ELLIPTICAL PRACTICE: ANALYZING WOMANIST BUDDHIST THOUGHT IN SELECTED WORKS BY ALICE WALKER

by

CHERA JO CHASSATI WATTS

(Under the Direction of Carolyn M. Jones Medine)

ABSTRACT

This thesis broadly concerns Womanist thought and Black Buddhist practice in the United States, with specific emphasis on Alice Walker, a Black Buddhist practitioner, as one of the mothers of Womanism. Black Buddhist writing and practice, coupled with a Womanist orientation, has much to offer in broadening our modes of healing while living and operating within what bell hooks labels "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy." Drawing upon Charles Long's notions of African Americans as an "involuntary presence" in the United States and taking seriously the "elliptical shape of thought," I analyze two early focal texts, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (Walker's first novel), and two essays from the collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. I argue that a Womanist Buddhist reading of Walker's earlier works in light of her later published Buddhist essays and poetry deepens Womanist understanding and contextualizes common themes within American Black Buddhist thought and practice, such as engaging with anger and cultivating nourishment.

INDEX WORDS: Alice Walker, Womanist/Womanism, Black Feminism, Black Buddhists, American Buddhism, Buddhist Modernism

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DEDICATION

To my son, Cooper, who inspires me to stretch my mind, heart, and Spirit through continuous exploration! Also, to Ms. Alice, who taught me to turn my scars into Worlds. Finally, to the Grand Mothers of the Universe (including mine), in all of their power and peace.

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Much like the remainder of this thesis, my acknowledgments manifested when I quit trying so hard to force things into a particular place. On Election Day 2020, during walking meditation, these words wrote themselves in my mind. As Alice Walker reminds us through many poems and essays, when you free your mind from unnecessary clutter and distraction, it is amazing what manifests in the space which opens. Ms. Alice, I am forever indebted to your fearlessness, audacity, and Spirit. As Rebecca did for you, you helped me turn my scars into worlds. I am humbled and grateful to join the wake of those whose healing has been imagined and catalyzed by your works of literature, way of being in the world, and generosity of Spirit.

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the grand scheme of things, so long as the work is done, so long as the practice continues. Yet, in that moment, you affirmed my Spirit, work, and practice in ways you may never understand. Thank you.

To my ancestral mothers: Mom, Mawmaw, Nana, and Aunt Doo. Each of you mark my name (Chera for Aunt Sherry, Jo for Barbara Joyce, Chassati for Mom, and Chera Jo, only Nana called me by my real full name), and I honor you and your names by storying you into history through this acknowledgment. When I first read *In Search*, you all were always in my mind and heart. Mawmaw, you taught me how to sew and garden, thereby connecting me with Walker and her lived experiences (and a long heritage of lived experiences, particularly among poor Southern folks, Black and white). Mom, I acknowledge that you struggle with your own trauma, and I appreciate you caring for me in the ways you are able. I wish you peace and ongoing healing. Nana, you were such a badass! The more I learn about you and the struggles you overcame, the prouder I am to call myself your great-granddaughter. Aunt Doo, you are my namesake and always present on my ancestral alter. You were stolen from us too early by a young man who made a careless mistake. You are remembered, and you are appreciated.

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To my kiddos in the Franklin Residential College (FRC), thank you for providing a place for me to practice decolonizing pedagogy in real life and for continuously challenging and inspiring me. Though Cooper and I sought to provide home, refuge, and support for you all, we felt at home among the throngs of Rutherford Hall. As our five-year residence closes, we will never forget lessons learned, memories created, and challenges we faced together, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, I want to acknowledge many UGA mentors and friends, including Kate Daley-Bailey, Caroline Piotrowski, Dr. Diane Miller, Judy Iakovou, Victoria Cooper, Elizabeth Fuller, Dr. Michelle Garfield Cook, Dr. Lesley Feracho, Kendra Freeman, Katherine Field, and many others who supported me on this journey and ensured I completed this thesis. Finally, I want to acknowledge my friends, colleagues, and teachers in the Department of Religion, especially including my friend Nathan Fleeson, my committee member, Dr. Kendall

Marchman, and also, Dr. Nanette Spina. Dr. Melanie Harris, thank you for joining my committee and for your generous contributions to the field already.

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coverage in exchange for Medicaid and graduate student health insurance, among other major financial implications. Yet, you were certain of this move, and your certainty inspired me. We started school "together," as you reminded me, that fall of 2019, me in full time graduate studies and you in Kindergarten at Barrow Elementary School. Though I had been pursuing my studies at a snail pace prior, this move created space to focus on the work, along with our ongoing presence in the Franklin Residential College and my graduate assistantship in the Institute for African American Studies. Your encouragements continued. You blessed my papers, kissed my forehead when it hurt from concentrating, and watched television on weekend mornings while I worked steadily in my bedroom, reading, writing, or making notes. From an early age you understood the importance of this work, believing in it and in your mommy as she worked at it. Thank you for being my Light and for helping me realize that we carry home with us wherever we go.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Alice Walker is a Pulitzer Prize winning author of over 40 works including fiction, essays, short stories, and poetry. A self-described "earthling" born in the Jim Crow South to sharecropper parents, Walker continuously engages humanitarian activist work.[1] Though often cited among disciplines of religion, literature, African American studies, and others, scholarly discussion of anger in Walker's works from a Womanist Buddhist lens has been critically neglected. Perhaps scholars ignore anger as an issue so as to avoid engaging with the problematic "angry Black woman" stereotype; perhaps scholars ignore Black Buddhism because it disrupts the presumed Black Christian theological frame.

This thesis broadly concerns Womanist thought and Black Buddhist practice in the United States, with specific emphasis on Alice Walker, a Black Buddhist practitioner, as one of the mothers of Womanism. Though Christianity remains central to the study of Black religious life and although Black Buddhists fall outside the "Two Buddhisms" binary in American Buddhist Studies, current scholarship is beginning to examine the diverse practices of contemporary Black Buddhists, including such voices as bell hooks, Pamela Ayo Yetunde, reverend angel Kyodo williams, Jan Willis, and many others. Black Buddhist writing and practice, coupled with a Womanist orientation, has much to offer in broadening our sense of approaching freedom while living and operating within what bell hooks labels "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy." Drawing upon Charles Long's notions of African Americans

[1] Chose the term "earthling," with thanks to Alice Walker, because she does not aim to prioritize human experience over that of other living beings, such as animals and plants.

as an "involuntary presence" in the United States and taking seriously his "elliptical shape of thought," I analyze two early focal texts, Walker's first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and two essays from the collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. In this thesis, I argue that a Womanist Buddhist reading of Walker's earlier works in light of her later published Buddhist essays and poetry deepens Womanist understanding and contextualizes common themes within American Black Buddhist thought and practice, such as engaging with anger and cultivating nourishment. Rather than make definitive claims, this thesis asks questions, invites a pause, and challenges readers to sit with that pause to see what emerges.[2] Finally, this thesis insists that we become curious with initial observations and invite more work in the future as we all have much to learn from the past, present, and from the interplay between these temporal spaces.

Since I began this work in Fall 2016, more work has emerged pertaining to Black Buddhists, generally, and Womanist Buddhist practices, specifically. I am grateful and indebted to practitioners, scholars, students, colleagues, and everyday folks engaging meaningfully, humbly, and curiously in these ongoing conversations, and any omissions regarding sources are my own and made without ill intent. Additionally, much has occurred personally and academically during the past six years in my life which affected the trajectory of this work. However, most notedly, two major thinkers became instrumental to my current understanding: Charles H. Long[3] and bell hooks. From Long, I learned the importance of origin points and

[2] Inspired by Alice Walker's essay "All Praises to the Pause: The Universal Moment of Reflection," a commencement address later published as part of *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness*. I use this notion of a "pause" several times in this work.

[3] Dr. Long was Dr. Medine's mentor and teacher at UNC Chapel Hill and throughout his life. He passed away in 2020. May he rest in peace and power.

orientation,[4] "involuntary presence,"[5] and the elliptical shape of thought,[6] couched within important Buddhist teachings, such as the intersecting aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path and the necessity for *sangha*.[7] From hooks, I affirmed love as an active practice and realized "teaching to transgress" as an act of love while operating amidst global imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,[8] all against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic which began early Spring 2020 and lingered throughout the remainder of my coursework. Also, Mikki Kendall's *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women That a Movement Forgot* shaped my imagination in important ways, particularly when connecting a Womanist Buddhist frame to the lived experiences of everyday women, as Charles Long would say, those who live the "nitty gritty,"[9] and affirmed the importance of accomplices, rather than allies.[10]

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[4] Charles Long, "New Orleans as an American City: Origins, Exchanges, Materialities, and Religion," *Ellipsis…The Collected Writings of Charles Long*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 25-38.

[5] On "involuntary presence" see: Charles Long, "Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States," *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, (Colorado: The Davies Group, Publishers, 1986), 188. Note: I return to this notion of involuntary presence several times because I find it appropriate and useful. Through his work, Long continuously reminds us to linger on what it might mean to be forcefully removed from your homeland and brought to a place. What does this mean for your ancestors? What does it mean for descendants? What does it mean for the folks with whom you come in contact?

[6] On "elliptical shape of thought," see: Charles Long, "Introduction," *Ellipsis…The Collected Writings of Charles Long*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 8-9. I use this notion of "ellipsis" or "elliptical shape of thought" several times in this work. I'm indebted to my teacher, Dr. Carolyn Jones Medine, who studied with Dr. Long, for introducing me to his work. Also, I extend gratitude toward my classmates from RELI 8510 in Fall 2021 semester, during which we read the works of Charles Long in community, allowing our various positionalities to inform our discussion and interpretations of the work.

[7] Long studied with Mircea Eliade at The University of Chicago, and thus, *sangha* was an important part of their teaching and learning process. Several Buddhist allegories appear in Long's works, particularly in *Significations* and *Ellipsis*, and I'm excited for further study in this area. For some context, see: "Mircea Eliade, Joachim Wach, and Chicago: An Interview with David Carrasco," *Ellipsis…The Collected Writings of Charles Long*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 307-319.

[8] I'm indebted to Black Buddhist bell hooks for my present understanding of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, particularly from recent readings of: *killing rage: ENDING RACISM* (1995) and *all about love: new visions* (2001). May she rest in peace and power.

[9] In an interview with Carolyn Jones (Medine) entitled "From Colonialism to Community," Long describes the "living life every day" amidst this conundrum of "everyone's equal but they're not," i.e. nitty gritty pragmatism. I recommend reading the entire interview, but see page 294 within *Ellipsis* for that particular reply.

[10] Mikki Kendall, *Hood Feminism: Notes From the Women That a Movement Forgot,* (New York: Viking, 2020), 249-258.

However, any contemporary extension of Womanism or Womanist thought must begin with an overview of its foundations. Therefore, the first two chapters ground the thesis and indicate direction for the remaining chapters. Chapter Three focuses on Black Buddhists in the United States, more generally, and sheds light on recent scholastic interest in the area. While important for contextualizing Walker's Buddhist practice, Chapter Three also serves as counternarrative to the presumed Christianity associated with Black religious life. Chapters Four and Five allow for Womanist Buddhist textual analysis, primarily focusing on acknowledging anger in Chapter Four and turning toward nourishment in Chapter Five. For now, primary focal texts include Walker's first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, two essays from her groundbreaking autobiographical essay collection, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, and selected contemporary essays and poetry which explicitly identify with her Buddhist practice, including her most recent poetry collection, *Taking the Arrow Out of the Heart*. However, I argue, this Womanist Buddhist frame can and should be used across many of her works. Chapter Six, the "Conclusion"[11] chapter, brings the work together thus far and insists on additional work in the future, especially in light of the forthcoming book *Gathering Blossoms Under Fire: The Journals of Alice Walker 1965-2000*, edited by Valerie Boyd, and a chapter devoted to African American and Womanist Buddhist Thought (authored by Carolyn Jones Medine) in the forthcoming *Routledge Handbook of Buddhist-Christian Studies*, edited by Thomas Cattoi and Carol Anderson.[12]

[11] Explicitly expressed "conclusion," to disrupt the presumption that this work could be complete or "finished." It is only beginning, and there is much more to do in the future. I envision this thesis as a small part of a much larger, ongoing practice.

[12] May she rest in peace and power. I'm especially grateful to Professor Boyd for her care and encouragement of my thesis. I had the pleasure of meeting her in the summer of 2019 at a birthday celebration for Alice Walker held in Eatonton, Georgia, and then emailed with her several times after.

Disruptions to our typical patterns of thinking initiate a pause and, importantly, a reconsideration. What can we consider in the pause? There are many possible answers to this question. For now, I propose that we consider the following: patterns of thinking, feeling, and being in the world which connect with ancestors and the past, complicate and nuance our temporal and geo-political present, and that imagine a way forward, moving towards the best version of ourselves and our fellow earthlings. Let us begin with an iteration of this elliptical practice, a turning of the wheel; let us trust in the pause and see what emerges.

CHAPTER 2: ORIGINS OF WOMANIST BUDDHIST THOUGHT AND ESTABLISHING THE WOMANIST BUDDHIST FRAME

Womanist:

1) From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious.*
2) Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."
3) Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.
4) Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

--Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983)[13]

The Womanist definition, always worth quoting in full, expanded upon an earlier idea in Alice Walker's writing, first published in a 1979 short story, "Coming Apart."[14] Although Walker articulated "Womanist" in this way, Womanists had existed for centuries.[15] This chapter introduces and discusses origins of Womanist thought, focusing primarily on the United States with nods toward African or Africana Womanism. Next, I review some commonalities and

[13] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Inc., 1983), xi-xii.
[14] Layli Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 17.
[15] Layli Phillips (Maparyan), "Womanism: On its Own," *The Womanist Reader: The First Quarter Century of Womanist Thought*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), xlii.

tensions between Womanism and Black feminism, noting to whom these distinctions matter most, while acknowledging Walker's ongoing relationship with white feminism.[16] Finally, I acknowledge Walker's "turn to" Buddhism, imagining ways it expands Womanist understanding and particularly focusing on ways Womanist Buddhists find nourishment and cultivate radical self-love through their Buddhist practice, a necessary starting point if one intends to extend such radical love outward into the world, and also, participate in ongoing social justice movements.

Womanism: A Brief Introduction

Womanism entered the Religious Studies academy in 1985 through the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical literature, and it maintains an evolving community of scholarship and activism across many disciplines.[17] Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas writes, "Though the term *womanist* was coined by Walker, *womanism* became a movement when Black women scholars of religion used their *logos* – marked by their intellectual reason and God-given sense – to reconcile theoretical/theological reflection to social transformation which would forever change the way they constructed knowledge and the way knowledge constructed them."[18] Charles Long would call this attention to the elliptical shape of thought.

