for Walker who, after practicing the meditation daily for a year, felt both relief from her own grief and increased compassion for others.³⁸ During this time, Walker's devotion to Tibetan meditation coexisted with an ongoing concern for preserving African traditions. In her 1995 essay "The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven Is That You Have Been Driven Out of Your Mind," Walker argues that African Americans should "decolonize their spirits" from Christianity and recover the "pagan" spirituality of their ancestors.³⁹ Christianity, Walker says, is a religion that black people were "forced to have" instead of their gentler, earth-based "traditional worship." She praises those who "speak in defense of the ancient Goddess/God of all pagans and heathens, Mother Earth," lamenting that "we are empty, lonely, without our pagan-heathen ancestors." If African Americans can recuperate an authentic spirituality from their own roots, Walker asserts, they can achieve both spiritual transcendence and cultural pride.

Christianity, Walker contends, is a poor candidate to do this cultural work, not only because it was imposed, but also because it is foreign. Walker finds it bizarre that so many African Americans should follow "the longhaired rabbi from a small Jewish sect in a far-off desert." The term "far-off" underscores Walker's reservations about alien spiritual influences and reinforces her appeal to authenticity as the rediscovery of ethnic roots. And yet, by the time Walker wrote "The Only Reason," she had already

been practicing *tonglen* meditation rigorously. If one risks neglecting one's heritage by practicing a religion from a "far-off desert," what would be better about devotions from far-off Himalayan mountains?

The tension behind this question would prove productive for Walker. In the late nineties, Walker met Pema Chödrön, and the two gave a public dialogue that was marketed on video and CD under the title "Alice Walker and Pema Chödrön in Conversation" (1999). During their discussion, Walker says, "the heart literally responds to this practice [of *tonglen*]. . . if you keep going and doing the practice, the heart actually relaxes. That is quite amazing to feel."⁴⁰ According to Walker, *tonglen* meditation opens one's heart. This description accentuates the relevance of *tonglen* meditation to the book's title.⁴¹ Although *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* does not discuss *tonglen* in particular, its engagement with Buddhism and concern for developing compassion is a direct result of Walker's specific meditation practice.

In her dialogue with Chödrön, one can also see Walker's developing ideas about the role ancestry plays as a spiritual concept. Explaining to Chödrön how *tonglen* helped her, Walker says, "I'm always supported by spirits and ancestors and people in my tribe, whomever they've been and however long ago they lived. So it was like having another tribe of people, of ancestors, come to the rescue with this wisdom that came through you and your way of teaching."⁴² This thought continues Walker's investment in ancestry. She refers to Tibetans, the people who invented *tonglen*, as "another tribe," but then calls them, ambiguously, "ancestors." Of course the Tibetans of antiquity are ancestors, most obviously of present-day Tibetans. But Walker implicitly claims Tibetans as her own ancestors as well, showing how important it is for Walker to describe spiritual solace in terms of cultural descent. Through her efforts to promote Buddhism to African Americans and, as we will see, Amerindians, Walker develops a more nuanced idea of spiritual ancestry that allows for direct acknowledgment of these traditions' Asian origins. In this way, Walker seeks to harmonize cosmopolitan receptivity with an ongoing concern for rooted identity more successfully than she does in *The Color Purple*.

Walker continues to elaborate her case for claiming Buddhists as African Americans' spiritual ancestors at a Buddhist retreat in 2002. This retreat, held at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California, was the first Buddhist retreat specifically for African Americans. Walker opens her talk with a historical account of George Slaughter, a mixed-race child who was lynched for riding on a horse with an unacceptably fine saddle.⁴³ Walker calls George "our murdered ancestor" because he is black, but she also invokes Buddhism to forge an expanded concept of ancestry that transcends ethnic identity:

I cherish the study and practice of Buddhism because it is good medicine for healing us so that we may engage the work of healing our ancestors. Ancestors like George. Ancestors like George's father.

Both George and his father are our ancestors.

