

# Let My People Go: A Reconceptualization of Black Exodus Discourses Using *The Color Purple*

By Isaac Seessel

**ABSTRACT.** This article makes a comparative literary analysis between the book of Exodus and *The Color Purple*. In this analysis, I conceptualize Celie's story as an Exodus: metaphorically she begins a slave, is then spoken to by the burning bush about masturbation, and finally flees her home. Indebted to womanist thinkers, this article attempts to construct an Exodus narrative that one, focuses not on the straight Black man, but on the lesbian Black women and two, focuses on sexual and bodily bondage rather than racial bondage. Using the master's tool, that is Christianity, I attempt to dismantle the patriarchal heterosexist master's house, the Black church. In constructing this narrative, one can begin to create a Black church that is a place of healing and not of harm for queer people and women.

The master's tools, like any other tool, can be used for a variety of purposes.<sup>1</sup> Tools that were once used to oppress can be used to emancipate. To state otherwise suggests an essentialist stance: tools that were used to oppress will always be by nature oppressive. I suggest otherwise. Instead, tools are context-specific instruments that do not contain an essence; therefore, they can be used in a variety of different ways. Oppressive tools can become tools of liberation and vice versa.<sup>2</sup> The African-American slaves' use of the Christian Exodus narrative proves this: African-

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<sup>1</sup> In this I depart from Lorde's famous article: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." She argues that the oppressive tools can never truly be used to emancipate.

<sup>2</sup> For critiques of Audre Lorde's essay look to Grillo's "Anti-essentialism and intersectionality: Tools to dismantle the master's house."

American slaves used Christianity, originally a tool that was used to oppress, as a spiritual, emancipatory tool. Womanist thought, however has shown how this narrative, as well as many aspects of the Black church, has inadvertently become a tool that silences women and LGBTQ people.<sup>3</sup> Irene Monroe, contemporary Black feminist scholar and blogger's 2004 article "When and Where I Enter, Then the Whole Race Enters with Me: Que(e)rying Exodus," argues that traditional Black Exodus narratives privilege the "endangered Black male," disenfranchising "feminists, lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people" (p. 123).<sup>4</sup> However, unlike Audre Lorde, many Womanists, such as Monroe, do not wish to discard the master's tools. Instead, they seek to use their Christian faith and the Exodus narrative in order to emancipate women and LGBTQ people within the Black church just as the Exodus narrative was used to emancipate the African-American slaves.

Despite the fact that white slave owners introduced Christianity to their chattel in order to make slaves more obedient, African-American slaves used the Bible, and more specifically the book of Exodus, as a tool for liberation.<sup>5</sup> Monroe (2000) writes: "My ancestors, enslaved Africans, turned this authoritative text, which was meant to aid them

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<sup>3</sup> Womanism is a movement created by and for Black women in the 1970s and 1980s. The term Womanist, coined by Alice Walker in her 1983 essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose," emphasized the racial and gender-based oppressions faced by Black women. Opposing the de-emphasis of race within white feminism, it often rejects traditional white feminist movements. Womanist thought finds itself in a mix of literary, poetic, and scholarly work.

<sup>4</sup> This article is largely indebted to Monroe's 2004 article.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on Christianity and African-American Slavery, turn to Pierce Yolanda's 2005 book *Through the storm, through the night: A history of African American Christianity or Hell without fires: slavery, Christianity, and the antebellum spiritual narrative*. For a specific history of the Exodus narrative with regards to African-American liberation, I suggest Eddie Glaude's 2000 book: *Exodus! religion, race, and nation in early nineteenth-century Black America*.

in acclimating to their life of servitude, by their reading of Exodus into an incendiary text that fomented not only slave revolts and abolitionist movements but also this nation's civil rights movements" (p. 123). The Christian tradition as well as the Exodus narrative extended from sociologist W.E.B Du Bois to civil-rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. and Black theologian James Cone.<sup>6</sup> This narrative pervades the Black church today, most notably with the spiritual "Go Down Moses," a musical arrangement of Exodus 8:1. Through this process of *appropriation*, the original biblical Exodus has created an entire Black Exodus discourse, calling for the liberation of Black slaves, as well as the liberation of contemporary Black people from the systematic oppressions they face today.

