

[Not] Losing My Religion: Using *The Color Purple* to Promote Critical Thinking in the Writing Classroom

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ABSTRACT: Private student discourses are often ignored or prohibited in the academy; however, these private discourses are very meaningful, and representative of the ways that students order and speak about the world. Specifically, religion is an extremely significant private student discourse; exploring religious discourse might help students not only to understand the ideological and linguistic formations of discourses, including those that undergird and shape religion, but also to refine their own discourses, written and spoken, inside and outside of school. Using The Color Purple by Alice Walker, a text that problematizes religious discourse, Ira Shor's Critical Teaching and Everyday Life as a model of illuminating ideological analysis, as well as critical essays about religious discourses, students read, discuss, and write about religion and other private discourses to enhance their writing and critical thinking, and secure a more stable rhetorical position within the academy.

KEYWORDS: private discourse; religion; The Color Purple; Ira Shor; black church; composition; basic writing

In the introduction to *Cross-cultural Approaches to Literacy*, Brian Street recommends an ethnographic approach to literacy that explores “the creative and original ways in which people transform literacy to their own cultural concerns and interests” (1). However, Street reminds us that all literacies are ideological and can play a significant role in “reproducing or challenging structures of power and domination” (7). For Street, the ideological nature of literacy is a primary reason that we should adopt a cross-cultural approach, exploring the different ways through literacy that people make meaning in the world. Toward this point, the use of private discourses in the classroom, as Hannah Ashley and Katy Lynn suggest, stimulates a field for “identity negotiation,” “discourse testing,” and the “performance of multiple voices” (7) which, citing Pierre Bourdieu, they define as “utterances voiced through

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speakers known intimately or at least personally by the author” (10). Corresponding with Street’s understanding of literacy and ideology, they draw the distinction between personal and private discourse: one “grants experience asylum from critique,” while the other “reminds us that perceptions, preferences, desires, even bodily sensations are not simply our own, but are shaped and constructed socially, in discourse” (11). According to Ashley and Lynn, these aspects of experience “get called into question when they butt against a different community discourse” (11). This discourse interaction is crucial because, as Rebecca Powell believes, “a commitment to illumination requires that we make our own subjectivities objects of critique, that we critically examine our own ideological assumptions” (qtd. in Tinberg 358).

In the writing classroom, the exploration of private discourses holds promise for students to engage with language and literacy that really matters to them, while also moderating the tendency toward often sacred *for* or *against* positions of argument (Lynch, George, Cooper 6). My experience of teaching developmental and freshman writing at a four-year, open admissions, private university, includes students from mostly poor and working class backgrounds who represent a variety of ethnicities and races, such as African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Caribbean. For many of these students, religion is one of the most intimately involving discourses of their private lives, a lens through which they understand and navigate the world. I don’t think I overstate the case when I say that it is religion that allows some students to get out of the house in the morning, encouraging and supporting them to struggle through another day. At the same time, I think that most of us have had the experience of discussing a sensitive topic, say, homosexuality, in class and hearing students oppose it based on religious beliefs.

Students need to recognize that any discourse is ideologically based, carrying with it the sociocultural attitudes and beliefs of a particular group of people. Understanding this ideological base can help students to better understand the discourse, and generate a willingness to critically engage other discourses for their ideological underpinnings as well. Still instructors, reflecting the field, hesitate to engage religion for its socially interrogative capacity. But might students be encouraged to explore religion because it is so important to many of their lives? Might a controversial text, such as *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, provide students with a way to explore and interrogate religious themes and ideas without condemning or belittling students’ beliefs, while also actuating religion’s potential toward social critique? And might examining religion as a private discourse increase

students' critical thinking, which they could apply to the examination of other private and public discourses and ideas? In what follows, I will attempt to answer these questions.

INTERROGATING READER RESPONSE

Like discourse, reading is ideologically based in that we bring who we are and all we know about the world to our reading of texts. In "Which Reader's Response?" Marjorie Godlin Roemer discusses the problem of efficacious reading strategies in her examination of reader response theory, which posits that the reader recreates the text every time he or she reads. Analyzing major reader response theorists, Roemer concludes that these theorists miss or downplay the importance of the ideologies that ground both reader and text:

As articulated by David Bleich, Wolfgang Iser, Louise Rosenblatt, Stanley Fish, and others, reader-response theory puts its emphasis on what occurs in the transaction between reader and text. For Bleich, the attention is on the way a reader projects his own desires on a text; for Iser and Rosenblatt, the interest lies in the interaction between text and reader, what the text activates in the reader, and what the reader activates in the text; for Fish, the focus is on the communal assumptions that control the sorts of attention we pay to texts and thereby shape our readings of them. In all this interchange about what actually constitutes the experience of reading and its appropriate pedagogy, what seems to be overlooked is full awareness of the ideological issues these positions raise. For despite Stanley Fish's ingenious argument to the contrary, most of us feel that the theories, or beliefs, we hold about literature and interpretation should shape our practice. Converts to reader-response theory see themselves effecting a more dynamic, more empowering classroom situation with readers who are being invited to make active and personal engagements with the texts they encounter. In principle I agree; in practice I am less certain. (911-12)

Roemer goes on to discuss the interpretive controls that teachers and the academy impose on students' reading of texts, explaining that there is an acceptable set of interpretations for any given text and students who "deviate" from those interpretations "transgress at their own peril" (112).

Roemer believes that the ideologies of both reader (including teacher) and text should be open to scrutiny. She advocates Paulo Freire's critical literacy or pedagogy of liberation as an interpretive strategy to help students read texts, privileging Freire's *conscientização*, which he defines as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (qtd. in Roemer 918). Again in agreement with Freire, Roemer recommends "a style of teaching that sharply focuses on the students' own circumstances and how they, as individuals and as a group, can be helped to greater self-awareness and more complex understandings of their own reality" (918-19). Kyle Fiore and Nan Elsasser also support Freire's method and his desire to "help students become critically conscious of the connection between their own lives and the larger society and to empower them to use literacy as a means of changing their own environments" (287).

Of course, many have challenged Freire's pedagogy, including, rather famously, Patricia Bizzell, who claims that Freire pretends "his critical literacy methods merely pointed out truths in reality for students to discover—that is, that his methods were strictly objective and value-free" ("Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness" 21). On the surface, Bizzell seems to accuse Freire of replacing one teacher-imposed interpretation with another; however, in "Classroom Authority and Critical Pedagogy" Bizzell explains that the truly liberatory classroom is often a myth and suggests that teachers "persuade" students to accept their "authority" while recognizing, and even challenging, the institutional constraint under which they all suffer (852). Roemer recognizes the ideological and institutional obstacles teachers face, but still supports more student interpretive freedom and objects to "teachers [who] often send subtle but firm messages about which readings should be shared, condoned, and supported, and which readings mark the reader as aberrant" (915). "For the teacher committed to fostering a plurality of readings, there are still always," in Roemer's opinion, "privileged modes of analysis, privileged values, privileged ways of reading the world" (915). I agree with Roemer that we need to create classrooms in which multiple interpretations are acceptable, in which students are encouraged to use their own discourses, their own ideologies to read and respond to texts, because, other discourses, if you will, can often produce illuminating insights that benefit all students. Ashley and Lynn report that in one of their classes, African American and Latina students problematized the idea of body image by their reading of a white female student's essay about her desire to be thin. Using personal

experience, both cultural and familial, the nonwhite students unearthed some specific social factors that impact how many American women view their bodies. Allowing the nonwhite students to explain their reading of the student text helped the entire class to examine female body image in new and illuminating ways (11). In a sense, the nonwhite students challenged the privileged, or dominant, discourse about body image, uncovering the ideological base of a mainstream viewpoint. Roemer's belief in the efficacy of welcoming into the classroom multiple interpretations and discourses, particularly those that seem aberrant or non-traditional, is a view and approach I share, and using private discourses in the writing classroom will ensure that *other* voices are heard.

RELIGION AND THE BLACK CHURCH: LEGACY FOR THE WRITING CLASSROOM

If we follow Roemer and encourage more interpretive freedom in the classroom, then we open ourselves to different ways that students see the world. As I said before, many students in my classes see the world through a religious lens, but religion has long been a taboo subject in many writing classrooms. Fortunately, this prohibition is starting to ease, and some prominent composition scholars are helping to clear the space for religious discourse in writing classes. In "The Book and the Truth: Faith, Rhetoric, and Cross-Cultural Communication," Bronwyn T. Williams explains the reluctance of the composition field to address religion: "The roots of this aversion include an unease with religious authority, a postmodern belief in the social construction of 'truth' and the slipperiness of language, a belief in the separation of church and state, and a Western, positivist conviction that knowledge is progressive, rational, and evolutionary" (107). Anne Ruggles Gere, discussing her own problems with expressing a Christian identity in the academy, says that "[c]oming out as a Christian or an observant member of any faith can be as dangerous as making public one's sexual orientation because the academy has so completely conflated the disestablishment of religion . . . with secularizing . . . higher education" (46-47). Priscilla Perkins, who makes religious discourse a focus in her classroom, argues that Christian students, particularly conservative ones, "are one of the only cultural groups openly and comfortably disparaged by many otherwise sensitive writing teachers in the country" (586). But teachers who restrict religious discourse in the classrooms might be doing their students a great disservice. Citing