What heals ancestors is understanding them. And understanding as well that it is not in heaven or in hell that the ancestors are healed. *They can only be healed inside us.* Buddhist practice, sent by ancestors we didn't even know we had, has arrived, as all things do, just in time. (109, emphasis original)

This passage lists three ancestors, each less literally plausible than the previous one. George may not be related to anyone in the room where Walker speaks, but he is memorable as a figurative ancestor because he is a black man killed by racial hatred. But George's father is more difficult to regard as an ancestor because he is white and a part of the mob that killed his own son. To forgive such a villain and embrace him as one's ancestor would require a profound Buddhist sense of nonduality. Walker exhorts her listeners to feel compassion toward George's father, saying that he was "unfree" because of racism (107). Finally, Walker takes the word "ancestor" even further: if Buddhism is "sent by ancestors we didn't even know we had," then this means that, spiritually speaking, Buddhists are African Americans' ancestors. In this usage, an ancestor is not necessarily someone in one's own family tree, ethnic group, or even country. An ancestor is someone from the past from whom one can learn valuable lessons. Of course this is not a new idea; Catholic parishioners routinely address their priests as "father." But Walker's application of this idea is striking for its implicit rejection of biological descent as a criterion for cultural ancestry. This developing idea relies on Eastern doctrines of nonduality to loosen the demands of authenticity. But it also acknowledges authenticity's investment in roots by imagining an ancestral connection between Asian religions and African American culture.

Opening the Heart

Walker's expanded notion of spiritual kinship finds narrative expression in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004). Whereas *The Color Purple* does not advertise its Hindu influences, *Now Is the Time* explicitly engages with Buddhism. In this novel, the protagonist, Kate Talkingtree, grows disaffected with Buddhism. She seeks to recover an ancestral spirituality through Amerindian cultures, a quest reflected in her self-made surname, which used to be "Nelson." Although *Now Is the Time* deals more with Amerindian than African American identity, the spiritual quest it narrates follows a similar paradigm of ethnic authenticity. But rather than receive Eastern wisdom in Amerindian disguise, Kate returns to the Buddhism she abandons after her ancestral spirits help her see Buddhism in a new light.

At the novel's beginning, Kate grows disaffected with Buddhism because of a politically out-of-touch teacher. He criticizes "hot revolutions, with guns and violence," and praises the "cool revolution" of the Buddha's teaching.⁴⁴ Kate, bristling at this

facile dismissal of disaffected masses with limited options, leaves the retreat and “[dismantles] her altar” at home (11). Corroborating Linda Selzer’s diagnosis of African American suspicions toward Asian religions,⁴⁵ the Buddhism Kate experiences is too white and affluent to understand the struggles of the poor and oppressed around the world. It uses meditation as an aloof withdrawal from the world rather than an active engagement with its problems. These impressions lead Kate to conclude that “she had reached an impasse on the Buddhist road.”⁴⁶ Her disillusionment prompts her to notice that “she seemed to be the only person of color there” (5), confirming that this Buddhist retreat did not nourish Kate’s sense of ethnic roots.

In this opening scene, Kate’s growing reservations toward Buddhism converge with her critiques of Christianity. When the Buddhist teacher scolds political revolutionaries, this offends Kate in the same way that Christianity’s doctrine of original sin does. Kate is supposed to be meditating, but she “kept looking out the window instead, just as she had looked out of the window of the Church of God and [sic] Christ, as a child, when she had been unable to believe human beings, simply by being born, had sinned” (5). In both cases, a foreign faith doles out undeserved criticism of people whose experiences the religious tradition does not understand. These thoughts strongly echo Walker’s critique of Christianity in “The Only Reason.” In her essay as well as this novel, the antidote to an alienated and alienating religion is to take refuge in a nature-focused tradition from an ancestral culture.

In search of a more ethnically grounded spirituality, Kate goes to the Amazon on a retreat consisting of teachings, nature walks, and trances induced by the psychedelic plant brew yagé. Kate, like Walker, is part-Amerindian, so her turn to the spiritual wisdom of the Amazon reflects a desire to recover the spirituality of her ancestral culture.⁴⁷ Her experiences there contrast her experiences of Buddhism in America. Whereas the indoor meditation hall separates Kate from a surrounding grove of redwood trees (3, 6), the Amazon retreat is primarily outdoors in the middle of the rainforest (53–54). Whereas the people at Kate’s Buddhist retreat are overwhelmingly white, her colleagues in the Amazon are white, black, Amerindian, and Hispanic. Whereas the center of gravity in the Buddhist retreat is an emphatically male teacher, in the Amazon the main object of reverence is a personified spirit called Grandmother, a primordial divine feminine. And whereas the Buddhist retreat focuses on listening to lectures from the teacher, in the Amazon the participants talk to and befriend one another.