According to many womanist thinkers, however, Black Christianity, and more specifically the Black Exodus narrative, focuses on the Black heterosexual male. The reasons for this are many. First, Black Exodus discourses have focused exclusively on racial captivity, ignoring sexual and gender captivity.<sup>7</sup> One major reason for this omission is the history of physical and sexual abuse of African-American slaves.<sup>8</sup> African-American people suffer from the damaging cultural and psychological effects of past physical bondage, resulting in a denial of black bodies and sexualities. The original Exodus narrative as found in the Bible, however, did not only focus on the racial captivity of the Jews, but also depicted the coming out of bodily and sexual captivity as well. In this way, to draw a queer analogy, the Exodus story has always been a "coming out

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<sup>6</sup> For foundational texts that use or refer to the Exodus narrative look to W.E.B. Du Bois' 1903 *The Soul of Black Folk*, Martin Luther King's 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and James Cone's 1970 *Black Liberation Theology*.

<sup>7</sup> For a complete history and analysis of sexuality in the Black church I suggest: Douglas' *Sexuality and the Black church: A womanist perspective*. For a look at Black sexuality in the Bible turn to Smith's "The Bible, the Body and a Black Sexual Discourse of Resistance."

story” (Monroe, 2004).<sup>9</sup> Second is the issue of compulsory heterosexuality.<sup>10</sup> For reproductive reasons, slaves were held to compulsory heterosexuality—the more slaves had heterosexual sex, the more slaves would be born for exploitation. Third, the Exodus narrative, as is found in the Bible, emphasizes the presumably heterosexual men in the story, leaving out the women (Monroe, 2004). This has been used to rationalize the presence of Black male leaders in the church: Martin Luther King can be Moses, but Harriet Tubman or Aretha Franklin cannot.

Instead of doing away with the Black Christian church and the Black Exodus narrative as Audre Lorde’s logic would suggest, Irene Monroe and I argue for a reinterpretation of the Exodus discourse that includes not only racial captivity but also physical and sexual captivity. In the following section, I make analogies between Walker’s seminal 1985 novel *The Color Purple* and the original biblical story of the Exodus. I do this by focusing not on the racial captivity of the main character Celie, but instead on her sexual and bodily captivity. This literary analysis aims at offering a Black, queer alternative to the traditional Black heterosexist Exodus narrative.

Literature and poetry of a distinctly religious nature has been vital within the Womanist movement. This began when Barbara Smith, a Black feminist author and scholar, called for a proliferation of Black lesbian literary criticism in her 1979 essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism.” Following this piece there was a veritable explosion of Black lesbian scholarship, literature, and literary criticism. Walker’s 1985 *The Color Purple* remains a foundational work in the canon of Black lesbian emancipatory literature. In this article, I connect Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and the Exodus narrative; this connection can be used as a Womanist tool for the emancipation of women and LGBTQ

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<sup>9</sup>For a theology of coming out, look to Gorell’s *Erotic Conversion*.

<sup>10</sup> The idea of compulsory heterosexuality refers back to Adrienne Rich’s 1980 essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.”

people. *The Color Purple* can be used as a foundational text for the inclusionary transformation of the Black Exodus narrative: In the same way that Black slaves used the Exodus narrative against white supremacy, Black queers can use the Black Exodus narrative against patriarchal heteronormativity. First, I give a brief summary of *The Color Purple*. Then, I will show how Celie functions as a virtual slave. Finally, I make a comparative analysis between the Exodus as chronicled in the Bible and Celie's personal Exodus.<sup>11</sup>

*The Color Purple*, an epistolary novel written in vernacular language, chronicles Celie, an African-American woman in the South, and her journey from her trouble-ridden childhood to her abusive marriage and finally to her lesbian awakening. Through this journey she undergoes severe racial as well as bodily and sexual trauma. Her father, referred to as Pa, repeatedly rapes her and takes away her children. Her abuse continues when her husband, named in the novel as Mr. \_\_\_\_, emotionally and physically abuses her. After all of this, however, she meets Shug, a fashionable, enigmatic singer and her husband's beautiful mistress, and engages in a sexual relationship with her. To conclude the novel, she leaves her small hometown for a better life in Tennessee.