The seeds of Walker's Buddhist practice and thought, however, remain largely unnoticed or disregarded by many scholars and critics, despite their appearance in her earlier essays and fiction. Though Womanism and Womanist thought emerged through the Christian theological

[16] Especially, her relationship with Gloria Steinem.
[17] Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, "Writing for Our Lives: Womanism as an Epistemological Revolution," *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 3-4.
[18] Ibid., 4.

lens in the United States,[19] other scholars, like Melanie Harris, Carolyn Jones Medine, Layli Phillips Maparyan, Nagueyalti Warren, and others, acknowledge the more pluralistic roots of Womanism in Walker's definition, personal spirit, and ethics, therefore urging fluidity and religious plurality within the Womanist academic and activist communities to *truly embody and center* the rich, varied lives of Black women, living and ancestral, across all of their identities and experiences. [20]

Researching the origins, history, and scholastic reach of Womanist thought reveals many critiques and debates surrounding Walker's work. Her open sexual fluidity and the challenges it poses to some Womanist thinkers is one example,[21] as is the Christianity centered episteme of the discourse. For instance, Cheryl J. Sanders acknowledged this tension during the 1989 American Academy of Religion Roundtable Discussion concerning "Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective,"[22] and the two major African mothers of Womanism, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, and Clenora Hudson-Weems, similarly reject this aspect of Walker's Womanist definition. Further, as Sanders bravely reminded fellow Womanist Christian theologian panelists in 1989, "The search for our mothers' gardens, and our own, seems pointless if we remain oblivious to our mothers' gods."[23] Received with an open acknowledgement of

[19] Of particular note is the 1989 *Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective* consisting of powerful Womanist scholars: Cheryl J. Sanders, Katie G. Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, M. Shawn Copeland, bell hooks, and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes. Published in: *The Womanist Reader,* edited by Layli Phillips (Maparyan), 2006.

[20] For the purposes of this paper, I'm less concerned with articulating the waves of Womanist thought, except when noting that later waves pick up on initial traces or ruptures from prior generations, carrying these ideas and practices forward, moving towards truly embracing all identities and experiences of humanity. For a history of waves of Womanist thought, *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (2006), edited by Stacey Floyd-Thomas, remains an excellent resource.

[21] See: Kelly B. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999).

[22] Cheryl J. Sanders, "Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective (1989)," *The Womanist Reader: The First Quarter Century of Womanist Thought*, edited by Layli Phillips (Maparyan), (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 132.

[23] Sanders, "Roundtable Discussion," *The Womanist Reader*, 132.

resistance from fellow panelist, Katie Cannon,[24] Sanders's paper named areas of Womanism that *some* scholars grapple with (or omit) in the present: namely, Walker's embrace of sexual fluidity (loving women or men, sometimes sexually, sometimes not) and her lack of Christian-centered spirituality.[25]

To limit the Womanist voice to Christian theological and ethical norms limits its possibilities for transformation. As reverend angel Kyodo williams poignantly notes in *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation*, "With the exception of Malcolm X, the Black prophetic voice has been erringly associated with Christianity."[26] Nevertheless, one feels strongly that Walker would urge Womanist scholars, including the Christian theologians, to "take what works, and leave the rest to rot,"[27] from her Womanist definition, to challenge static boundaries, creating space and the possibility to more fully embrace themselves and make meaning in their world. Many years before editing *The Womanist Reader* (2006) collection, Layli Phillips (now Maparyan) and colleague Barbara McCaskill published "Who's Schooling Who? Black Women and the Bringing of the Everyday into Academe, or Why We Started *The Womanist*," in which they declared, "By dint of our differences, womanist scholarship is composed of transformative harmony, proactive tension, and regenerative collaboration. Womanist scholarship resists dogma, and it offers a vision of intellectual leadership in which reliance and responsibility are not approached as handicaps but as liberatory strategies."[28] Rather

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[24] Katie Cannon, "Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective (1989)," *The Womanist Reader: The First Quarter Century of Womanist Thought*, edited by Layli Phillips (Maparyan), (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 135.
[25] Sanders, "Roundtable (1989)," *The Womanist Reader*, 126-134.
[26] rev. angel Kyodo williams, "A New Dharma: Prophetic Wisdom and the Rise of Transcendent Movements," *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation,* (Berkeley, California: New Atlantic Books, 2016), 192.
[27] Folk expression quoted by Alice Walker in: "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor," *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Inc., 1983), 59.
[28] Layli Phillips and Barbara McCaskill, "Who's Schooling Who? Black Women and the Bringing of the Everyday into Academe, or Why We Started *The Womanist*," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 20, no. 41, (1995): 1014, accessed March 4, 2020, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174892?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

than enforce static boundaries, the work suggests that Walker conceived Womanism as a broad methodology. As noted in later chapters, we ask the same of Buddhism, acknowledging and embracing Buddhism in its many forms, rather than enforcing static boundaries.

Thus, through an elliptical practice of thought, leaning into the pause, can we communally contextualize the way we construct knowledge and the way it constructs us (to reiterate Floyd-Thomas)?[29] An elliptical practice of thought takes seriously the work of crawling back through history, again and again, to undergo willingly in the present what one was forced to undergo in the past, and perhaps, to sit with it (i.e. initiate a pause). After a pause, can we move towards "regenerative collaboration"?

African Womanism

In the spirit of "transformative harmony and proactive tension," I want to briefly acknowledge some scholarship surrounding Womanist thought in Africa. As Melanie Harris poignantly notes, "The womanist movement is not local to just the North American context; it is a global movement. Perhaps the most engaging proof of this fact is that there are three mothers to the word *womanist*."[30] Along with Walker, those mothers include Nigerian writer, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, and Africana Studies scholar, Clenora Hudson-Weems, who according to Harris, began using Womanism and Womanist in variations starting in the late 1970s and early 1980s.[31]

In African Womanist thought, Layli Maparyan notes Chikwenye Okono Ogunyemi's contributions of significant importance, particularly a 1985 article, "Womanism: The Dynamics

[29] Floyd-Thomas, "Writing for Our Lives," *Deeper Shades of Purple*, 4.
[30] Melanie Harris, "Third-Wave Womanism: Expanding Womanist Discourse, Making Room for Our Children," *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 128.
[31] Ibid., 129.

of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English" published in the journal *Signs*.[32] However, much like Womanist Christian theologians, Ogunyemi's articulation of African Womanism cannot easily reconcile itself with Walker's woman-loving tendencies (particularly female-female sexual love, sometimes problematically labeled "lesbianism").[33] According to Maparyan, Hudson-Weems articulated Africana Womanism, which arose during a specific "Africana nationalist context" instead of within feminist contexts.[34] As such, Hudson-Weems marks feminism irreparable and inseparable from racism and white supremacy and takes seriously "separatism," using a small piece of Walker's Womanist definition in a different context than she originally intended. Particularly, Hudson-Weems wishes to separate the heteronormative Black family unit, consisting of the mother, father, elders, children, and ancestors, to ensure its protection from white racist societal forces.[35] Like Ogunyemi, Hudson-Weems similarly "endorses heteronormativity and denies the legitimacy of same-sex relationships for people of African descent," and as Maparyan further notes, "…maintains a posture of Black separatism that is highly consonant with traditional Black nationalist discourses, on the assumption that white racism is intractable and fundamentally threatening to Black cultural integrity." As I will soon discuss, African Womanist critiques of Walker's Womanism intersect with concerns of Black feminists, namely acknowledging homophobic tendencies and white feminism's inadequacies to confront, challenge, and dismantle its own white supremacy.

For the purposes of this paper (and my research interests generally), Walker's original articulation of Womanism from *In Search,* coupled with Maparyan's expanded Womanist

[32] Maparyan, "Womanist Origins," *The Womanist Idea*, 22.
[33] Ibid., 24.
[34] Ibid., 26.
[35] Ibid., 27-28.

definition (moving toward her Womanist "Luxocracy"[36] as a worldview) resonate best. However, as we deepen Womanist understanding, we must incorporate intentional reflection upon the significance of Walker's consistent and ongoing Buddhist practice alongside these Womanist traces. Next, I will briefly discuss commonalities, tensions, and interplay between Womanism and Black Feminism as this foundation further contextualizes Walker's Buddhist practice.

Womanism and Black Feminism

In her introduction to *The Womanist Reader*, Layli Phillips (Maparyan) defines Womanism as:

> A social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension.[37]

This expansive definition, viewing Womanism as both a mode of being *and* ongoing, cumulative practice, allows scholars, practitioners, and everyday folks to meaningfully participate in collective social justice movements in the ways that they can from the spaces they occupy. Maparyan's definition proves especially useful to a Womanist Buddhist frame as it resonates with Engaged Buddhist practice and a re-imagining or re-orienting society from the perspective of those most oppressed within our global master narrative.[38]

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[36] For "Luxocracy" definition, see: Layli Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 320.
[37] Phillips (Maparyan),"Womanism: On its Own," *The Womanist Reader*, xx-xxi.
[38] In an interview with Bill Moyers in March 1990 for his television series, *A World of Ideas*, prophetic writer Toni Morrison explains the "master narrative" – that is, the 'ideological script being imposed by the people in authority by everybody else.' Transcript & video clip: https://billmoyers.com/content/toni-morrison-part-1/ (comes up about four minutes into this clip). Accessed November 1, 2020. I use this notion of "master narrative" several times in this paper as it intersects and reinforces the understanding of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

However, this re-orientation would understandably enact change across most of our lives. The capacity or openness toward self-reflection and change *might be* the main tension point between Womanism and Black Feminism, particularly concerning patriarchal norms and habits of being, concerns with open sexual fluidity and/or non-binary gender expression, and capitalist participation and patterns.[39] Whether we want to admit it, we all participate in global imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, especially those occupying space in the Academy. A true imagining of a collectively just society invites us to acknowledge how we participate in imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (without lingering on defensive tendencies), and also on what might happen if we stop clinging to the current normative societal systems.

In "What's in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond," Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins acknowledges tensions surrounding Walker's "troublesome" sexual fluidity for some Black feminists;[40] obviously, Black feminist lesbian Audre Lorde would not fall into this category. Collins writes:

> While individual African American women may be accepting of gays, lesbians and bisexuals as individuals, especially if such individuals are African American, black women as a collectivity have simultaneously distanced themselves from social movements perceived as requiring acceptance of homosexuality.[41]

Thus, accepting all forms of sexuality becomes a breaking point between some Black feminists and Womanism. However, she simultaneously acknowledges "the relative silence" of some Womanists on this important aspect of Walker's identity.[42]

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[39] It would be interesting to consider a spectrum of feminisms and their proximity to imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. At present, this study does not exist. However, it could enlighten and expand upon the idea presented in this sentence. I intend to pursue this study in the future with my sisterfriend and colleague, Sha'Mira Covington. For now, we plan to utilize Patricia Hill Collins on Black Feminist Thought, Indigenous Feminist scholars, and Carolyn Jones Medine, Melanie Harris, and Helen Rhee, who coined "approximate whiteness," or what I like to call "proximity to whiteness."

[40] Patricia Hill Collins, "WHAT'S IN A NAME? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond," *The Black Scholar* 26, no. 1, (1996): 12, accessed April 7, 2020, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41068619.

[41] Ibid., 14.

[42] Ibid., 12.

Black feminist scholar Traci C. West notably problematizes any project wishing for clear distinctions and boundaries between Black feminism and Womanism.[43] However, no conversation concerning Womanism can ignore the importance and intersections of Black feminist ancestors, practice, and thought. Along with Collins, important and historic Black feminist interlocutors include the Combahee River Collective, Kimberle Crenshaw, bell hooks, and many others. In understandable but problematic ways (given its establishment and history), Black feminism seems married to competitive capitalism, and at times, especially when participating in the Academy, patriarchal patterns, rendering it problematic for the purposes of my scholarship and practice. As Audre Lorde warns us, the "master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."[44] Yet, many scholars, writers, and friends that I admire, cite, and respect, identify closely with Black feminism; its tools, particularly surrounding intersectionality, remain relevant and useful.

Further, in *Black Feminism Reimagined After Intersectionality*, Black feminist scholar Jennifer Nash implores fellow Black feminists to consider the common defensiveness which "has come to mark contemporary black feminist academic practice."[45] Provocative and fearless, Nash's work traces ancestors of Black feminism, and imagines an expansive view of the discipline, noting: "…it is the ongoing conception that black feminism is the exclusive territory of black women that traps and limits black feminists and black women academics who continue to be conscripted into performing and embodying their intellectual investments."[46] Nash's

[43] Tracey C. West, "Is a Womanist a Black Feminist? Marking the Distinctions and Defying Them: A Black Feminist Response," *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 293.
[44] Phrase from the title of her essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," given as a speech at a conference in 1978. Accessed in: Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, (London: Penguin Random House, 2018).
[45] Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined After Intersectionality*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 3.
[46] Ibid., 5.

concern for embodiment seems particularly important, especially when later considering embodied healing practices, and her work intersects with Womanism in many ways.

Similarly, Mikki Kendall's *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women a Movement Forgot* asks that readers consider their relationship to and participation in respectability politics, gun violence, global food insecurity, homophobia, and other dangerous and problematic societal norms, issues affecting all women in some way and BIPOC women in particular ways. Like Nash, Kendall's work disrupts norms, poses questions, and invites reflection for all readers, while carefully considering the socio-political spaces or various identities they occupy. It seems that Collins would agree with Kendall. In "What's in a Name?" Collins reminded us that "the womanist/black feminist debate occurs primarily among relatively privileged black women," i.e. women in the Academy; in reality, we should be concerned with the "issues of power leav[ing] masses of black women doing the dry cleaning, cooking the fast food, and dusting the computer of the sister who has just written the newest theoretical treatise on black women."[47] Historian of religions Charles Long would label this concern for the everyday the "nitty gritty," and we must remain concerned with the everyday. Otherwise, what is the point?

Before turning to Walker's Buddhism and ways it deepens Womanist understanding, it is worth noting that for the purposes of this scholarship and imaginative practice, official labels matter little. Traci C. West affirms and echoes my sentiment in "Is a Womanist a Black Feminist? Marking the Distinctions and Defying Them: A Black Feminist Response." West writes:

> Frankly, specifying the boundaries between feminism and womanism in my work is of little significance to me, unless it furthers some form of woman-affirming social shift toward a more just and compassionate world, and gives special attention to those persons

[47] Collins, "WHAT'S IN A NAME?" *The Black Scholar*, 15-16.

> who are victimized by violence (sometimes lethal) that is too easily tolerated by the society, such as wives, prostitutes, lesbians, gay men, and transgendered persons.[48]

In addition, as Phillips (Maparyan) reminds us in *The Womanist Reader*, "since the beginning, the womanist frame has been applied more frequently than it has been written about…more people have employed womanism than have described it."[49] As a human occupying a white body,[50] I can acknowledge my positionality (and various identities) while participating meaningfully (and humbly) in this ongoing, cumulative practice,[51] "bringing front and center the oral cultures…especially those voices and person whom power brokers have hounded into silence, rendered invisible, or considered exceptional."[52] Again, these voices comprise the everyday, i.e. living the nitty gritty.

On the potential of a Womanist orientation in the world for healing, Layli Phillips (Maparyan) writes, "Unlike feminism, and despite its name, womanism does not emphasize or privilege gender or sexism; rather, it elevates all sites and forms of oppression, whether they are based on social-address categories like gender, race, or class, to a level of equal concern and action."[53] This practice continuously affirms and assures our inextricable interconnectedness as earthlings, and offers creative space for our shift toward Walker's Buddhism and its implications for Womanist thought and understanding.