The retreat leads Kate to identify more strongly with her various ethnic lineages. Significantly, Kate comes to see herself as someone who can integrate different cultures precisely because she is American. While she is in the throes of yagé-induced nausea, she reflects, “I am an American, Kate thought. Indigenous to the Americas. Nowhere else could I, this so-called black person—African, European, Indio—exist. Only here. In Africa there would have been no Europeans, no Native Americans. In Europe, no Africans and no Indians. Only here; *only here*, she said, as the waves of vomiting continued past the three hours and into the evening. I will bear this

as long as it takes. This old medicine surely must care for, belong to, me” (53). Maria Lauret reads this passage as a nod to the mythos of the US as a uniquely diverse nation of immigrants, even as the novel recognizes many of the problems in American history.⁴⁸ And yet, in the context of this passage, Kate uses the term “American” in a broader sense than the common usage. Here “American” does not mean “of the United States” but rather “indigenous to the *Americas*” (emphasis added), a term that encompasses all of North and South America. Kate identifies with the entire New World.

This passage justifies the practice of a particular religious discipline—in this case, the Amerindian use of yagé to connect with the Grandmother spirit—by appealing to an ancestral connection to the tradition’s custodians. Because Kate is “indigenous to the Americas,” the Amerindian spiritual path she chooses naturally “belong[s] to [her].” By implication, Kate’s sense of spiritual belonging gives her a culturally rooted satisfaction that Buddhism does not, since Kate is not Asian. While Kate’s sense of heritage covers a vast territory, Kate’s affirmation of her multicultural identity is just as significant for its tacit disavowal of Buddhism as a major presence in her spiritual life. By celebrating her multiethnic identity but leaving an alien Buddhism behind, Kate defines herself as multicultural without being cosmopolitan. Ethnic kinship, not philosophical affinity alone, becomes a criterion for spiritual pursuits.

But while the novel emphasizes contrasts between Buddhism and Amerindian traditions, there are hints of commonality as well. Similar to introspective Buddhist meditation, the Amazon retreat, according to its teacher, will place its participants in “connection with our interior world” (143). In addition, even though Kate has stepped away from Buddhist practice, she still thinks of her Amazon retreat as the pursuit of “enlightenment” (51), the dominant English translation for the Sanskrit *bodhi*, the release from suffering that is Buddhism’s ultimate goal.⁴⁹ Kate’s experiences with psychedelics also remind her of Ram Dass, a countercultural teacher who helped popularize Eastern philosophy in the 1960s (88, 209). These fleeting connections foreshadow a more complete synthesis that occurs after the retreat ends.

After Kate returns to America, a vivid dream catalyzes her experiences into a conscious integration of Buddhism and Amerindian religion. The connections that remain hidden in *The Color Purple* thus become explicit here. One night after she returns, Kate has a dream in which she listens to a sermon from Grandmother. Whereas Grandmother seemed at first to be an alternative to sterile Buddhism, here, no less an authority than Grandmother herself declares the value of Buddhism. Grandmother admonishes Kate not to throw out the Buddha with the bathwater. She instructs, “*You don’t understand about Buddha. . . . He would not mock those who take up arms against their own enslavement. Sometimes there is no way, except through violence, to freedom*” (196–97, emphasis original). This is a direct rebuttal of Kate’s previous Buddhist teacher, who condescendingly denounces all revolutionary violence. But Grandmother does not say, “White people don’t understand about Buddha.” She puts the onus on Kate; it is *she* who does not understand. This

chastisement paves the way for Kate's reconciliation with Buddhism. The problem, the novel suggests, is that Kate tried to learn Buddhism from someone who does not understand the suffering of oppressed people around the world. Only by rediscovering Buddhism through the spirits of her own ancestors can Kate recover a positive Buddhist spiritual practice.