Many literary analyses have examined *The Color Purple's* liberatory potentials (Lewis, 2012; Abbandonato, 1991; Berlant, 1988; Kamitsuka, 2003). Margaret Kamitsuka (2003) uses *The Color Purple* to "contest hegemonic, idealized abstractions about women and to promote models of liberation and well-being for oppressed communities" (p. 49). With a slightly different focus, Christopher Lewis (2012) examines how *The Color Purple* can teach us to conduct a politics based on shamelessness rather than respectability. These analyses offer us useful lessons on the ways in which literature can be used to

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<sup>11</sup> Just as I intentionally capitalize Black, I intentionally capitalize Celie's Exodus, in order to maintain its religious potentials.

inform our politics. In my article, I have a similar aim; my focus, however, shifts to the distinctly *religious* nature of *The Color Purple*. Comparing the Exodus with *The Color Purple* reveals the ways in which sexuality and the body can be reconciled with religion, reconstructing a Black church that serves to liberate, instead of disenfranchise, women and queer people.

Celie begins the story functionally as a slave, much like the Israelites in Exodus and the African-American slaves in the United States<sup>12</sup>. Her servitude, however, is not *legally* sanctioned by the white heterosexist patriarchy but is instead *culturally* sanctioned by the “Black heterosexist patriarchy” (Monroe, 2000, p. 129). Celie begins the novel in fact as property of Pa, a Black man, her mother’s husband, and thought by Celie to be her father. Pa reifies this ownership by repeatedly raping her: “Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it” (Walker, 1982, 1). Like a slave owner, Pa then takes ownership of her children: “He took my other little baby, a boy this time” (Walker, 1982, p. 3). Like the African-American slaves, Celie lives with no physical or sexual rights.

This servitude is further reified when Pa chooses to offer Celie as a wife to Mr \_\_\_\_\_. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is in love with Celie’s sister Nettie; however, Pa does not wish to give Nettie away, as she was younger and prettier and thus more valuable than Celie. In this way, Pa is literally treating his daughters as property to be exchanged. Pa’s proposition to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ goes as follows:

But she ain’t no stranger to hard work. And she clean.  
And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like

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<sup>12</sup> In order to avoid confusion, I am not stating that Celie was actually a slave. She is legally a free woman. I liken her condition to slavery in order to give thrust to my comparison between her story and the Exodus narrative.

you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed or clothe it (Walker, 1982, p. 8).

Pa describes Celie in purely utilitarian, physical and sexual terms—her value as a wife is not as a romantic partner, but is instead as a laborer whose only use is to please her master. After Mr. \_\_\_ acquires Celie, he begins to send her to the fields, much like the Israelites in Exodus. Exodus reads,

The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them (1 Exodus 13:14, New Standard Revised Edition).

Celie suffers remarkably similar servitude: Mr. \_\_\_ refuses to work, forcing Celie to work the fields: “Every day [Mr. \_\_\_]... mostly never move” (Walker, 1982, p. 27). When Celie refuses to work, he says: “You better git on back to the field. Don't wait for me” (Walker, 1982, p. 26). All of this points to Celie's physical and sexual enslavement.

Celie's *Exodus* from Mr. \_\_\_ is marked by three major events: her discovery of masturbation, her reconceptualization of God, and finally her leaving of Mr. \_\_\_, sometimes paralleling and sometimes breaking from the original Exodus narrative. Christopher Lewis (2012) analyzes Celie's discovery of masturbation as “the means through which her burgeoning self-awareness and self-love are experienced” (p. 163). I view it similarly, emphasizing the emancipatory and even religious potential of her discovery of masturbation. The first event, her discovery of masturbation, parallels the story of the burning bush. In Exodus 3, Moses unexpectedly finds solace in Horeb, the mountain of God, where God talks to him: “I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up” (3 Exodus 7:8). God gives Moses the knowledge and strength to change. In the *Color Purple*, Celie finds solace in her bathroom (paralleling

Horeb) with Shug (paralleling God) teaching her how to masturbate. In the bathroom, Shug reveals to Celie that sexual pleasure is possible: "Listen, she say, right down there in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody" (Walker, 1982, p. 77). Just as God's revelation allowed Moses to begin the journey to freeing his people from the Egyptians' chains, Celie's revelation of sexual pleasure and ultimately masturbation allows her to begin to discover her sexuality, freeing herself from the heterosexist patriarchal chains of Mr. \_\_\_\_.