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[48] West, "Is a Womanist a Black Feminist?" *Deeper Shades*, 292.
[49] Phillips (Maparyan),"Womanism: On its Own," *The Womanist Reader*, xxi.
[50] Acknowledging whiteness of my body in the political sense, and importantly, the privilege this carries – not, however, as a mode of being in the world which ascribes to the superiority of whiteness or white bodies.
[51] Choosing "practice" to disrupt notions of "definite" or "true" scholarship. This work is never finished; thus, it is an ongoing, cumulative practice.
[52] Katie G. Cannon, Alison P. Gise Johnson, and Angela D. Sims, "Womanist Works in Word," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 21, no. 2, (2005): 138, accessed April 17, 2020, https://jstor.org/stable/25002545.
[53] Phillips (Maparyan),"Womanism: On its Own," *The Womanist Reader*, xx-xxi.

Walker's "Turn" to Buddhism & Implications for Womanism

> Though not a Buddhist, I have found a support in the teachings of the Buddha that is beyond measure, as I have found comfort and support in those teachings I have received from Ancient Africans and Indigenous people of my native continent and from the Earth itself.[54]

On August 16, 2002, Walker delivered a Dharma talk at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California, and this talk marks the first time she openly identified with Buddhism and acknowledged its potential for healing. However, she makes clear that she is not a "Buddhist;" rather, she strives for embodying enlightenment.[55] As mentioned earlier, Womanism entered the Religious Studies academy in 1985; yet, open acknowledgement of Walker's Buddhist practice, and its impact on her writing, life, and ways of being in the world, remain limited.

There have been several biographical accounts of Walker's life, essay collections critiquing her work, or books of literary criticism, some published before she openly acknowledged her consistent Buddhist practice, and some after. Yet, few scholars acknowledge Walker's Buddhist practice—perhaps, because they do not know what to do with it or because Black Buddhists challenge presumed Christianity for Black religious experience.[56] Black Buddhists are a complex phenomenon, challenging the "Two Buddhisms," binary within American Buddhist Studies, which primarily focuses on "white" and "Asian" Buddhists, leaving out other POC entirely.[57] Interestingly, Black Buddhists often experience racism within integrated *sanghas* or other Buddhist spaces in the United States and, therefore, contend with

[54] Alice Walker, "This Was Not an Area of Large Plantations: Suffering Too Insignificant For the Majority to See," *We Are The Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness*, (New York: The New Press, 2006), 105.
[55] Ibid., 94.
[56] For instance, Thadious M. Davis's most recent, *Understanding Alice Walker* (2021) specifically mentions "Buddha" on two pages of the work.
[57] Adeana McNicholl, "Buddhism and Race," The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Race in American History, ed. Kathryn Gin Lum and Paul Harvey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 223-240.

some of the very harms their Buddhist practices seek to alleviate.[58] As expanded upon in Chapter Three, these experiences complicate healing potential for Black Buddhist practice, but they do not negate it entirely.

For the purposes of this thesis, I consider Walker's Buddhist practice within the broad, diverse spectrum of Black Buddhists, focusing primarily on engaging with anger and cultivating nourishment. Carolyn Jones Medine and Melanie Harris, along with a handful of others, consistently acknowledge Walker's Buddhism in their scholarship and remain important interlocutors for my work. As an Ecowomanist, Harris focuses primarily on the Earth-loving Pagan aspect of Walker's Womanist identity, seriously considered in two books: *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth- Honoring Faiths* (2017) and *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics* (2010). Harris notes Walker's Buddhism influencing her Earth-loving worldview, and she seems less concerned than other scholars with teasing out various aspects of her identity, instead seeing them as interconnected.[59] Medine links Walker's Buddhist practice with healing, and her work also inspires and affirms this new scholarship.[60] Finally, Nagueyalti Warren's newest book, *Alice Walker's Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit* (2020), briefly mentions Walker's Buddhist practices, but focuses primarily on Warren's own label: mystic. Further, Warren's book acknowledges the disconnect between Womanist theologians and other aspects of

[58] For the purposes of this chapter, I do not focus on racism in American Buddhist spaces. If interested in learning more, see: "The Challenges of Being POC in Largely White Sanghas," a video by Harvard Divinity School during the 2nd "Buddhism & Race" conference, April 23, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qv3aI_fSSyk and "Making the Invisible Visible: Healing Racism in Our Buddhist Community," available on the Spirit Rock meditation center website and originally published as a teaching booklet, https://www.spiritrock.org/document.doc?id=9.
[59] Melanie L. Harris, "In the Company of Friends: Womanist Readings of Buddhist Poems," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 36, (2016): 4-6, accessed October 22, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1353.bcs.2016.0001.
[60] Carolyn M. Jones Medine, "Practice in Buddhist-Womanist Thought," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 36, (2016): 17-28, accessed October 22, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1353/bcs.2016.003.

the Womanist identity as originally articulated by Walker which too often get neglected, namely, critiques of heterosexism and Walker's Paganism.[61]

Although not concerned with labeling herself a Buddhist (noting that, for example, the Buddha wouldn't have been concerned with labeling himself a Buddhist),[62] Walker openly acknowledges her consistent Buddhist practices and the ways they enhance her life, especially in newer poetry and essay collections.[63] Therefore, in light of what has come before and where we are in the present, let us pause and reconsider Walker's writing, especially earlier writing, in light of her Buddhist thought and practice, thereby contributing to an existing gap among critiques and celebrations of her work and expanding our sense of Womanism. However, we must first briefly contextualize Black Buddhist practice in the United States as another foundational layer of our Womanist Buddhist frame.

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[61] Nagueyalti Warren, *Alice Walker's Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 175-188.

[62] Walker is not concerned with labeling herself Buddhist because she strives toward becoming the enlightened being itself (Christ or Buddha). Her practice is blended and draws heavily from her Indigenous Native American roots, African ancestors, southern Christianity, Buddhism, and Pagan practices.

[63] See: *We Are The Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness* (The New Press, 2006), *Over-Coming Speechlessness: A Poet Encounters the Horror in Rwanda, Eastern Congo, and Palestine/Israel* (Seven Stories Press, 2010), *The Chicken Chronicles: Sitting with the Angels Who Have Returned with My Memories: Glorious, Rufus, Gertrude Stein, Splendor, Hortensia, Agnes of God, The Gladyses, & Babe, A Memoir* (The New Press, 2012), *The Cushion in the Road: Meditation and Wandering as the Whole World Awakens to Being in Harm's Way* (The New Press, 2013), *The World Will Follow Joy: Turning Madness Into Flowers* (The New Press, 2013), and the newest, *Taking the Arrow Out of the Heart* (37 Ink, 2018).

CHAPTER 3: BLACK BUDDHISTS

Unfortunately, since African Americans originated as an involuntary presence[64] in the United States, there exists little to no historical record regarding the full scope of their religious practices. As such, the dominant religion of their enslavers, Christianity, becomes presumed (and practiced) by the majority of Black descendants of enslaved persons in the United States.[65] While this chapter will not establish a complete history regarding Black Buddhist practice in the United States, it provides brief foundational context, thereby expanding the scope and reach of the Womanist Buddhist frame of analysis. We might imagine, however, many histories and blended ancestral religious practices – erased, never written in the first place, or transmitted orally – passed down among families, especially given the transmission of various lineages of Buddhism worldwide.

Furthermore, as American Buddhist Studies scholar Adeana McNicholl reminds us, mainstream writings concerning the transmission of Buddhism to the United States mostly omit Black folks altogether.[66] Though I imagine it being much earlier, McNicholl's article points toward 1910-1940 as a starting point for Buddhism in Black communities, particularly during the Great Migration and Harlem Renaissance, and she implores scholars continue this work in the

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[64] On "involuntary presence" see: Charles Long, "Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States," *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, (Colorado: The Davies Group, Publishers, 1986), 188. Note: I return to this notion of 'involuntary presence' several times because I find it appropriate and useful. Through his work, Long continuously reminds us to linger on what it might mean to be forcefully removed from your homeland and brought to a place. What does this mean for your ancestors? What does it mean for descendants? What does it mean for the folks with whom you come in contact?

[65] For instance, in a study conducted by the Pew Center on "Faith Among Black Americans," 74 % of respondents identified as either Protestant or Catholic. For the full report, see: https://www.pewforum.org/2021/02/16/faith-among-black-americans/.

[66] Adeana McNicholl, "Being Buddha, Staying Woke: Racial Formation in Black Buddhist Writing," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 86, no. 4, (2018): 886-888, accessed October 22, 2021, doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfy019.

future.[67] Since our society centers around and perpetuates imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the history surrounding Buddhism's transmission to America similarly presents itself, thereby establishing what McNicholl and others have engaged with and criticized as "Two Buddhisms:" "white" and "Asian."[68] In her chapter on "Buddhism and Race" for *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Race in American History*, McNicholl admits:

> While it is difficult to find substantial works on racial discourses within Asian American communities, the voices of non-Asian Buddhists of color are practically invisible in academic discourse. One would be hard pressed to find the voices of African American, Native American, and Hispanic people in monographs discussing the transfer and spread of Buddhism in the United States, despite the fact that they have been consumers of Buddhism in America since at least the beginning of "Beat Buddhism" and the Buddhist "countercultural" movements in the 1960s and 1970s, if not earlier.[69]

Therefore, the counter-narratives, autobiographical or semi-autobiographical accounts by Black Buddhists, and intentional and responsible scholarly re-storying contribute to this omission's correction.

American Buddhist Modernism scholar, Ann Gleig, similarly concerns herself with undoing whiteness as the *center* (my addition) within American Buddhist Studies.[70] Primarily informed by Larry Yang's Dharma work as culture and community[71] alongside Zenju Earthlyn Manuel's Dharma as embodied difference for Black and Brown bodies operating within a specific daily existence,[72] Gleig recently partnered with McNicholl as co-principal investigators for the 2021 *Teaching Race and Racism in Buddhist Studies* project.[73]

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[67] Ibid., 887.
[68] Ibid.
[69] McNicholl, "Buddhism and Race," *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Race in American History*, 229.
[70] Ann Gleig, "Undoing Whiteness in American Buddhist Modernism: Critical, Collective, and Contextual Turns," *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections*, ed. George Yancy and Emily McRae (London: Lexington Books, 2019), 21-42.
[71] Ibid., 28-33.
[72] Ibid., 33-38.
[73] See: http://teachingbuddhism.net/teaching-race-and-racism/.

Though their work intersects with my interests, we orient ourselves differently. Gleig identifies as post-colonial and feminist within American Buddhist Modernism,[74] whereas McNicholl concerns herself with embodied identities, including race, gender, and sexuality, and very recently, began considering the importance of Black Buddhists and their engagement with American Buddhism.[75] Their work implies their origin points. For instance, their 2021 project concerns itself with "teaching race and racism" in Buddhist Studies, something Black and Brown racialized bodies experience, rather than dismantling white supremacy in Buddhist Studies, something they participate in and benefit from.[76] In the future, I hope that work enters their consciousness which nudges them towards cultivating a Black Studies mindset, which would understandably affect the trajectory and impact of the "teaching race and racism" project.[77]

Re-imagining that 2021 project, they might instead focus on "dismantling imperialist white supremacy" within Buddhist Studies. Though McNicholl included Black Buddhist voices in the "Buddhism and Race" chapter from *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Race in American History* (2018), these voices were not recognized in the newer *Teaching Race and Racism in Buddhist Studies* digital project from 2021. Unfortunately, the "Searchable bibliography of resources relevant to teaching Buddhism, race, and racism," yields little from the many primary resources written, edited, or collected by prominent Black Buddhists such as Alice Walker, angel Kyodo williams, Pamela Ayo Yetunde, Faith Adiele, Jan Willis, bell hooks, and many others. For instance, as of March 2022, the only work included thus far was *Dreaming Me:*

[74] During the 2022 Howard Lecture (virtual via Zoom on February 23, 2022) for the Department of Religion at The University of Georgia, Dr. Gleig offered these labels.
[75] See McNicholl's Faculty profile here: https://as.vanderbilt.edu/religiousstudies/people/McNicholl.php.
[76] Shout out to my sister-friend, Sha'Mira Covington, who articulated why this project bothered me in an email thread from March 2022. Quoted with permission.
[77] "Black Studies mindset" inspired by Darlene Clark Hine, "A Black Studies Manifesto," *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research* 44, no. 2, (2014): 11-15, accessed October 20, 2021, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2014.11413683.

Black, Baptist, and Buddhist by Jan Willis,[78] though the resource claims itself "a selection of pedagogical resources for the incorporation of race and racism into Buddhist studies classes."[79] As we know, discussions pertaining to race and racism cannot ignore Black and Brown voices. To that end, let us next consider important contemporary sources which speak to the expansive nature of Black Buddhist practice, acknowledge righteous anger operating within imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, and finally, move towards nourishment, both self and collective.

Contemporary Sources

In their 2020 edited volume, *Black & Buddhist: What Buddhism Can Teach Us About Race, Resilience, Transformation, & Freedom*, editors Pamela Ayo Yetunde and Cheryl A. Giles poignantly introduce Buddhism as a "Path of Trauma Resilience for Anti-Racism Activists," establish the Four Noble Truths, and describe the Noble Eightfold Path and what it can mean for African Americans.[80] To date, this introduction chapter serves as the best concise guidebook for African Americans practicing Buddhism or those who wish to learn more about the practical ways Buddhism enhances African American religious life. Similarly, reverend angel Kyodo williams, a prominent Black Buddhist teacher ordained in the Zen tradition, explored the Truths and the Path in her book, *being black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace* (2000), and that text remains relevant, with specific chapters devoted to Zen Buddhist teachings, tangible steps for awakening the warrior-spirit, and teachings regarding lovingkindness,

[78] To search the resource, see: http://teachingbuddhism.net/teaching-race-and-racism/.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Pamela Ayo Yetunde and Cheryl A. Giles, "Introduction: Buddhism as a Path of Trauma Resilience for Anti-Racism Activists," *Black & Buddhist: What Buddhism Can Teach Us About Race, Resilience, Transformation, & Freedom*, edited by Pamela Ayo Yetunde and Cheryl A. Giles, (Colorado: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2020), 1-23.

mindfulness, and fearlessness. Other important primary sources by Black Buddhists include *Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist, and Buddhist* (2008) and *Dharma Matters: Women, Race, and Tantra* (2020) by Jan Willis, in addition to *Meeting Faith: The Forest Journals of a Black Buddhist Nun* (2005) by Faith Adiele, and the newest work from williams, Lama Rod Owens, and Jasmine Syedullah, *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation* (2016). Finally, to date, Alice Walker has published at least six openly Buddhist essay or poetry collections[81] alongside her numerous interviews, speeches, and commentaries on her personal website.[82]

For Black Buddhists, practice empowers their embodied existence in the various intersections of identity: race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc.[83] For instance, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, African American Zen Buddhist from the Suzuki Roshi lineage, reminds practitioners, scholars, and critics that one must consider the daily lived existence within the broad, ontological reality; Charles Long would call this the "nitty gritty." In other words, we cannot and should not ignore physical, sexual, mental, spiritual, and all other harms experienced by Black and Brown bodies within a particular lived historical and temporal context. As Black Buddhist bell hooks reminded us, the personal is political and vice versa.