To accomplish this goal, Grandmother uses nature imagery to unite Buddhist and Amerindian traditions:

When Buddha sat under the bodhi tree, he was sitting under Me. He was sitting under Me, she repeated, as tree. And he was sitting on Me as grass.

When you drink yagé, you complain about how bad it tastes. It tastes bad because you have killed it in order to have it. This is not necessary. For the Buddha, it was not necessary. Sitting under Me and on Me, he received the medicina. . . . This is possible, receiving the medicina this way, if you open your heart. (197, emphasis original)

Here Grandmother proclaims the kinship of Buddhism and *medicina* as vehicles to spiritual insight. She even suggests Buddhism's advantages over the Amerindian path, saying that Buddhist meditation provides the same benefits of *medicina* without the killing or unpleasant taste. But in order for Kate to return to Buddhism, she must avoid the pitfalls of what she experienced before. Grandmother warns that, for most people, spiritual retreat is not an option, because "the moment they try to open their hearts, . . . the powers that be rush to implant a religion, generally foreign to their natures, into them" (197). This reference to Walker's critique of Christianity, and her larger project of ancestral spiritual recovery, challenges Kate to rediscover a Buddhist practice that is not "foreign to [her] nature." Even though Buddhism is geographically distant from Kate's ethnic roots, the imagery in the above passage puts Grandmother and the Buddha in the same place, suggesting that Kate should think of the Buddha as coming from the same ancestral culture as Grandmother.

Like Shug's description of God in *The Color Purple*, Grandmother's teaching contains liturgical elements. Grandmother offers a series of points and counterpoints, balancing spiritual affirmations with warnings against violence: "*How precious it is to have a human life to live! How sad to waste it in something so grim and blurry [as violence]. A thought can be like a gun; it can slay the enemy. Music can be like a sword; it can pierce the heart of the enemy*" (197, emphasis original). These repetitive, poetic analogies read like a prayer for training the mind to avoid violent thoughts, as these can poison even normally benign activities. Also, after explaining that the physical *medicina* is not necessary for spiritual insight, Grandmother asserts, "*That is why people take the time to learn how to do that; open the heart. That is why they go on retreat. That is why they learn to meditate*" (197). This anaphora gives a repetitive,

rhythmic call to regular, diligent spiritual practice. At the novel's end, Kate's return to Buddhism and to her estranged boyfriend demonstrate that she has, in fact, "opened her heart" to spiritual and romantic commitment. Furthermore, the fact that Kate has this dream without the aid of yagé indicates that she can now "[receive] the medicina" without chemical aids. In addition, Grandmother's remarks about the struggles of "the very poor" suggest that opening one's heart is not only for personal healing but is necessary for social change on a larger scale.

Kate's nature-infused return to Buddhism gives new meaning to the description of the Buddhist teacher in the novel's first scene. The Buddhist teacher has "a shining bald head. . . . Every once in a while he reached up and stroked the silver earring in his left ear. . . . Because of the earring and because he seemed spotless in his flowing robes, she mentally dubbed him Mr. Clean" (4). This description casts the teacher as immaculate—"shining," "silver," and "spotless"—and lofty, emphasizing his "head" and his upward reach to his earring. He is haughty, distant from the earth, bereft of vivid color, and out of touch with the worldly experience of impoverished masses. He represents the fantasy of a disembodied mind that arrogantly judges the world from a sterile remove.

By contrast, Kate's yagé-induced visions approach Buddhism from the earth, emphasizing the ground the Buddha touches and on which he sits, as well as his position under the bodhi tree. This earth-centered imagery teaches Kate to re-approach Buddhism from the lowly ground, not from the lofty position of the complacent teacher's "shining bald head" (4). Near the novel's end, Kate dreams that a snake, a creature demonized in Christianity but venerated as close to the earth in Amerindian lore, tells her that the Buddha is "in alignment" with Amerindian teachings on "[making] friends" with one's fears (211). The snake is "smiling benignly, like Mr. Clean from the Buddhist retreat she'd left an eternity ago" (211). This reference to the teacher who alienates Kate from Buddhism shows how far Kate has come. Whereas she reacts with distaste to the teacher before, she can now appreciate his good qualities, seeing him in the snake without resentment. This change in perspective allows Kate to rebuild her altar, return to the lover she left to go on her retreat, and have an informal wedding-like reception feast with friends who fly in from around the world. The novel ends with Kate placing an anaconda clock on her altar in the Buddha's lap, symbolizing the harmony of Amerindian and Buddhist spirituality, a synthesis that spans cultures and continents.