Celie's reconceptualization of God is Celie's second major Exodus event and the only one to break clearly from the Exodus narrative. In order for Moses and the Israelites to be liberated, God did not need to be reconceptualized. Moses' God speaks directly to Moses, allowing for a direct, unfettered connection with God. Unlike Moses, Celie never speaks directly to God, but instead to Shug. Because of this, Celie's God is not as immediate as Moses' God. Whereas Moses' God speaks directly to him, Celie's God does not. Her concept of God is not direct and is shrouded by the Black male heterosexist church. Her God takes the form of a monolithic male being. For Celie, this conception thwarts her path towards Exodus: Since the institutionalized conception of God is male, and since one is taught to worship God, the worshipping of the institutionalized God is ultimately just an extension of the worshipping of man, and ultimately enslaving (Daly, 1972). Celie writes, "Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful, and lowdown" (Walker, 1982, p. 192).

Celie's concept of God can be seen as directly constructed by the Black heterosexist church. As Shug says: "If you wait to find God in church, Celie... that's who is bound to show up, cause that's where he live...Man corrupted everything, say Shug" (Walker, 1982, p. 194). Shug then begins to change Celie's conceptualization of God from a monolithic male being to a pervasive presence. Shug



argues: “The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God” (Walker, 1982, p. 195). Shug’s God and eventually Celie’s God does not condemn but loves the bodily, the sensual, and the sexual.<sup>13</sup> Instead of masturbation as a shameful act, this reframing of God encourages masturbation and sexual expression. Shug says,

It sort of like you know what, she say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh... God love all them feelings. That’s some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God love’s ‘em...You can just relax, go with everything that’s going and praise God (Walker, 1982, 196).

This reconceptualization allows for Celie to accept and ultimately embrace her attraction towards Shug, allowing for her final Exodus event.

Celie’s final Exodus event, her leaving of Mr. \_\_\_\_, directly parallels Exodus 13, where the Jews are freed from Egypt. In this section of the story, Celie, paralleling Moses, orders Mr. \_\_\_\_, paralleling the Pharaoh, to let her and Shug go. Celie says: “You a lowdown dog is what’s wrong, I say. It’s time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need” (Walker, 1982, p. 199). She proceeds to struggle with Mr. \_\_\_\_: He threatens to beat her and lock her up. Celie, however, holds strong and proceeds to leave Mr. \_\_\_\_ for Shug. At the end of her literal Exodus, she cries: “I’m pore, I’m Black, I may be ugly and can’t cook’ a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here” (Walker, 1982, 207). This display of power and emotion stands in stark contrast to her submissiveness and servitude at the beginning of the novel; it is clear that Celie has broken free.

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<sup>13</sup> For more academic literature on how God can be viewed as loving the bodily and the sexual, turn to Gudorf’s *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian sexual ethics* and Gorell’s *Erotic Conversion*.

Reading Celie's story as an Exodus narrative has great implications for the redefinition and the reconceptualization of Black Exodus discourses. By focusing on a women's liberation, we begin to dismantle the false notion that the Black man is at the center of racial oppression. By focusing on sexual and bodily liberation, we allow for an Exodus that is not only seen as liberation from white patriarchy, but also liberation from compulsory heterosexuality, rape, and gender norms. It is through these redefinition and reconceptualization of the master's tools that we can slowly work to dismantle the master's house.

**I.B. Seessel**, who was born and raised in New York City, currently studies Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies at Oberlin College. Seessel's research interests are wide and varied and include theories of masculinity, public health STI/STD prevention and treatment, and queer literary theory. Past experiences include working as a consultant for Crescent Care's transgender health clinic, as well as participating in several academic "Identity Workshops" with professors from the tri-state area. Seessel hopes to enter graduate school in 2017 in order to study for a Ph.D. in sociology, focusing on human sexuality.

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