Interestingly, Buddhism – which teaches "no self" or *anatta* – as contextualized by racialized Black bodies, becomes a tool to defend one's right to exist, live, and be in the world. Pamela Ayo Yetunde works as a Community Dharma Leader and Zen student of the San

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[81] Some of Walker's newer Buddhist works include: *We Are The Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness* (The New Press, 2006), *Over-Coming Speechlessness: A Poet Encounters the Horror in Rwanda, Eastern Congo, and Palestine/Israel* (Seven Stories Press, 2010), *The Chicken Chronicles: Sitting with the Angels Who Have Returned with My Memories: Glorious, Rufus, Gertrude Stein, Splendor, Hortensia, Agnes of God, The Gladyses, & Babe, A Memoir* (The New Press, 2012), *The Cushion in the Road: Meditation and Wandering as the Whole World Awakens to Being in Harm's Way* (The New Press, 2013), *The World Will Follow Joy: Turning Madness Into Flowers* (The New Press, 2013), and the newest, *Taking the Arrow Out of the Heart* (37 Ink, 2018).
[82] Alice Walker's personal website: https://alicewalkersgarden.com/.
[83] See: Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, *The Way of Tenderness: Awakening Through Race, Sexuality, and Gender*, (Massachusetts: Wisdom Publications, 2015).

Francisco Zen Center. She writes that it "…means releasing ourselves from the racist social constructs that blind us to the truth of our humanity, positioning ourselves to receive the truth of our humanity, accept our humanity, and learn to live equanimously with the truth of our humanity in a society that still questions it."[84] Further, she encourages and insists that Black Buddhist practitioners repeat that statement as a decolonizing practice. This practice, among many others, speaks briefly to Buddhism as offering healing potential. In her essay on "Practice in Buddhist-Womanist Thought," which incorporates Walker's first Dharma talk, "This Was Not an Area of Large Plantations," Carolyn Jones Medine writes that, "Walker is pointing us to the importance of practice for survival in the midst of violence and oppression, but also for going beyond survival to healing by recognizing our own Buddha-nature and that of our ancestors…"[85] Further, Medine's chapter on African American and Womanist Buddhist Thought[86] and a forthcoming Oxford Bibliography entry on Alice Walker (for which I am co-author) similarly present counternarratives and corrective narratives, re-storying the presumed norm of Christianity for Black religious life and further disrupting the "Two Buddhisms" myth of American Buddhist practice.

Healing work remains relevant and instrumental, particularly as we move toward Chapters Four and Five, and in that healing, the turn toward identity and identifying roots. However, we must simultaneously acknowledge anger, noted as one of the Three Poisons in

[84] Yetunde and Giles, "Introduction," *Black & Buddhist,* 3.
[85] Medine, "Practice in Buddhist-Womanist Thought," *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 17.
[86] From the forthcoming Routledge *Handbook of Buddhist-Christian Studies*, edited by Carol Anderson and Thomas Cattoi.

Buddhism, and its established links to stress, harm, tension, and other ailments in Black bodies.[87] Initially, anger drew me to Alice Walker's work, likely because it mirrored my own anger in powerful ways. As elaborated upon in future chapters, acknowledging and working with anger (including its roots) offers release. Therefore, acknowledging anger becomes an integral part of the Womanist Buddhist frame of analysis for Walker's literature.

As Lama Rod Owens poignantly reflects, "The anger is a reaction to the suffering I experience being Black and targeted, with very little relief," and also, he notes that this anger becomes trauma held in the body and passed down from each generation to the next, acknowledging "…those before have not had the capacity to heal or understand their trauma."[88] Further, Owens notes meditation as a practice by which he learned to sit with his trauma, his suffering, and to transform his experience of Blackness as a racialized body, no longer linking Blackness with anger. He writes:

> …because of my meditation practice, I have an experience of Blackness that is based upon resiliency, community, deep joy in the face of violence, and a profound gratitude for my culture, which continues to transform marginalization into celebration. My trauma and anger are still parts of this celebration, but they are not what Blackness means. They are only some of the consequences of being in this system.[89]

As my analyses will show, Walker's Womanist Buddhist frame similarly engages with anger, both in her personal lived experiences, reflections on experiences, and through her fictional characters.

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[87] For some context, see: "Why are Blacks dying at Higher Rates from COVID-19?" https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/04/09/why-are-blacks-dying-at-higher-rates-from-covid-19/ by Rashawn Ray and "Coronavirus in African Americans and Other People of Color," https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/covid19-racial-disparities by Sherita Golden.

[88] Lama Rod Owens, "The Dharma of Trauma: Blackness, Buddhism, and Transhistorical Trauma as Narrated Through Three Ayahuasca Ceremonies," *Black & Buddhist: What Buddhism Can Teach Us About Race, Resilience, Transformation, & Freedom*, edited by Pamela Ayo Yetunde and Cheryl A. Giles, (Colorado: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2020), 52.

[89] Ibid., 53.

Womanist Buddhist Practice as Nourishment

The first Womanist-Buddhist project emerged in the Academy in 2009, thanks to a grant co-directed by Melanie Harris and Charles Hallisey supported by the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University.[90] This imaginative project generated interesting and hopeful in-person conversational gatherings between Buddhists and Womanists, resulting in several articles published in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* (2014 & 2016), and as Harris indicates, a forthcoming edited volume (*Standing on Two Legs: Buddhist Resources for Womanist Reflection*).[91] Unlike Christianity, inextricably linked to imperialism, nationalism, and enslavement in the United States, Buddhist teachings and practices (particularly those under the auspice of Engaged Buddhism) *might be* uniquely positioned for healing, inspiration, and forward-thinking action as we collectively demand justice and undo systems of racism, heterosexism, and patriarchy.[92] However, this positionality does not imply that Buddhism is not linked to imperialist white supremacy capitalist patriarchy in certain temporal or geo-political contexts.

Though we cannot make definitive claims regarding Buddhism as practiced worldwide,[93] we can and should explore the imaginative ways American Black Buddhists, and specifically Alice Walker, study and practice Buddhism. Many incorporate teachings into their everyday ways of being in the world and participate in ongoing decolonizing movements aimed at

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[90] Melanie L. Harris, "Buddhist Resources for Womanist Reflection, *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 34, (2014): 108, accessed April 15, 2020, https://www/jstor.org/stable/24801357.
[91] Ibid., 109.
[92] For more information regarding Christianity's long and complicated relationship to racism and racist practices, including enslavement of Africans, consider reading *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* by Ibram X. Kendi (New York: Bold Type Books, 2016).
[93] For instance, as my teacher Dr. Kendall Marchman pointed out, would Muslims in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, and other places feel this way about Buddhism? Answer: no, and Black Buddhists do not make such claims. Further, many Black Buddhists identify with various forms of suffering perpetuated worldwide, especially among Indigenous and/or Black and Brown bodies.

disrupting our global master narrative: imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Some Black Buddhists retain traces of their Christian practices, resulting in blended or blending religious identities, while Christianity remains irreparable for others. To label these practices as "Orientalist" or "romanticized" notions of Buddhism[94] further perpetuates imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Instead, we can and should take Black Buddhists seriously, acknowledging them in all their diversity and various lineages, rather than re-inscribing harmful hegemonic narratives. Further, as already established, these blended and blending practices remain contested by boundary enforcers, including but not limited to Academics within the Ivory Tower, white *sanghas*, and various lineages of natal Buddhists.

In his widely acclaimed book on Buddhist Modernism, David McMahan charts Buddhism's travel and evolution as it spreads to new cultures and places. Rather than dismissing, McMahan asserts the validity of the practice, noting:

> In Europe and America, too, Buddhism has been adapted and infused into preexisting discourses and debates, interpreted in terms of modern western categories and assumptions, and called on to confirm or refute western philosophies, ideologies, and cultural practices. To conceive of the cultural locations of Buddhist modernism and of how Buddhist ideas and practices have been enlisted and transformed within the context of western discourses, we must understand how Buddhism's infusion into these discourses has created novel forms of Buddhism shaped as much by the taxonomies, concerns, and anxieties of nineteenth- and twentieth- (and now twenty-first) century America and Europe as by traditional aspects of Buddhism.[95]

Thus, McMahan does not negate American Buddhism or disentangle it entirely from traditional aspects of Buddhism, and it would be interesting to seriously consider Black Buddhist practice in light of his insights. Therefore, in response to critics wishing to dismiss Buddhism practiced in

[94] See: Adeana McNicholl, "Being Buddha, Staying Woke," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, for one such example as she uses the labels "Orientalist" and "romanticizing" when describing certain contemporary Black Buddhists.
[95] David McMahan, "Introduction," *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 19.

this way, labeling Black Buddhist practice as Westernized and romanticized Buddhism, so as to cling to natal versus convert Buddhist boundaries, or to establish a binary between "real" Buddhism and "American" Buddhism, I reply: Who are the deciders? Why do they decide? Why does it matter?

Womanist Buddhist thought, in the conversation on Buddhism, might be a useful heuristic for examining Buddhism in America, pinpointing ruptures, leaving us with questions, and bothering or unsettling categories, in conversation with natal and convert Buddhism, American Buddhism, Womanist theology, and earlier waves of Womanist scholarship. We should practice settling into this discomfort and becoming curious with its teachings. As Alice Walker would urge us, we should take the pause, invoking what emilie townes calls, the "Womanist Dancing Mind."[96]

> This womanist dancing mind is more than our attempt to make sense of the worlds surrounding us – sometimes enveloping us, sometimes smothering us, sometimes holding us, sometimes birthing us. It is more than our desire to reconfigure the world in our own images and then invite others to come and inspect the textures, the colors, the patterns, the shapes, the sizes of this new order, and this new set of promises. No, the womanist dancing mind is one that comes from a particular community of communities yearning for a common fire banked by the billows of justice and hope. As such, our particularity marks us with indelible ink. Our task is to explore the twists and turns of the communities from which we spring and have our very life and breath. It is to be very particular about the particular – and explore the vastness of it.[97]

As we move towards this community "yearning for a common fire banked by the billows of justice and hope," Womanist Buddhist thought and practice offer unique nourishment along the way. However, we must first acknowledge anger.

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[96] Worth noting that Toni Morrison's 1996 National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters acceptance speech inspired townes's articulation of a Womanist Dancing Mind.
[97] emilie townes, "The Womanist Dancing Mind: Speaking to the Expansiveness of Womanist Discourse," *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 237.

CHAPTER 4: ACKNOWLEDGING ANGER

> 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 piece of mind, which they have valued so highly, and with such persistence, will be enlarged. They will not fail to recognize the gift. [98]
>
> – Alice Walker in "A Letter to the Graduating Class of Naropa University," June 2009

Spoken in 2009 and published in a 2013 essay collection, this passage reads more like a prophecy, particularly in light of Donald Trump's Presidency, the highly publicized murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery in 2020, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic against the backdrop of continued Black Lives Matter movements. Alongside these ongoing horrors, we have experienced a relatively recent mainstream shift towards Black Buddhist practice and its healing potential (although these blended practices have existed for centuries). Though we pinpoint Walker's first open acknowledgment of her Buddhist practice in 2002 at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, she admits that she first came to it through meditation when healing from lost love, particularly her divorce from Mel Leventhal (finalized in 1976).[99] However, more generally, Womanist Buddhist practice, teaching, and thought emphasizes radical self-and-collective healing from racism and sexism, but also, healing from all types of oppression. Beginning with one's orientation or mode of being in the world, this healing always extends outwards, "Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female."[100]

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[98] Alice Walker, "Human Sunrise: A Letter to the Graduating Class of Naropa University," *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.
[99] Walker, "This Was Not An Area," *We Are The Ones*, 94.
[100] Walker, *In Search*, xi-xii.

Therefore, a Womanist Buddhist orientation results in pauses; "self-generated enthusiasm" perhaps obtained through meditation, gardening, dance, prayer or any other practice which allows us to reach "inner state of recognized divinity;"[101] reflection upon one's own identities, perspectives, and patterns of meaning-making in a particular time and space; *and* a continuous elliptical return, like the turning of a wheel – over, over, over – such that you may "free yourself from the pain of being shot, no matter who [or what] the archer might be."[102] With this orientation in mind, I will gesture next toward Womanist Buddhist readings of Walker's earlier writings, acknowledging anger, and, *nourishment*.

"Beyond the Peacock"

> Standing there, knocking on Flannery O'Connor's door, I do not think of her illness, her magnificent work in spite of it. I think: it all comes back to houses. To how people live. There are rich people who own houses to live in and poor people who do not. And this is wrong…I think: I would level this country with the sweep of my hand, if I could.[103]
>
> – Alice Walker, "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor," from *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*

Written and published more than twenty years before Walker openly identified with Buddhism, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (hereafter *In Search*) explores Walker's life, and her encounters with anger exemplify Buddhist liberation of anger to alleviate suffering, a practice echoed among contemporary American Black Buddhists. "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor" appears as one of the ten essays organized into Part One of *In Search*.[104] Written after *The Color Purple*, which Walker calls her Buddha book that is not

[101] Walker, "This Was Not An Area," *We Are The Ones*, 109.
[102] Ibid., 103.
[103] Alice Walker, "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor," *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Inc., 1983), 58.
[104] "Finding Zora," also appears in Part One. In total, *In Search* consists of 36 essays divided among four parts.

Buddhism,[105] *In Search* explores Walker's life and, as Carolyn Jones Medine and John R. LeBlanc note, is also a Buddha book.[106] As Walker invites us to sit with some of her innermost reflections, anger is a key theme, but so are liberatory strategies for acknowledging anger, and, healing.

First, I discuss two essays published in Walker's *In Search*: "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor" and "Looking for Zora." Next, I unpack Walker's anger using *being black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace* by reverend angel Kyodo williams. Then, I revisit the essays through the lens of Thich Nhat Hanh, Zen Master and Engaged Buddhist practitioner. This analysis sets a frame, or as historian of religions Charles Long might say, an elliptical shape of thought, before turning to a few of Walker's openly Buddhist essays, and concluding with Womanist Buddhist analysis of her first published novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland.* Intentional placement of Walker's first novel near the end of this paper invites a return – as Long would say, a *crawling back*[107] through history – humbly acknowledging what came before while inviting new teachings based on current positionalities and perspectives. Through these analyses and through deploying the intentional elliptical shape of thought, I demonstrate that Walker's Womanist Buddhist thought and practice offer new paths for freedom, particularly in dealing with racism, oppression, and anger. Further, we observe seeds of Walker's Buddhist thought in her writing long before she officially encounters Buddhism and begins cultivating her practice.

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[105] Alice Walker, "This Was Not an Area of Large Plantations: Suffering Too Insignificant for the Majority to See," *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness,* (New York: The New Press, 2006), 99.

[106] John Randolph LeBlanc and Carolyn Jones Medine, "Alice Walker: Suffering and the Task of the Revolutionary Artist," *Ancient and Modern Religion and Politics – Negotiating Transitive Spaces and Hybrid Identities* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 171.