The deliberateness of the novel's transnationalism is further reflected in its acknowledgments. These encapsulate the differences in identifying influences between *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* and *The Color Purple*. Walker dedicates *The Color Purple* "To the Spirit, / Without whose assistance / Neither this book / Nor I / Would have been / Written." The label "Spirit" is general enough to encompass the novel's African, Native American, and Asian influences without specifically highlighting any one of them. By contrast, Walker begins *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* by thanking "all devas, angels, and bodhisattvas who accompany, watch over, and protect

explorers, pioneers, and artists” (emphasis original). Instead of using one all-encompassing spiritual term, here Walker deploys multiple specific terms for venerated beings in Judaism and Christianity (“angels”) and Buddhism (“devas” and “bodhisattvas”).⁵⁰ Here Walker’s religious terminology emphasizes cultural differences rather than overlooking them. This perspective arises from Walker’s evolving dedication to specific religious disciplines. At the Spirit Rock retreat in 2002, Walker emphasizes how important it is for people to have a spiritual “practice.” She exhorts that “whatever it [the practice] is, now is the time to look for it, to locate it, *definitely*, and to put it to use.”⁵¹ In this context, to “locate” a practice is not only to select one but to know where it comes from.

By bringing Buddhism and Amerindian paths together, Walker narrates a more nuanced, ethnographically detailed negotiation between traditions than she offers in *The Color Purple*. Nevertheless, both novels emphasize the primacy of finding spirituality that is related to one’s own ethnic roots. Celie’s, Nettie’s, and Kate’s spiritual journeys succeed because Asian religion is mediated through contact with an ancestral culture. Many scholars have criticized such appeals to ethnic authenticity on the grounds that they promote an essentialist and oversimplified view of a singular origin.⁵² But critics also acknowledge that many ethnic and diasporic communities derive strength, identity, and dignity from an affective connection to an ancient tradition, effectively reclaiming dignity that long histories of oppression have sought to take away.⁵³ Walking a fine line in this debate, Walker wants to teach her readers to go beyond one’s own culture *through* one’s own culture. Finding spiritual solace in one’s ancestors—however loosely defined—opens up ways of relating to sacred paths from elsewhere. Thus Walker envisions how one can reach across cultures for transcendence while still catering to the demands of cultural authenticity. For example, while Kate sees herself as an “American,” this train of thought ultimately leads to a sense of transcendence that goes beyond the Americas to a transcendent spiritual reality that encompasses all things. This process underlies Walker’s 2006 exhortation to “understand oneself as an earthling, not an American, Canadian, African, or Indian.”⁵⁴ The benefit of Walker’s approach is that it loosens the demands of authenticity to overcome skepticism toward cross-cultural spiritualities. But it also risks substituting one essentialist myth of origins for another without critically analyzing the concept of ancestry.

Although Walker’s spiritual syntheses may seem universalistic, Walker balances a devotion to transcending ethnic identity with a rootedness in specific places and cultures. For Walker, Buddhism’s relevance for African Americans stems, not only from its applicability to antiracist activism, but also from specific spiritual tendencies within the black Southern culture in which she grew up. In 2009, Walker wrote a letter of encouragement to the graduating class of Naropa University, a Buddhist school in Boulder, Colorado, founded by Chogyam Trungpa in 1974.⁵⁵ In this letter, she praises the school’s mission of promoting Buddhist values but also brings up African American regional experience. Referring to Tibetan Buddhism, she writes, “I see how beautifully

it connects with, joins, African American Southern soul. If and when black people in the South begin to investigate Buddhism, a large part of their suffering will decrease and a large part of their peace of mind, which they have valued so highly, and with such persistence, will be enlarged. They will not fail to recognize the gift.”⁵⁶ Walker’s deep concern for African American Buddhism is apparent in how her letter changes course in order to make this point. This quotation does not fit neatly within the letter’s larger organization. Moreover, Naropa University is not in the South, nor does it have a significant population of black students—just one percent as of 2012–2013.⁵⁷ But here Walker is more interested in imagining what could be than what is already the case. Her qualifier “if and when” combines a sense of contingency and inevitability, yearning for a cultural development that she acknowledges has yet to “begin.” The “peace of mind” Southern blacks “have valued so highly” is, however, ambiguous in the above passage. At a public appearance in 2013, I asked Walker what specific characteristics of Tibetan Buddhism she sees as harmonizing with “African American Southern soul.” Walker answered that Southern blacks historically found peace of mind through communing with nature in a slow-paced, outdoor-centered culture. Thus, Walker said, Southern blacks “were meditating without calling it that.” Walker proposed that Buddhist meditation would give a more “structured” way of expanding this peace of mind. Through Buddhist meditation, she said, “the black soul” meets “the Tibetan soul.” While Walker’s gloss on Southern black life may be an overgeneralization, it is noteworthy as an appeal to rural folk culture, which has been central to popular notions of African American authenticity.⁵⁸ Thus Walker is connecting Buddhist meditation to African American authenticity. By supporting events such as the Spirit Rock retreat, speaking alongside His Holiness the Dalai Lama,⁵⁹ and promoting meditation at her public appearances,⁶⁰ Walker is working to make Buddhism a greater presence in African American culture.

We can thus see a change in how Walker deals with channeling Eastern wisdom to African Americans. An allegory of literal ancestry in her earlier work gives way to overt recognition of Asian traditions in her later work. The reader can see an evolving sense that literal ancestry is less important, although one’s ethnic group remains an indispensable reference point when engaging with Eastern religion. Whether discussing African origins or African American solidarity, Walker emphasizes ethnic identity to convey her view of Eastern religions’ relevance for African Americans. Her literary project thus constitutes a groundbreaking effort to make Eastern nonduality a tool for improving America as a multiethnic society. For Walker, the liberating potential of Asian religion makes Buddhists and Hindus the ancestors African Americans did not know they had. This idea helps us see Walker’s career as a process of thinking about, and teaching others, a more nuanced way of being cosmopolitan and culturally rooted at the same time.

Notes

¹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), xv. See also Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

² Bruce Robbins, "Cosmopolitanism: New and Newer," *Boundary 2* 24, no. 3 (2007): 58.

³ See Lauren Berlant, "Race, Gender, and Nation in *The Color Purple*," *Critical Inquiry* 14, no. 4 (1988): 831–59; and Lauren S. Cardon, "From Black Nationalism to the Ethnic Revival: *Meridian's* Lynne Rabinowitz," *MELUS* 36, no. 3 (2011): 160–85.

⁴ See Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, "Warrior Marks: Global Womanism's Neo-Colonial Discourse in a Multicultural Context," *Camera Obscura: A Journal of Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 39 (1996): 4–33; and Maria Lauret, *Alice Walker* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 214–19, 237.

⁵ For a summary of Hindu-influenced musicians, see Philip Goldberg, *American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation: How Indian Spirituality Changed the West* (New York: Harmony Books, 2010), 264–68. For information on Buddhism's influence on Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock, respectively, see Kyle Smith, "A Separate Piece," *People Magazine*, July 28, 1997, <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20122768,00.html>; and Greg Truman, "Herbie Hancock Unplugged," *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 2, 2010, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/music/herbie-hancock-unplugged-20100702-ztm5.html>.

Additionally, academics including bell hooks and Charles Johnson have written about Buddhism's relevance for African Americans. See bell hooks, "Spirituality in Education," in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 157–64; and Charles Johnson, "A Sangha by Another Name," in *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 46–57.

Also, several ordained African American Buddhist teachers have written about their experiences, such as Jan Willis, Ralph Steele, and Joseph Jarman. See Lawrence Pintak, "'Something Has to Change': Blacks in American Buddhism," *Shambala Sun*, September 2001, accessed July 10, 2013, http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1741&Itemid=0. See also Linda Heuman, "A Right to the Dharma: An Interview with Myokei Caine-Barrett, Shonin," *Tricycle*, Fall 2011, accessed July 8, 2013, <http://blog.tricycle.com/feature/right-dharma?page=0,1>.