[107] On "crawling back" see: Charles Long, "Introduction," *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, (Colorado: The Davies Group, Publishers, 1986), 9. "Crawling back" as a mode of orientation in the world is particularly important for my work.

Let us return to a portion of our opening quotation, "I would level this country with the sweep of my hand, if I could,"[108] and contextualize its placement within the full essay. A personal reflection piece, "Beyond the Peacock," signifies the importance of a day trip Walker took with her mother, during which they first visited their family's sharecropper shack in Putnam County, Georgia, followed by a stop at Andalusia, the country home of Flannery O'Connor. Walker notes O'Connor's importance in her intellectual development as the "first great modern writer from the South."[109]

Situated in a peaceful pasture, Walker observes her childhood home rotting away; the remains of a shack of four rooms now consist of barely two. Remembering her life here, Walker does not think of peace. Walker reflects, "I remember only misery: going to a shabby segregated school that was once the state prison and that had, on the second floor, the large circular print of the electric chair that had stood there…" among other childhood horrors.[110] Walker's visit to her childhood home establishes the lens through which she can experience the last home of Flannery O'Connor, and the contrast is staggering. Andalusia is a large, white antebellum house which has been empty since O'Connor's death in 1964.[111] When Walker visits, she imagines where the slave quarters once stood in the backyard. She admires the bricks crafted by the hands of slaves.[112] Regarding knocking on the door of Andalusia, Walker writes:

> What I feel at the moment of knocking is fury that someone is paid to take care of her house, though no one lives in it, and that her house still, in fact, stands, while mine – which of course we never owned anyway – is slowly rotting into dust. Her house becomes – in an instant – the symbol of my own disinheritance, and for that instance I hate her guts. [113]

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[108] Alice Walker, "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor," *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Inc., 1983), 58.
[109] Ibid., 52.
[110] Ibid., 44.
[111] Flannery O'Connor – Andalusia Foundation, Inc. "Andalusia Farm – About," *Andalusia Farm – Home of Flannery O'Connor*, 2014. Accessed April 14, 2017, http://andalusiafarm.org/about-us/.
[112] Walker, "Beyond the Peacock," *In Search,* 47.
[113] Ibid., 57.

Charles Long would call this disinheritance the legacy of African Americans as an involuntary presence in the United States. Long reminds us, "The American republic at its moment of founding created the impossible dilemma of embracing and sustaining the institution of chattel slavery within a revolutionary democracy."[114]

Yet, lingering on this hatred would be detrimental to Walker's spirit, hindering her growth as a person and a writer (as we later see with Grange and Brownfield, our fictional characters from *Third Life)*. Walker writes, "For several years, while I searched for, found, and studied black women writers, I deliberately shut O'Connor out, feeling almost ashamed that she had reached me first."[115] However, it is during this search for other Black women writers that Walker makes a monumental discovery: Zora Neale Hurston. Further, Walker discovers she can both accept O'Connor and reject what is harmful, i.e. take what works and leave the rest.

Finding Zora

Positioned as the last essay in Part One of *In Search*, "Looking for Zora," reflects upon Walker's adventures to Florida where she uncovered information regarding Hurston's life, her home, and particularly, her death. Robert Hemenway's literary biography tells us Hurston authored at least six books, including *Mules and Men*, as well as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and traveled widely as an Afro-American folklorist and anthropologist, fearless in her search to uncover the truth about her people. Her post-humous publication, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo,"* (2018) generated massive public interest regarding the lived experiences of Cudjo Lewis, an enslaved man with whom Hurston conducted interviews during his life. More recently, National Geographic created a documentary entitled *Clotilda: The Last American Slave*

[114] Long, "African American Religion in America," *Ellipsis*, 201.
[115] Walker, "Beyond the Peacock," *In Search*, 42

Ship (streamed on DisneyPlus in February 2022), which connects with Cudjo Lewis, his descendants, and other known captives brought to the United States on the *Clotilda*.[116]

Yet, Hurston died unrecognized and without funds to pay for a funeral or burial.[117] Posing as Hurston's niece, Walker discovers Hurston's burial location[118] through conversation with Eatonville local Mrs. Moseley. Another local resident, Mrs. Patterson, draws a map to aid Walker's search for Hurston's grave in the old black cemetery in town, the Garden of the Heavenly Rest. Robert Hemenway notes Hurston's burial year as 1960, when she died without funds for a funeral or burial.[119] In 1973, the Garden of the Heavenly Rest appears viciously neglected.[120] Walker's guiding map indicates that Hurston's grave should be in the center of a circle in the middle of the cemetery. Walker writes: "…the "circle is over an acre large and looks more like an abandoned field. Tall weeds choke the dirt road and scrape against the sides of the car…As far as I can see, there is nothing but bushes and weeds, some as tall as my waist."[121] In the midst of being eaten by insects, fearful of snake bits, and feeling hopeless, Walker literally calls out loud for Zora. Finally, she finds herself in a sunken rectangle approximately in the center of the circle. Intuitively, Walker finds Zora and decides to honor her spiritual grandmother in this final resting place.[122]

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[116] See: "Researchers say the wreckage of the last known slave ship to the U.S. is mostly intact," December 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/12/22/1067078342/wreckage-of-last-slave-ship-clotilda-alabama.
[117] Robert Hemenway, introduction to *Zora Heale Hurston: A Literary Biography,* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 3.
[118] Fort Pierce, Florida, where Hurston spent the last years of her life in a welfare home.
[119] Robert Hemenway, introduction to *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 3.
[120] Evelyn White's chronology (pg. 465-467) from *Alice Walker: A Life* designates 1973 as the year Walker placed the headstone at Hurston's grave.
[121] Alice Walker, "Looking for Zora," *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Inc., 1983), 104.
[122] Ibid., 106-109.

In Hurston, Walker recognizes her ancient, kindred, spirit and a true model for the type of revolutionary artist[123] Walker becomes. Hurston's unmarked grave in an unkempt, overgrown field elicits an appropriately emotional response from Walker:

> There are times – and finding Zora Hurston's grave was one of them – when normal responses of grief, horror, and so on do not make sense because they bear no real relation to the depth of emotion one feels. It was impossible for me to cry when I saw the field full of weeds where Zora is…there is a point at which even grief feels absurd. And at this point, laughter gushes up to retrieve sanity. [124]

Before departing Florida, Walker purchases a headstone for her spiritual kinswoman, honors her, and then later resurrects her work beyond the grave. While "Looking for Zora" tells the story of Walker searching for and memorializing the grave of Zora Neale Hurston, as Robert Hemenway reminds us in her biography, "Hurston's final resting place is symbolic of the black writer's historical fate in America."[125] Again, we might connect this historical fate with the ongoing legacies of involuntary presence, manifesting in continued oppression among African Americans across every aspect of life, whether education, pay, housing, healthcare, or other areas. Operating within these systems, one might understandably become angry.[126] As Walker said, she would, "level this country," if she could.[127]

[123] For more on the tasks of the revolutionary artist, see: John Randolph LeBlanc and Carolyn Jones Medine, "Alice Walker: Suffering and the Task of the Revolutionary Artist," *Ancient and Modern Religion and Politics – Negotiating Transitive Spaces and Hybrid Identities* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
[124] Ibid., 115.
[125] Hemenway, introduction to *Zora Heale Hurston,* 3.
[126] I would add that we all should feel angry. And we should all be doing something about it.
[127] Walker, "Beyond the Peacock," *In Search,* 58.

Connecting Anger with Involuntary Presence

Reverend angel Kyodo williams, Zen Buddhist teacher, notes that for Black Americans, anger is a recurring poison, but easily the most complex poison of overall wellbeing.[128] She says:

> Anger presents itself in many forms. It is almost always beyond our control, though. It is like a bully that comes in and takes over the situation and leaves no room for anything or anyone else. In our anger, we forget the other person's story. When enraged, we cannot feel our responsibility to the greater community because we are too busy giving attention to our anger.[129]

Whether anger results from fears, insecurities, material social injustice, racism, or other triggers from the intersecting oppressions encountered by African Americans, in life and death, one cannot feel responsibility to collective humanity when blinded by this extreme anger. Nor can fellow community members, often acting out of anger, ignorance, and fear when perpetuating imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, feel their collective responsibility.[130] Worse, once anger results in violent harmful action toward oneself or others, recovery seems nearly impossible.

Though an established global system, this chapter largely concerns itself with imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy within the United States and offers Womanist Buddhist responses, inviting pauses for reflection and moving toward healing. Under such a system, one can never fully realize the humanity in other human beings with whom their space is shared, as denial and intentional ignorance of our inter-connectedness sustains the system. Amidst these systems, williams (like Walker and many other Black Buddhists) discover Buddhist practice as a

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[128] angel Kyodo williams, "Three Serious Poisons," *being black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace*, (New York, NY: Viking Compass, 2000), 48.
[129] Ibid., 56.
[130] Dr. Carolyn Jones Medine rightly labels this "pathological innocence." In practice, we see pathological innocence play out in white *sanghas* who claim that conversations concerning racism are "too political."

tool when engaging with anger. Ecowomanist ethicist Melanie Harris observes that, "…womanists have interpreted Buddhism as offering strategies to interpret the grueling task of having to defend one's being and right to exist on the planet," as she references several of this paper's interlocutors in her work.[131] As opposed to harming self or others, one might transform anger from negative energy of the mind, body, and spirit into a productive energy, later harnessing this energy toward collective social justice action. As we will discuss when turning to Thich Nhat Hanh, such transformation cultivates Right Mindfulness, an essential element of the Noble Eightfold Path, and requires cumulative, ongoing practice.

Returning to *In Search*, Walker acknowledges that O'Connor brought her to life as a reader and writer, but Walker identifies on a personal and spiritual level with Hurston. Therefore, the condition of O'Connor's house, in stark contrast to the negligence that Hurston's grave has sustained, brings about incredible feelings of anger for Walker. In this dichotomy, systemic racism in the United States becomes exemplified through materialities. In particular, Walker focuses on the condition of the house and grave of these two important model artists in her life and what this implies about racial societal status, even after their deaths - namely the white artist as a life worth living, preserving, and grieving, and the black artist is unrecognized, unappreciated, and unacknowledged during life – and remains so, even after death. How can one live with this type of anger or confront it without the anger consuming her from the inside out?

[131] Interlocutors including Jan Willis, Alice Walker, bell hooks, Robin Hart, & others. From: Melanie L. Harris, "Engaged Buddhism and Liberation Theologies: Fierce Compassion as a Mode of Justice," in *Buddhist Responses to Globalization*, ed. Leah Kalmanson and James Mark Shields (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 102.

Movements Toward Liberating Anger

In 2006, Maya Angelou appeared on a television show called *Iconoclasts* with Dave Chappelle, another creative mind and a controversial comedian.[132] When asked about anger following Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s murder (and many others) during the sixties, Angelou responded to Chappelle:

> You should be angry…You must not be bitter…Bitterness is like cancer. It eats upon the host. It doesn't do anything to the object of its displeasure. So use that anger. You write it. You paint it. You dance it. You march it. You vote it. You do everything about it. You talk it. Never stop talking it.[133]

Like Walker, Angelou lists several tangible practices for liberating anger such that its seeds do not cultivate bitterness. We can connect Walker, Angelou, and other Womanists and Black Buddhists with the writings of Zen Master and Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, a world-renowned peace activist who, until his recent death, lived in Plum Village monastery in France.[134] Nhat Hanh wrote over thirty works on Buddhism, and in particular, on Engaged Buddhism as a practical means by which to address universal social injustices.[135] For instance, *Interbeing* guides readers through the fourteen guidelines of Engaged Buddhism.

On anger, Nhat Hanh writes: "Aware that anger blocks communication and creates suffering, we are determined to take care of the energy of anger when it arises and to recognize and transform the seeds of anger that lie deep in our consciousness."[136] In other words,

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[132] I'm grateful to my teacher, Dr. Carolyn Jones Medine, for directing me toward this quote during a classroom interaction in Fall 2016.
[133] Maya Angelou and Dave Chappelle, *Iconoclasts*, executive producers: Mike Davies, Andrew Fried, Chris Moore, Robert Redford, (2006: New York, NY: SundanceTV LLC, aired November 30, 2006), television show.
[134]Specifically chose Nhat Hanh's works because he's consistently referenced by Walker, hooks, reverend williams, Harris, Medine, and other Black Buddhists and social justice activists. Also, of note, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., nominated Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967. Full letter: https://plumvillage.org/letter-from-dr-martin-luther-king-jr-nominating-thich-nhat-hanh-for-the-nobel-peace-prize-in-1967/.
[135]Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation, "Planting Seeds of Compassion – Home," *Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation – Planting Seeds of Compassion*, 2015. Accessed April 14, 2017, https://www.thichnhathanhfoundation.org/.
[136]Thich Nhat Hanh, "The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings," *Interbeing*, (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1998), 18.

practicing intentional patience, we are instructed to embrace our anger, to sit with it. Later in her life, Walker urges readers, "Praise the pause,"[137] stressing the value of meditation practice, among Buddhism's other many jewels. Another prominent Black Buddhist ordained in Thailand, Faith Adiele, similarly reflects upon meditation practice in her book, *Meeting Faith: The Forest Journals of a Black Buddhist Nun*. Adiele writes, "Meditation forces me to be brutally honest with myself… The goal is in the practice. The good is in the practice. The god is in the practice."[138]

From this frame, let us return to "Beyond the Peacock." Instead of allowing herself to be consumed with anger towards O'Connor, Walker instead recognizes the positive impact O'Connor had in her life, choosing to "take the good, and let the rest rot."[139] Rather than harbor anger, Walker invests energy toward finding Black women writers as role models, while locating O'Connor within a particular historical and temporal period and simultaneously accepting their shared Southern background. Further, O'Connor's recognition as a great writer serves as foundation for Walker's own work as a Southern writer. This recognition does not excuse O'Connor's behavior, nor does it negate the fact that her home remains preserved after her death while Walker's home rots to ruin; rather, it cultivates understanding of the particular in relation to the universal, freeing the negative power this anger harbors over Walker.