⁶ Linda Selzer, "Black American Buddhism: History and Representation," in *Writing as Enlightenment: Buddhist American Literature into the Twenty-first Century*, ed. John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 43, 45.

⁷ For an extensive review of scholarly literature on authenticity in the context of African American Studies, see David Chinitz, *Which Sin to Bear? Authenticity and Compromise in Langston Hughes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10–18. For a representative critique of authenticity in African American Studies, see Leslie W. Lewis, “Naming the Problem Embedded in the Problem That Led to the Question ‘Who Shall Teach African American Literature?’; or, Are We Ready to Discard the Concept of Authenticity Altogether?” in *White Scholars/African American Texts*, ed. Lisa A. Long (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 52–67. For a defense of authenticity, see Bernard W. Bell, *Bearing Witness to African American Literature: Validating and Valorizing Its Authority, Authenticity, and Agency* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 64–67.

⁸ James Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7–8.

⁹ Selzer, “Black American Buddhism,” 45.

¹⁰ For explanations on the ultimate nondifferentiation of reality in Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, see Venkatarama Iyer, *Advaita Vedanta: According to Samkara* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1964), 82; Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, *Science of Being and Art of Living: Transcendental Meditation* (New York: Meridian, 1995), 33–36; and Anantanand Rambachan, *The Advaita Worldview: God, World, and Humanity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 43–46. For comparable explanations of nonduality in Mahayana Buddhism, see David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 54; and Richard Hughes Seager, *Buddhism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 24–25.

¹¹ For discussions of the centrality of meditation for spiritual liberation in Hinduism and Buddhism, respectively, see Iyer, *Advaita Vedanta*, 202–3; and McMahan, *Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 183–88.

¹² Alice Walker, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 98.

¹³ Walker expresses a keen interest in recovering “pagan” religion specifically because of her family’s status as “descendants of Africans and Native Americans and Europeans.” See Alice Walker, “The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven Is That You Have Been Driven Out of Your Mind (Off Your Land and Out of Your Lover’s Arms),” *On the Issues*, Spring 1997, <http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/1997spring/sp97walker.php>.

¹⁴ Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, xv.

¹⁵ Alice Walker, “Interview with John O’Brien from *Interviews with Black Writers* (1973),” in *The World Has Changed: Conversations with Alice Walker*, ed. Rudolph P. Byrd (New York: The New Press, 2010), 52.

¹⁶ For discussions of Alice Walker’s debts to African and Native American religions, see Lauret, *Alice Walker*, 231–32; Thomas F. Marvin, “Preachin’ the Blues: Bessie Smith’s Secular Religion and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*,” *African American Review* 28, no. 3

(1994): 411–21; and Karla Simcikova, “Life and Its Survival: Walker’s New Religion in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*,” *Cuadernos de Literatura Inglesa y Norteamericana* 9, no. 1–2 (2006): 37–46.

¹⁷ Evelyn White, *Alice Walker: A Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 298; and Walker, *We Are the Ones*, 90–105.

¹⁸ “Transcendental Meditation,” Transcendental Meditation, Maharishi Foundation USA, accessed July 7, 2013, <http://www.tm.org/meditation-techniques#technique-top>.

¹⁹ Walker, *We Are the Ones*, 156; White, *Alice Walker*, 466.

²⁰ Walker, *We Are the Ones*, 158.

²¹ Iyer, *Advaita Vedanta*, 93–94; and Rambachan, *Advaita Worldview*, 83–85.

²² Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt, 1982), 192.

²³ Mahesh Yogi, *Science of Being*, 268.

²⁴ Walker, *Color Purple*, 260.

²⁵ Mahesh Yogi, *Science of Being*, 31.

²⁶ Walker, *Color Purple*, 285.

²⁷ Walker, “Interview with John O’Brien,” 41, emphasis mine.

²⁸ Mahesh Yogi, *Science of Being*, 33–36; and Rambachan, *Advaita Worldview*, 43–46.

²⁹ Walker, *Color Purple*, 257.

³⁰ See John Gruesser, *Black on Black: Twentieth-Century African American Writing about Africa* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 153.

³¹ Walker, *Color Purple*, 168.

³² Walker, “Interview with John O’Brien,” 41.

³³ Bruce Robbins, “Introduction Part I: Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism,” in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 1.

³⁴ White, *Alice Walker*, 466.

³⁵ Walker, *We Are the Ones*, 98. Again, as with TM, Walker came to this practice by following the recommendation of a friend. See also Alice Walker and Pema Chödrön, “Good Medicine for This World: Alice Walker and Pema Chödrön in Conversation,” *Shambala Sun*, January 1999, accessed August 23, 2013, <http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=1929>.

³⁶ H. H. Sakya Trizin, *Entry into the Adamantine* (Singapore: Grey Earth, 2009), 82–84.

³⁷ Walker, *We Are the Ones*, 98; and Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (Boston: Shambala Publications, 1997), 109.

³⁸ Walker, *We Are the Ones*, 98.

³⁹ Walker, “Only Reason.”

⁴⁰ Walker and Chödrön, “Good Medicine for This World.”

⁴¹ Walker’s book title, *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, is a line from a South American ritual song. See Lauret, *Alice Walker*, 299; and Alice Walker, *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (New York: Random House, 2004), 66.

⁴² Walker and Chödrön, “Good Medicine for This World.”

⁴³ Walker, *We Are the Ones*, 88.

⁴⁴ Walker, *Now Is the Time*, 4.

⁴⁵ Selzer, “Black American Buddhism,” 45.

⁴⁶ Walker, *Now Is the Time*, 4.

⁴⁷ Walker is part Cherokee (see White, *Alice Walker*, 389–90). While there are vast differences and distances between Cherokee and indigenous Peruvian cultures, Walker uses the terms “Indian” and “Amerindian” to encompass all native peoples of the Americas, North and South (Walker, *Now Is the Time*, 66, 90, 183). Thus, for Walker, to explore South American spirituality is still to explore her Native American heritage in a way that does not rely on the metaphorical apparatus with which she treats Asian religions and peoples.

⁴⁸ Lauret, *Alice Walker*, 203.

⁴⁹ McMahan, *Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 18.

⁵⁰ A deva is a god or celestial being (see McMahan, *Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 66). A bodhisattva is a Mahayana Buddhist spiritual hero who delays her entry into nirvana in order to help other beings (see Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 24).

⁵¹ Walker, *We Are the Ones*, 110, emphasis original.

⁵² See J. Martin Favor, *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 233–46; and Amy K. Levin, *Africanism and Authenticity in African-American Women’s Novels* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

⁵³ See Bell, *Bearing Witness*, 64–67; Hall, “Cultural Identity”; and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 281.

⁵⁴ Alice Walker, “A Conversation with David Swick from *Shambala Sun* (2006),” in Byrd, *World Has Changed*, 306.

⁵⁵ John Whalen-Bridge, “Poetry and Practice at Naropa University,” in Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff, *Writing as Enlightenment*, 157.

⁵⁶ Alice Walker, *The Cushion in the Road: Meditation and Wandering as the Whole World Awakens to Being in Harm’s Way* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 53–54.

⁵⁷ “Facts at a Glance,” Naropa University, accessed August 24, 2013, <http://www.naropa.edu/about-naropa/facts-at-a-glance.php>.

⁵⁸ Favor, *Authentic Blackness*, 4–14.

⁵⁹ “The Creative Journey: Dalai Lama, Richard Gere and Alice Walker,” Emory Report, October 22, 2010, accessed August 24, 2013, http://www.emory.edu/EMORY_REPORT/stories/2010/10/18/creative_journey.html. For video of the entire event, see Emory University, “THE CREATIVE JOURNEY- Full Program,” YouTube, 1:32:54, November 15, 2010, <http://youtu.be/hSDaSwUUS1I>.

⁶⁰ Alice Walker, personal appearance (Busboys and Poets, 14th & V, Washington, DC, June 26, 2013). At this event, Walker reiterated that meditation has “been such a friend to me” and urged her audience to train their own minds.

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