Even angrier when she discovers the condition of Hurston's grave, Walker channels that negative energy in a positive manner by honoring her spiritual grandmother, a role model revolutionary artist, afterward resurrecting Hurston's literary works from the dead. Embodying the revolutionary artist in herself as she gives voice to Hurston, this important life experience

[137] Walker, "All Praises to the Pause; The Universal Moment of Reflection," *We Are the Ones.*
[138] Faith Adiele, *Meeting Faith: The Forest Journals of a Black Buddhist Nun*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 137.
[139] Walker, "Beyond the Peacock," *In Search,* 59.

demonstrates Walker cultivating her inner Buddha nature[140] in a practical way, though the labels for such practices will not be articulated for many years. This is Engaged Buddhism realized, or what Womanist scholar Layli Maparyan labels, "Luxocracy," or "rule by Light," as an orientation in the world.[141]

In contrast to Walker's response to anger, consider Jan Willis's response to an encounter with a racist historian when uncovering her African American ancestry. In her spiritual memoir *Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist, and Buddhist,* Willis reflects: "I was from a smoldering storm of fury too long stymied. And like a black bull, I was ready to destroy all the neatness and propriety of this white china shop."[142] Later, upon a particularly evil discovery that the racist historian's grandparents had once *owned* Willis's grandparents, and what's worse, the historian exhibited *pride* over this fact, Willis is so angry that she becomes ill, unable to sleep or eat for a period of ten days and completely incapacitated.[143] In *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, Nhat Hanh explains: "When Right Mindfulness is present, the Four Noble Truths and the seven other elements of the Eightfold Path are also present…Right Mindfulness is the energy which brings us back to the present moment."[144] However, one cannot cultivate Right Mindfulness when anger resides within. Let us imagine Nhat Hanh would respond to Willis's predicament, "The fire of anger burns in us day and night and causes us to suffer – even more than the one at whom we are angry. When anger is absent, we feel light and free."[145]

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[140] Here, using Buddha nature to mean essence of being or innate value as an earthling. Invokes connection with spirit, nature, Earth, and all living beings.
[141] For more on "Luxocracy," see the Epilogue from *The Womanist Idea* (2012) by Layli Maparyan.
[142] Jan Willis, *Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist, and Buddhist – One Woman's Spiritual Journey,* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2008), 275.
[143] Ibid., 277.
[144] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 64.
[145] Ibid., 79.

Acknowledging anger and then letting it go frees one of suffering so that one may cultivate their Buddha nature. Walker would call this "freeing the pain of the arrow no matter who the archer might be."[146] Reflecting upon her encounter with the racist historian to Lama Pema, Willis was surprised by his advice that she "spit out" this woman.[147] In other words, release the anger! In her memoir, Willis shares insight into her intentional, persistent Buddhist practice, and I am grateful for her generosity and vulnerability. Like Walker, williams, and other Black Buddhists, Willis discovers in Buddhism, particularly meditation practice, a methodology for engaging with anger at racial injustices, one of her oldest and deepest wounds.

In Search, written between the years 1966 and 1982 and published in 1983 as a collection, predates Walker's encounter with Buddhist nun Pema Chodron, her first dharma talk, and later, her open identification with Buddhism, by at least twenty years. Yet, when read as an entire collection, *In Search* reads as what Carolyn Jones Medine and John Randolph LeBlanc coin, a "spiritual autobiography" for Walker,[148] and she exposes herself and her Womanist Buddhist process in a vulnerable, intersecting, circular way, much like the elliptical shape of thought. Remember, the elements of the Noble Eightfold Path are not attained in an ordered, straight-forward fashion. Instead, elements of the Path are continuously circling, intersecting, and reinforcing one another, as one strives to awaken her Buddha nature. In *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, Nhat Hanh explains: "["a noble path of eight limbs"] suggests the interbeing

[146] Walker, "This Was Not An Area," *We Are The Ones*, 103.
[147] Willis, *Dreaming Me*, 279.
[148] John Randolph LeBlanc and Carolyn Jones Medine, "Alice Walker: Suffering and the Task of the Revolutionary Artist," *Ancient and Modern Religion and Politics – Negotiating Transitive Spaces and Hybrid Identities* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 171.

nature of these eight elements of the path. Each limb contains all the other seven."[149] Therefore, to cultivate one element and to address one issue is to begin to address all.[150]

Walker concludes *In Search* with her own radical self-acceptance and self-love, a necessary starting point if one intends to extend such radical love and compassion outward into the world, and a necessity within Buddhist practice. We must begin with non-violence toward ourselves in order to radiate non-violence outward, and we will revisit this necessary practice later in this paper when considering Walker's fictional characters from *Third Life*. Penetrating the seeds of anger before they turn into harmful resentment or violent action, Walker invites her readers to experience this transformative journey alongside herself as a Womanist writer.

In *being black*, williams rewrites Zen Buddhist Bodhisattva Vows with Black practitioners in mind, encouraging others to awaken their warrior spirits and engage with anger.[151] Touch it, sit with the anger, and then courageously let it go. Use that would-be negative energy in a positive outlet. As its title suggests, essays collected in *Black & Buddhist: What Buddhism Can Teach Us About Race, Resilience, Transformation, & Freedom,* edited by Yetunde and Giles, similarly engage with and respond to anger. Though Zen has been "just-so" packaged to mainstream, elitist white Americans over the last century or so, most white *sanghas* maintain what Carolyn Jones Medine correctly identifies as "pathological innocence,"[152] wishing to keep politics outside the *sangha* rather than actively confronting, naming, and dismantling imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. As Black Buddhists, williams, Willis, Yetunde, Giles (and countless others) seek to fill existing information gaps regarding American

[149] Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, 50.
[150] I recommend the introduction to *Black & Buddhist: What Buddhism Can Teach Us About Race, Resilience, Transformation, & Freedom* (Edited by Pamela Ayo Yetunde & Cheryl A. Giles, 2020) for an excellent overview of the basic tenets of Buddhism, and their Dedication lists several Black Buddhist practitioners.
[151] williams, *being black*, 67-83.
[152] Carolyn Jones Medine, On "pathological innocence," Personal Conversation. April 7, 2022.

Buddhist practices among racialized bodies within this intersecting system, openly name and challenge imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, and nourish themselves and their communities. However, before their works, we had Alice Walker's example.

Concluding "Looking for Zora," Walker writes: "It is only later, when the pain is not so direct a threat to one's own existence, that what was learned in that moment of comical lunacy is understood. Such moments rob us of both youth and vanity. But perhaps they are also times when greater disciplines are born."[153] Leading by example, Walker points her readers toward a way to survive in our society, and for those brave enough to engage with themselves in deep, reflective work, to *thrive* as they liberate anger from their spirit and cultivate Right Mindfulness, and eventually, their inner Buddha nature.

[153] Walker, "Looking for Zora," *In Search*, 116.

CHAPTER 5: TURNING MADNESS INTO FLOWERS: CULTIVATING NOURISHMENT

> …let me emphasize that I did not come to the study and practice of Buddhism to become a Buddhist. In fact, I am not a Buddhist. And the Buddha would not have minded this in the least. He would have been happy to hear it. He was not, himself, a Buddhist. He was the thing itself: an enlightened being…The challenge for me is not to be a follower of Something but to embody it; I am willing to try for that.[154]
>
> – Alice Walker, Dharma Talk, African American Buddhist Conference/Retreat, Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Woodacre, California, August 16, 2002

Nourishment

For Walker, as with many other Black Buddhists, Buddhist practice opens new paths for freedom, particularly when contending with racism, oppression, and anger. Yet, unlike a linear path with a demarcated "end," this worldview involves cumulative, ongoing practice. Much like the elliptical shape of thought, this means an ongoing circling back to reassess one's own life experience and practices. In 2002 during her famous Dharma Talk at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Walker guided listeners through a few examples of her practice. For instance, she facilitated a communal meditation during which she told the story of George Slaughter and asked for audience members to breathe for ten minutes, sending communal loving kindness toward all parties involved in his horrific murder. Those parties included George Slaughter, George's mother, his father (who led the lynching party), those who accompanied his father, and even George's horse.[155] This simple yet powerful meditation reads:

> May you be free
> May you be happy
> May you be at peace

[154] Walker, "This Was Not an Area of Large Plantations," *We Are the Ones*, 94.
[155] Ibid., 107-108.

May you be at rest
May you know we remember you[156]

Through this communal meditation practice during the first African American Buddhist retreat in North America, Walker shared some of her most important Buddhist teachings and thought patterns, including healing ourselves through extending loving kindness towards those who harm (or harmed) us, and, also ancestors. Additionally, she publicly affirmed the blended, intersecting religious identities of African American and Indigenous peoples, noting: "Though not a Buddhist, I have found a support in the teachings of the Buddha that is beyond measure, as I have found comfort and support in those teachings I have received from Ancient Africans and Indigenous people of my native continent and from the Earth itself."[157] Further, she shared a famous allegory of the Buddha's,[158] slightly adapted for contending with anger towards oppression, racism, anxiety, and life circumstances, worth quoting in full here:

> Suppose someone shot you with an arrow, right in the heart. Would you spend your time screaming at the archer, or even trying to locate him? Or would you try to pull the arrow out of your heart? White racism, that is to say, envy, covetousness and greed (incredible sloth and laziness in the case of enslaving others to work for you), is the arrow that has pierced our collective heart. For centuries we have tried to get the white archer even to notice where his arrow has landed; to connect himself, even for a moment, to what he has done…This teaching says: enough. Screaming at the archer is a sure way to remain attached to your suffering rather than easing or eliminating it. A better way is to learn, through meditation, through study and practice, a way to free yourself from the pain of being shot, no matter who the archer might be.[159]

In other words, what are practices which might cultivate healing? How might one remove the various arrows damaging them or their loved ones? In 2018, Walker further emphasized the importance of this teaching to her life and practice, publishing *Taking the Arrow Out of the*

[156] Ibid., 107.
[157] Ibid., 105.
[158] The story is in the Cūla-Mālunkyovada Sutta in the Majjhima Nikāya. See: https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.063.than.html.
[159] Walker, "This Was Not An Area," *We Are The Ones*, 103-104.

Heart: New Poems, in which she explains the Buddhist teaching (again) during the introduction and offers a series of poems centering on its message.[160]

We will return to this important archer/arrow teaching a little later, noting Walker's deployment of Buddhist thought among her fictional characters *years before* she openly acknowledged the influence of Buddhism and her Buddhist teachers in 2002. Just like Womanists existed long before labeled as such, Walker and other African Americans have deployed Buddhist thought and practice in the face of their ongoing involuntary presence in the United States, whether consciously or unconsciously. Charles Long might call this "nitty gritty pragmatism," whereas I deploy the term "skillful means," in connection with the popular Buddhist teaching from the Lotus Sūtra. Regardless of the label, African Americans consistently "take what works and leave the rest to rot,"[161] to survive global imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.[162]

Elliptical Return: The Third Life of Grange Copeland

Published in 1970, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (hereafter *Third Life*) emerged as Walker's first novel. *Third Life* contends with thematic interconnections among poverty, imprisonment, violence, parenthood, forgiveness, healing, and Black families. It chronicles the life (or "lives") and evolution of its protagonist, Grange, over a period of years living and working amongst the Southern sharecropping system. *Third Life* strikes as a real human story.

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[160] Alice Walker, *Taking the Arrow Out of the Heart: New Poems,* (Great Britain: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2018), xv-xvi.
[161] Walker, "Beyond the Peacock," *In Search,* 59.
[162] I recognize other scholars, such as Chandra Mohanty, offer similar labels for what hooks labels imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. For the purposes of this paper, I credit bell hooks because she's a Black Buddhist, and she expanded my original understanding of Mohanty's timeless works: "*Under Western Eyes*" and "*Under Western Eyes, Revisted*." Far too often, Black female intellectual labor goes uncited.

Flawed and anguished, its characters make big mistakes, endure violence and family strife, and as Charles Long would say, live the "nitty gritty." In *Critical Insights: Alice Walker*, Nagueyalti Warren reminds us that for Walker, this novel is personal and connects with her lived experiences.[163] Born near Eatonton,[164] Georgia, in 1944, Walker grew up with her parents as the youngest of eight children in a sharecropper's shack, and through them, she experienced the effects of the sharecropping system. *Third Life* offers interesting lessons as African Americans contend with and reflect upon their involuntary presence (and its legacies) in the United States; as Grange says to his granddaughter Ruth, "The Lord knowed that you could dump shit on a fellow for just so long before he begin to stink from with*in*."[165] For now, I focus primarily on Grange Copeland (juxtaposed alongside Brownfield, his son), especially through interactions with Ruth, though this practice can and should be extended among all of the novel's characters and their interconnected relationships.

The novel's beginning details Grange's marriage as a young man to Margaret, ongoing romantic affair with inn-owner Josie, and Brownfield's heartbreaking childhood home, including violence sustained to his own body and observed against his mother and illegitimate sibling. Towards the middle, Grange migrates to the North, leaving Brownfield as a young teen to fend for himself with his mother in their miserable life; as he gets older, Brownfield can neither forgive nor forget this offense. Yet, during this period in the North, Grange grows and changes considerably. Later, Grange returns to the South (hence, his "Third Life"), where he resumes

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[163] Nagueyalti Warren, "On Alice Walker," in *Critical Insights: Alice Walker*, ed. Nagueyalti Warren (Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2013), 12.
[164] During her 75th birthday celebration, hosted in downtown Eatonton in July 2019, Walker reminded the audience that she'd never technically lived within city limits because her family was not permitted to do so under Jim Crow. Further, she had not returned to 'Eatonton' at all since she moved away, meaning this event marked the first time she had ever been to the city which now claims her. As an audience member, I appreciated her taking the time to complicate this claiming of a 'return,' instead acknowledging the celebration as her first visit to the city.
[165] Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland,* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1970), 211.

fatherly responsibilities toward his granddaughter, Ruth, because his son Brownfield is unfit and unwilling to parent lovingly and compassionately. As it turns out, Brownfield murdered Ruth's mother, Mem, and ends up imprisoned. This portion of the novel, particularly Grange's interactions with Ruth when parenting her, allow for rich Womanist Buddhist textual analysis.

Nearing the end of the novel, Grange realizes a problematic pattern in his life (clinging to suffering), and in response, builds upon transformation (rooted in his experiences away in the North). To Ruth, he says, "The white folks hated me and I hated myself until I started hating them in return and loving myself. Then I tried just loving me, and then you, and *ignoring* them as much as I could,"[166] which sounds remarkably similar to Walker's archer/arrow story shared at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. In other words, starting with self (Grange: "loving me"), extending outward (Grange: "and then you" – i.e., Ruth) and ignoring them (i.e., the white archers), affords Grange a more loving and caring orientation within the world around him.

Brownfield, in response, reacts violently, wishing to take Ruth from Grange and treat her unkindly to make him suffer.[167] In response, Grange implores Brownfield to "…*hold tight a place in you where they can't come*;" they meaning white folks, generally. Toni Morrison communicates a similar message through her fictional characters in *Beloved*, i.e., the "only grace they can have is the grace they can imagine,"[168] and Grange does not wish for Brownfield to enact suffering upon his own daughter just to, "…make her wish she was dead just to git back at some white folks that you don't even know." Instead, Grange reminds Brownfield that, "We keep killing ourselves for peoples that don't even mean nothing *to* us!"[169]

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[166] Walker, *Third Life*, 196.
[167] Ibid., 203-209.
[168] Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, (New York: Penguin Group, 1987), 88.
[169] Walker, *Third Life*, 209.

Put another way by Nagueyalti Warren in her newest book, she notes Grange realizes that, "…while one person may not single-handedly change the facts of racism and oppression, a person can change his responses to the experiences."[170] For readers, *Third Life* presents an imaginative response to white supremacy which could open paths for living and healing, if the readers themselves remain open to the teachings. Alternatively, if folks remain confined to *samsara* – that endless cycle of suffering, perpetuating violence towards others and themselves (much like Brownfield's example) – receiving teachings which facilitate healing becomes nearly impossible. Often, this openness comes more easily following a pause, a rupture, and importantly, should be viewed as a cumulative and ongoing practice. For Grange, that pause was the move to the North before returning to the South.

Focusing on the Arrow, Not the Archer

In *Critical Insights: Alice Walker,* Warren writes on Walker's self-healing through artistic creation as opening pathways for reader healing.[171] Salamishah Tillet's new work, *In Search of The Color Purple: The Story of an American Masterpiece* (2021), similarly considers both personal and reader healing. This text combines autobiography and analysis with reflections on interviews with Alice Walker, and in it, Tillet considers pathways for healing from sexual violence and trauma for the characters in *The Color Purple,* herself, and for readers of the text. Though approaching from a frame with a different label, this chapter aims at a similar practice of acknowledging healing for Grange Copeland in *Third Life* as an example by which readers might learn to practice healing themselves. Further, though limited in this chapter to Grange and

[170] Nagueyalti Warren, *Alice Walker's Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 26.
[171] Warren, "On Alice Walker," 9.

Brownfield Copeland, this frame should be expanded to include other characters in the novel and, generally, across Walker's writing.

However, scholarship concerning *Third Life* remains limited, and much of what exists to date misses the mark of the text, i. e., Grange's healing and Ruth's hopeful future. For instance, Mark Schorer's 1970 book review published in *The American Scholar*, describes Grange as a character who "lives by crime,"[172] during his second life and does nothing to contextualize the necessity for actions committed while he is away in the North. Schorer condescendingly asserts that in the novel itself "Things fall apart. There is no center to hold," while imploring Walker grow as a novelist.[173] In 1985, just after *Third Life*'s publication in Great Britain, another review appeared in *The Sunday Times* (London) written by Andrew Graham-Dixon. Unfortunately, Graham-Dixon also missed the mark of the text, but because of the fifteen-year time lapse, he alludes to comparison of this novel with some of Walker's other works. Though he briefly acknowledges the impact of "white oppression" on the novel's characters, he wrote that, "the real subject of the book is women's heroic responses to the brutality of their husbands."[174] This brutality speaks to themes contested in Walker's literature, i. e., her ability to examine and acknowledge violence perpetuated among Black families, often involving Black men.

More than twenty years following its publication, concerns regarding *Third Life*'s "negative male imagery" remained in print.[175] Again, many scholars in the present avoid engaging with *Third Life* because they feel themes regarding violence perpetuated among Black

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[172] Mark Schorer, "Review: Novels and Nothingness," *The American Scholar* 40, no. 1, (1970-71): 170, accessed October 22, 2021. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41209830.
[173] Ibid., 172
[174] Andrew Graham-Dixon, "Books: Torments of the deep South; Review of 'The Third Life of Grange Copeland' by Alice Walker," *Sunday Times* (London, England), November 17, 1985. *Gale OneFile: News*, accessed April 13, 2022. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A118010481/STND?u=uga&sid=ebsco&xid=2933f497.
[175] See: Reginald Watson, "Negative Male Imagery in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*," *MAWA Review* 14, no. 1, (1999): 9-23.

families are problematic and could be taken out of context from the much larger issue, imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Yet, a few sources not as widely studied note healing potential for *Third Life'*s characters and complicate the many intersecting impacts of the involuntary presence of African Americans in the South, generally, and the Southern sharecropping system, specifically.[176] For instance, Robert James Butler's 1993 article published in *African American Review* puts *Third Life* in conversation with *In Search*, notes the importance of Grange's parental relationship to Ruth, and acknowledges his healing. Butler wrote:

> Whereas early in the book Grange seems "devoid of any emotion…except that of bewilderment" (13) and whereas in the middle of the book he is blinded by a nearly demonic hatred of whites, he finally becomes a fully developed, even heroic, person because of his recovery of a "home" in the black South.[177]

When concluding the article, Butler acknowledged that as a writer and a Southerner, Walker wished to complicate the South, rather than express only "one side," a non-duality inherent in both her fiction and her life.[178] Like the Alice Walker in the present, the Alice Walker of 1970 wanted folks to heal, which means confronting violence. Again, focus on the arrow, not the archer.

As our elliptical analysis shows, early seeds of Walker's Buddhist practice exist in *Third Life*, though the labeling of such practices as "Buddhist" do not come for Walker until over thirty years later. Further, like much of her fiction outside *The Color Purple*, scholarly work focusing on *Third Life* remains limited, and any work exploring Walker's Buddhist practice and thought

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[176] In future work, I would like to consider "Alice Walker: Finding Discursive Space in the Aesthetic Realm: The Third Life of Grange Copeland," published as a chapter in Phillip Auger's *Native Sons in No Man's Land: Rewriting Afro-American Manhood in the Novels of Baldwin, Walker, Wideman, and Gaines* (2000) and Klaus Ensslen's essay, "Collective Experience and Individual Responsibility: Alice Walker's Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970," published in the edited volume *The Afro-American Novel Since 1960*, edited by Peter Bruck and Wolfgang Karrer (1982).

[177] Robert James Butler, "Alice Walker's Vision of the South in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*," *African American Review* 27, no. 2, (1993): 202-203, accessed October 22, 2021. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3042012.

[178] Ibid., 203.

remains *especially* limited. For instance, two new critical texts published in the last two years by Walker scholars collectively mention Buddhism or Buddha a total of five times among their pages.[179]

Yet, through this exercise, I join the ranks of scholars such as Melanie Harris, Carolyn Jones Medine, Layli Phillips Maparyan, Pamela Ayo Yetunde, Jan Willis, reverend angel Kyodo williams, bell hooks, and others who acknowledge and honor Walker's Womanist Buddhist perspective, continuously asking, "What can this teach us?" In June 2009, Walker delivered a graduation address at Naropa University entitled, "Human Sunrise," during which she specifically and explicitly cites the Buddha and Buddhism several times. In closing, we might imagine the Walker of 2009 speaking to her characters from *Third Life,* ancestors, (and to the rest of us):

> 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.[180]

Thank you, Ms. Alice. May we all recognize this gift, and through that recognition, our place(s) in the movements toward both personal and collective freedom, whether from ourselves, our oppressors, from our participation in cycles perpetuating oppression, or from the interplay between and among all of these.

A Womanist Buddhist orientation results in: pauses, "self-generated enthusiasm" perhaps obtained through meditation, gardening, dance, prayer or any other practice which allows us to

[179] Though they do not extensively consider Buddhism, these texts remain relevant and useful: *Alice Walker's Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit*, Nagueyalti Warren, 2019 and *Understanding Alice Walker*, Thadious M. Davis, 2021.
[180] Walker, "Human Sunrise: A Letter to the Graduating Class of Naropa University," *The Cushion in the Road,* 53-54.

reach "inner state of recognized divinity,"[181] reflection upon one's own identities, perspectives, and patterns of meaning-making in a particular time and space; *and* a continuous elliptical return, like the turning of a wheel – over, over, over – such that you may "free yourself from the pain of being shot, no matter who [or what] the archer might be."[182]An elliptical return implies the conscious, continuous, and cumulative nature of this practice.

We, therefore, turn our focus toward the arrow and healing wounds, all the while wishing peace and wellbeing toward the archer. May they also heal themselves and their wounds. This shift in consciousness, towards a mode of being, resonates with what Layli Maparyan notes as the "animating impulse" of Womanism, a movement toward what she calls, "Luxocracy – rule by Light." Her words inspire and unsettle me; they make for the perfect conclusion to this chapter. She writes:

> As I see it, humanity is headed toward a form of social organization based on universal acceptance and expression of innate divinity, the inner light. I name this horizon of human social organization, "Luxocracy – rule by Light," … The logic of womanism is this: when hearts and minds change, the world changes... Womanism exists to guide humankind along this path toward Luxocracy through the permeation of the everyday sphere with love, harmony, care, interconnectedness, cosmic inspiration, and Spirit. These are the attributes, the energies that cause human beings to abandon violence, conflict, exploitation, objectification, dehumanization, and materialism in favor of altruism, peace, healing, sustainability, collective self-actualization, and reverence. These are the thoughtforms, mindframes, and inspired states that enable us to become the next, higher version of ourselves – not just individually, but as a human race together.[183]

[181] Walker, "This Was Not An Area," *We Are The Ones*, 109.
[182] Ibid., 103.
[183] Layli Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 320.

CHAPTER 6: PRESENT (AND PERSONAL) CONNECTIONS

It is our duty to fight for our freedom.

It is our duty to win.

We must love each other and support each other.

We have nothing to lose but our chains.

– Assata Shakur[184]

As I move towards conclusion of this elliptical practice, I need to briefly return to the beginning, including my entry point into this scholarship and Walker's radical example of lived healing practices. How did I come to this work? Why did I come to this work? How has it evolved alongside my evolution over the past (nearly) six years? Why does it matter?

The Personal as Political (& Vice Versa)

Academic writing shies away from the first-person, looks down upon autobiographical writing, and as we have been told as teachers and practitioners, wants to "keep the personal out of the classroom." Yet, as bell hooks and many other Womanists and audacious liberationists remind us, "the personal is political and vice versa," to which I add, where we choose to invest our time, energy, and spirit in the Academy is both personal and interconnected to other beings, each other, and remaining aspects of our lives. In "Who's Schooling Who? Black Women and

[184] Published on page ix of *when they call you a terrorist: a black lives matter* memoir by Patrisse Khan-Cullors & Asha Bandele, (New York: St. Martin's Press), 2018. For a concise history on Shakur's quote and connection to contemporary BLM movements, I highly recommend: Charlene A. Carruthers, "Hearing Assata Shakur's Call," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 3 & 4, (2018): 222-225, accessed March 28, 2022, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/2651134.

the Bringing of the Everday into Academe, or Why We Started *The Womanist*,"[185] Phillips (Maparyan) and McCaskill remind us:

> Ironically, universality emerges not from the imposition of sameness and the enforced proclamation that "we're all just human underneath it all," but from the careful and respectful acknowledgement that both individuals and groups have experiences that generate differences in both vision and concern and the recognition that these differences can contribute to the robustness and optimal functioning of the human race as a whole.[186]

The "we're all just human underneath it all," sounds remarkably similar to the harmful (and Medine would say, "pathologically innocent") proclamation, "I don't see color," often spoken by white folks who refuse to acknowledge their participation in and benefits from imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Yet, this refusal keeps everyone trapped in the system, in *samsara*, from Buddhist teachings, or in "chains" from Shakur's quote opening this chapter.

Right Livelihood, a branch of the Noble Eightfold Path, reminds us that we should contextualize the choices we make as it pertains to how we make our living, including but not limited to the ways we participate in the Academy. Put simply by reverend angel Kyodo williams, Right Livelihood:

- Expresses who we are and where we want to be
- Acknowledges that what we do in the world is not separate from who we are
- Honors all our time as being important to our sense of wholeness and connection[187]

Again, Right Livelihood intersects with other aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path and should not be ignored. Further, as a scholar occupying a white body[188] and practicing decolonizing pedagogy, this remains an ongoing practice, recognizing each encounter as an opportunity to

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[185] This 1995 essay remains a foundational text for my scholarship. I'm grateful to Dr. Barbara McCaskill, who when she found out, gifted me an original printed version. I highly recommend reading this essay, over and over, as it continuously offers new insights.
[186] Phillips (Maparyan) and McCaskill, "Who's Schooling Who?" *Signs*, 1011.
[187] williams, *being black*, 116.
[188] Though I do not ascribe to the superiority of white bodies, my white body participates in and benefits from white supremacy in tangible ways (as do all white bodies).

stretch my mind and heart, continuously decolonizing myself as I hone my teaching practices, and pushing boundaries for decolonization in the personal and professional spaces I occupy with others of varying perspectives, identities, and mindsets. These collective considerations, over time, allow me to engage with my own suffering, analyze its roots, and also to connect with the suffering of other beings around me.

Again, why does this matter? When I began this work, I focused primarily on anger. I remember my first conversation with Dr. Carolyn Jones Medine in her basement office of Peabody Hall. Another of her students, Kate Daley-Bailey, insisted that she walk me over to Dr. Medine's office that hot summer July day in 2016. Nearly a year had passed since I began reading Alice Walker's writings at home on my own, and I was simultaneously frightened and emboldened by the personal healing catalyzed by Walker's works. I will never forget Kate's insistence on this meeting because I was terrified and intimidated to meet Dr. Medine. For the previous year or so, several colleagues who had studied with her and worked alongside me in academic advising had insisted I meet her. There were so many universal nudges and encouragements, and I am grateful for all of them. All I knew at that time was that I wanted to read and study more Alice Walker, and specifically, I was picking up on aspects of anger in her writing and her Buddhist response to anger. She was my entry point for understanding my own anger, acknowledging its roots in trauma, and for understanding larger societal systems, such as imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. However, at that time six years ago, the anger stood out to me most.

I recall Dr. Medine's puzzled look, because as we know, Walker does not present as angry, and the troubling stereotype of the angry Black woman remains in effect; yet, she generously agreed to take me on as a student and see where this path went. As a first-generation

college student from a poverty class background, I have always worked multiple jobs to support my educational pursuits. Also, it so happens that I am a single parent to a small human. When I initially began my graduate studies, my sweet Cooper had just turned three years old. Hesitant to bite off more than I could chew, I committed to one class that first semester as a non-degree seeking graduate student using the University System of Georgia Tuition Assistance Program (TAP). At that time, I was fighting an ongoing legal battle with Cooper's abusive father, and I was learning healing practices to contend with the multiple traumas I experienced in childhood, long before I became a parent myself. It was against this backdrop and within this context that I first experienced Alice Walker during her 2015 visit to the University of Georgia as the inaugural Delta Visiting Chair, and later, as I read her works.[189]

As a scholar occupying a white body who practices decolonizing pedagogy and works towards cultivating a Black Studies mindset,[190] it is imperative that I establish the lens and perspectives from which I engage with this work. To that end, I share autobiographical glimpses which establish my entry point into the work. In short, I have experienced severe sexual, physical, spiritual, and mental traumas, and, as a result of those unique experiences alongside the identities I occupy, as I moved into elitist spaces (such as the Ivory Tower of Academe), I have lived and worked as a marginalized subject with respect to the majority around me. This does not mean that I experience the same trauma of racism; however, the pain I experience to my mind, body, and spirit allows me a unique entry point, or a kind of double-consciousness, to use DuBois.[191]

[189] For more on the Delta Chair at The University of Georgia, see: https://deltachair.uga.edu/about/delta-chair/.
[190] Darlene Clark Hine, "A Black Studies Manifesto," *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2014.11413683.
[191] W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (Rhode Island: Millenium Publications, 2014), 5.

I am forever indebted and grateful to Alice Walker, in ways that she may never know, because my first readings of *The Color Purple* and *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens* catalyzed radical personal healing for me, a process which continues in the present and to which I have added a long list of teachers.[192] It is this radical personal healing which allowed for my gradually increasing capacity to sit with the suffering of others, suffering that I do not personally experience to my own physical body, and to find tangible and creative ways to engage with that suffering such that I minimize it in the ways I can, and when possible, work towards dismantling systems which sustain the suffering.[193] Therefore, what began as an interest wrapped up in my own personal healing journey became something much larger in my life; this mindset became an active way of engaging in the world. It taught me practices for retreat[194] and deep listening.[195] It shaped the way I interact with my students as a practitioner. Moving forward, it informs the work I will engage with in academic spaces and, more importantly, with everyday folks.

Anticipated Criticisms

In her insightful essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," Audre Lorde reminded us, "What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruit of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable."[196] Thus, while I acknowledge anticipated criticisms of this

[192] bell hooks, Toni Morrison, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, angel Kyodo williams, Pamela Ayo Yetunde, Chandra Mohanty, Judith Butler, Jan Willis, Fatima Mernissi, and many others.
[193] On a global scale, the best label for this suffering remains imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Thanks, bell hooks.
[194] Yoga, gardening, CrossFit, dance, time spent outside, & meditation.
[195] Meditation, sitting with the suffering of others, journaling, & parenting.
[196] Lorde, "The Master's Tools", *The Master's Tools*, 17.

thesis and my work, I simultaneously encourage critics to stretch their minds and consider which systems and power structures they perpetuate.

In some Womanist circles, as we discussed, Walker's open sexual fluidity, critiques of violence in all forms, and lack of Christian-centered religious practice remain criticized. Again, I imagine Walker urging folks to "take what works, and leave the rest to rot,"[197] from her Womanist definition and its accompanying Womanism movement, if it moves them towards meaning-making and facilitates healing in their lives and scholarship. In a similar vein, I take the same approach and wish these critics well; hopefully, they might learn something in this pause which disrupts their norms.

As for anticipated critiques regarding Black Buddhist practice, – i.e. labeling them "Orientalist," or "romanticized" notions of Buddhism, deeming them "not real," or dismissing Buddhism practiced "in this way," – David McMahan's *The Making of Buddhism Modernism,* contends with these critics, particularly his insightful arguments concerning the spread of Buddhism and its adaptability as it moves and changes in different temporal and geo-political spaces. Also, in another paper currently under peer review for the online journal *Literature*, I link these legitimacy questions for Black Buddhists to the earlier historical legitimacy debate regarding the first dual ordination of early East Asian Buddhist nuns.[198] In short, the boundary enforcers for imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (in all of its many forms throughout history) do not welcome margin dwellers in "their" spaces – whether that means the first East Asian Buddhist nuns in monasteries or Black Buddhists in the Ivory Tower of the

[197] Folk expression quoted by Alice Walker in: "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor," *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Inc., 1983), 59.
[198] Once published, this article will be available open access via: https://www.mdpi.com/journal/literature for the special issue, "Spirituality, Identity, and Resistance in African American Literature, edited by Carolyn Jones Medine.

Academy. In my experience in the Academy, an outsider in terms of upbringing, background, socio-economic level, and first-generation status, I notice it seems important for Buddhist Studies scholarship that certain boundaries hold – i.e. What counts as "real Buddhism"?

Ann Gleig and Adeana McNicholl provided some helpful contemporary sources in American Buddhist Studies which speak to the recent interest in Black Buddhist practice and the expansive reach of racism within American Buddhist communities. Yet, as I already suggested in my critique, their work currently misses the mark in important ways. Gleig's chapter, "Undoing Whiteness in American Buddhist Modernism," published in *Buddhism and Whiteness*, notes the lack of Black Buddhist representation in American Buddhist Modernism and critiques whiteness and racism; however, it does not mention dismantling imperialist white supremacy. McNicholl's recent articles serve as counter-narrative to Black Buddhist exclusion;[199] however, her digital research project (in partnership with Gleig) on "Teaching Race and Racism in Buddhist Studies,"[200] lacks Black Buddhist representation. In the spirit of "taking what works and leaving the rest to rot," I appreciate Gleig and McNicholl's efforts thus far. Perhaps, we may collaborate in the future.

However, I am disappointed that I do not see the likes of reverend angel Kyodo williams, Dr. Pamela Ayo Yetunde, Lama Rod Owens, Dr. Carolyn Jones Medine, Dr. Melanie Harris, or other Womanists or Black Buddhists among the ranks of collected interviews or contributors to the project. Rather than teach about race and racism, something racialized bodies experience, I implore white scholars and practitioners specifically teach decolonizing pedagogy and dismantle white supremacy, something they participate in and benefit from in tangible ways.

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[199] Previously cited and included with references: McNicholl, "Being Buddha, Staying Woke," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion;* and, McNicholl, "Buddhism and Race," *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Race in American History*.
[200] See: http://teachingbuddhism.net/teaching-race-and-racism/.

Approaching conclusion, I invite a pause and encourage the reader to consider the following questions mentioned in previous chapters: Who gets to decide what counts as Buddhism? Why do they get to decide? What are their motivations?

Dismantling White Supremacy through Decolonizing the Everyday

Dismantling white supremacy is an ongoing practice, and it requires diligence, patience, humility, and as Charles Long would remind us, a "crawling back"[201] perspective from which we imagine and participate in both our recent and distant histories. Black and Brown bodies are disproportionately dying from this work, one of the many legacies of their involuntary presence in the United States. Therefore, it is imperative that white scholars join them in this work in responsible and intentional ways.

Moving forward, I am especially excited about scholarship generally connecting Engaged Buddhism, caste, and Bhimrao Ambedkar's writings as it pertains to the storying of India's history, the legacy of Gandhi, and decolonizing practices moving forward. Though not included in this thesis, this research interest connects broadly to global imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and its legacies in India, linking them to Dalit Studies in the present and the lived everyday experiences of Dalits. Further, I look forward to the following forthcoming sources mentioned in previous chapters: *Standing on Two Legs: Buddhist Resources for Womanist Reflection*, *Gathering Blossoms Under Fire: The Journals of Alice Walker, 1965-2000*, edited by Valerie Boyd, Carolyn Jones Medine's chapter on "African American and Womanist Buddhists" in the *Routledge Handbook of Buddhist-Christian Studies*, edited by Carol Anderson and Thomas Cattoi, and an Oxford bibliography entry on Alice Walker, for which I am

[201] Charles Long, "Introduction," *Significations,* 9.

co-author along with Medine. Again, current scholarship is beginning to examine the diverse practices of Black Buddhists, and I urge readers to consider workshops or retreats facilitated by Pamela Ayo Yetunde, reverend angel Kyodo williams, or the Spirit Rock Meditation Center. Also, Stephanie Evans recently published her beautiful and groundbreaking book on Black women's yoga practice, *Black Women's Yoga History: Memoirs of Inner Peace* (2021), and I highly recommend this book and her scholarship. Finally, I enjoy leading book clubs in the Athens community with my sisterfriend, Sha'Mira Covington, from a Womanist Buddhist and trauma-informed perspective, one of the tangible ways we connect our scholarship to our lived experiences (i.e., the nitty gritty or everyday). In Fall 2020, we read *when they call you a terrorist: a black lives matter memoir,* by Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele, and in Fall 2021, *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women a Movement Forgot,* by Mikki Kendall, and we facilitated real conversations with real people about their everyday lives. This work is nourishing, and it continues in many forms, including conference participation (such as during the 2022 Southern Humanities Council Conference in Memphis, Tennessee), and (we hope) a forthcoming journal article reflecting on our experiences as co-facilitators from a duo-ethnographic approach.

In *killing rage: ENDING RACISM,* Black Buddhist bell hooks reminded us that beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world.[202] In the spirit of small movements toward that beloved community, this paper contributes to the growing body of intentional, interdisciplinary scholarship and practice which inspires us to imagine a *more* perfect, *more* just society by becoming curious with patterns played out in

[202] bell hooks, *killing rage: ENDING RACISM*, (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1995), 263-272.

history – turning over, over, over, much like a wheel – that we must examine through Charles Long‘s counter-turning elliptical analysis. That curiosity invites a humbling pause, a crawling back, fully embracing the elliptical shape of thought and its reverberations in our lives. My sincere hope is that through this brief Womanist Buddhist exercise, through this practice, more questions are raised, rather than “answers” being given.

Mindful of this pattern, I conclude with a poem by Alice Walker in *Taking the Arrow Out of the Heart: New Poems*. I will not explicitly explain its connection to the rest of this thesis; rather, I will let your imagination make that connection for you. May it instigate righteous anger and awaken consciousness. Finally, may it inspire resistance, solidarity, and hope.

The Circle

I myself do not believe
in political parties
comprised, generally, in my experience, of so
many who
are not awake. Still, all options must be
presented by those who care.

An unbalanced wakefulness
can be as treasonous
as blind sleep.

Let there be a private counsel
first
with one’s own heart.
One’s own bright
or blighted
spirit and soul.

Then from that sacred spot
of personal centering
move outward
to The Circle.

There are always others
more wise than us.
Let us hear them with humility

and do not, as in the past,
obey an impulse
to shout them down.

We owe it to all the others
gone before us
black, white, red;
you know,
the merry ones
who would have died
laughing –

if this cheekiness
had not been
crushed out of them –
to step thoughtfully here
into what future
there is left.

We have not lost
and are not lost
if we hold ourselves
in honor and respect.

There is a way forward
and yes
it is with a broken
heart
but it is our own way
collectively convened,
pondered,
shared.
The Circle (call all your friends!),
like the church
in all our struggles
an extension
of our unshakably
trustworthy
and consoling
arms.

Like a wise grandparent
who loves us
more than life itself
The Circle sends us out
into the world

in the direction we choose
fortified
by its collective wisdom
and ancestor driven
love.[203]

[203] Alice Walker, *Taking the Arrow Out of the Heart*, 37-38.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

> I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of color remains chained. Nor is any one of you.[204]
>
> – Audre Lorde, in "Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism"
>
> Do not think that the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice non-attachment from views in order to be open to receive others' viewpoints. Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge. Be ready to learn throughout your entire life and to observe reality in the world and in yourself at all times.[205]
>
> – Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Commentaries on the Tiep Hien Precepts*

Again, Womanism, as defined by Phillips (Maparyan) is:

> A social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension.[206]

Intentionally juxtaposed, Lorde, Nhat Hanh, and Phillips (Maparyan) speak to the intersecting and connected points manifested in the pause, i.e. insights which emerge through this Womanist Buddhist practice: 1. a re-imagining of our worldview from the vantage point of those marginalized within what Morrison deems the master narrative or hooks labels imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy; 2. the inextricable interconnectedness of all beings, and; 3. the importance of noticing the tangible, everyday, decolonizing practices (i.e. the nitty gritty) which

[204] Audre Lord, "Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, (London: Penguin Random House, 2018), 34.
[205] Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*, 30.
[206] Phillips (Maparyan),"Womanism: On its Own," *The Womanist Reader*, xx-xxi.

fracture imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, in the (seemingly) small ways we can.

These powerful truths operate as modes of being and ongoing, cumulative practices, therefore allowing scholars, practitioners, and everyday folks to meaningfully participate in collective social justice movements. This thesis serves as a small but tangible relic of my personal (and ongoing) decolonizing practice, and through it I establish the importance and utility of the little explored Womanist Buddhist frame of analysis.

To that end, Chapters One and Two grounded the thesis, reviewing Womanism and its trajectory in literature and the Academy, alongside tensions and intersections with the likes of African Womanism and Black Feminism. For instance, tensions remain within some Womanist and African Womanist circles concerning Alice Walker's sexuality, blended religious practices, and willingness to critique violence in Black families. Yet, on a spectrum moving away from imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, Womanism remains further along, particularly when we take seriously the definition as articulated by Phillips (Maparyan). Also, Chapter Two gestured towards a Womanist Buddhist frame, with its roots in Alice Walker's first Dharma Talk, "This Was Not an Area of Large Plantations: Suffering Too Insignificant for the Majority to See."[207]

Next, Chapter Three proved necessary for additional context concerning Black Buddhists, particularly in light of presumed Christianity among Black religious life. Though it did not establish a complete history of Buddhism practiced among Black folks in the United States, it posed an imaginative understanding of Buddhism carried among Black and Brown bodies during the transatlantic slave trade, with blended practices passed down informally among families long

[207] Walker, "This Was Not an Area," *We Are the Ones*, 88-110.

before formal labeling. This chapter's inclusion serves as counter-narrative since Black Buddhists have traditionally been excluded from the discussion concerning American Buddhist practice (just as they are often excluded or experience racism from predominantly white convert *sanghas*). Black Buddhists disrupt the "Two Buddhisms" myth in American Buddhist Studies – that American Buddhists are either "white" or "Asian." Also, Chapter Three briefly referenced important contemporary sources written, edited, or compiled by Black Buddhist scholars and practitioners and imagined intentional, collaborative anti-racist scholarship within Buddhist Studies aimed at actively challenging and dismantling imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, rather than simply teaching about racism.

Finally, we reached Chapter Four, the peak of our elliptical practice. Chapter Four primarily focused on two essays by Walker published within *In Search*: "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor," and "Looking for Zora." Using a Womanist Buddhist lens and drawing heavily upon Zen Buddhist reverend angel Kyodo williams coupled with Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, Chapter Four explored anger within these important essays, linked anger with the involuntary presence and legacies for African Americans in the United States, and moved towards liberating anger, which becomes the focus for Chapter Five. Therefore, Chapter Four served as example for a pattern of meaning-making, an elliptical shape of thought, which should continuously turn over, over, and over, much like a wheel. Chapter Four does not establish this as the only way for such a practice; rather, it shared one offering.

Chapter Five largely concerned itself with cultivating nourishment, linking Walker's current Buddhist practice with earlier seeds (or traces) from some of her first published writing. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker's first novel, demonstrated that even a decade

before *In Search*, and at least thirty years before she openly identified with Buddhism, Walker's fictional characters exhibited similar ways of being, later noted as instrumental for Black Buddhists: namely, identifying anger (as a living, breathing involuntary presence within imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy) *and* practicing strategies for liberating anger. Chapter Five centered around one such strategy, shared during Walker's 2002 Dharma Talk at Spirit Rock, the archer/arrow metaphor, the Cūla-Mālunkyovada Sutta in the Majjhima Nikāya. During this talk, Walker explained that focusing heavily on the archer, the one who shot an arrow at you, is a waste. Instead, we should concern ourselves (and she's speaking primarily to racialized bodies here) with, "freeing the pain of the arrow no matter who the archer might be."[208] Further, Chapter Five moved toward the contemporary connections, concluding with Layla Phillips (Maparyan)'s poignant, hopeful, and imaginative explanation regarding "Luxocracy," rule by Light, as an orientation in the world.

Finally, Chapter Six disrupted elitist, "Academic" norms by including my personal and vulnerable entry point into the work as a scholar. Further, it brought the importance of the work into the present, linking experiences with foundational Womanists and a Womanist Buddhist frame to present decolonizing pedagogical teaching and learning practices, concerns with everyday folk (for example, with Kendall's *Hood Feminism*), and movements toward a collective humanity grounded in hope and justice, fiercely and audaciously loving ourselves and each other.

Obviously, the work isn't finished; to deem it so arrogantly misses the mark. Therefore, I do not offer a "conclusion" to this elliptical practice. Rather, I invite a pause (with palms together).

[208] Walker, "This Was Not an Area," *We Are the Ones*, 103-104.

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