James Calvin Schaap, Lizabeth Rand explains that we might “view religious faith as a primary identity that frequently restricts ways of being as do race, class, and gender,” and given that “spiritual identity may be the primary kind of selfhood more than a few [students] draw upon to make meaning of their lives,” religious discourse should be a topic of discussion in our classrooms (350-51). To facilitate better discussions of religious discourse, Rand suggests that “[w]riting instructors . . . start from the premise that evangelical discourse may reflect an oppositional and critically resistant stance,” and that we might “engage students in further conversation about the complex negotiations of selfhood that they undergo” (363).

Rand’s idea that evangelical or conservative religious discourses can be critical and oppositional is an important point, even as we seek to be in dialogue with any elements we might identify as oppressive. African-American religion is a prime example of a discourse that can be socially and politically critical and liberating but still contains oppressive elements; its complex nature thereby makes it a compelling discourse to examine in the writing classroom. Most American students have some knowledge of the socially resistant nature of African-American religion as represented by people such as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, and events such as the Civil Rights Movement. For centuries, African Americans have used the Bible as an instrument of liberation, employing black biblical hermeneutics to serve a variety of social, political, and personal needs. Before and after emancipation, many religious blacks likened their social situation to that of the Jews in the Old Testament who sought deliverance from slavery and the rights of free people: Moses and Jesus figured significantly in the African-American struggle, both acutely aware of suffering, and promising hope, salvation, and redemption. Unfortunately, the biblical interpretations of ordinary black folk have been virtually ignored in the academy, unlike the attention paid to African-American religious hermeneutics performed by scholars. For example, James H. Cone’s *A Black Theology of Liberation* is considered the foundational text of black liberation theology, which reimagines God as deeply concerned in the real life struggles of black people (11). However, ordinary religious black people have long considered God or Jesus intimately concerned with their lives and have performed biblical hermeneutics as a means of both survival and protest. Admittedly, Cone’s opposition to “white theology” and his construction of the “Black Christ” might seem radical, but for centuries, blacks have identified with, as Cone does, Jesus’ humble birth in the manger, his baptism as identification with

sin and sinners, and his ministry, which concentrates on healing, preaching to, liberating, and saving the poor and downtrodden (204-208). We need only look to the Civil Rights Movement and the work of ordinary churchgoers to secure equal representation in our society to illustrate the point that common folk have interpreted the Bible to serve useful, even revolutionary, ends. In effect, many African Americans construe Jesus as a black man who understands their condition and needs.

Religion as an ideology that encourages, promotes, and supports critical opposition to oppressive forces is also evident in the work of female black theologians. While some female black theologians have criticized black liberation theology for its sexism (this, too, might seem a modern, radical response), many black women have been critical of sexism within the black church for many years. For example, as Bettye Collier-Thomas explains, Jar-ena Lee left both white and black Methodist churches to become an itinerant preacher from 1818 to 1849. Lee even published a very influential spiritual autobiography in 1836, as did Zilpha Elaw in 1846, and Julia A. J. Foote in 1879 (147). These “ordinary,” unheralded black females, and others like them, broke away from the traditional black male-dominated church to construct a religion that spoke to their unique experience as black women. Their legacy is part of the academy today, where we privilege womanist theology, constructed by black female theologians and scholars to elevate the status of black women and combat multiple oppressions, both in and outside of traditional churches and religions. For example, in *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Delores S. Williams asks us to read the Bible from the point of view of the non-Hebrew slave so that we might understand that “there is no clear opposition expressed in the Christian testament to the institution of slavery” (146). In *Hagar’s Daughter*, Diana Hayes privileges and reimagines the Hagar story, emphasizing the relationship between the black slave, Hagar, and Abraham’s wife, Sarah, concluding that both women are societal victims who “regarded men only and envisioned women only in terms of their relationship to those men—as daughter, wife, mother, or sister—unable to stand alone, with no identity they could claim for their own.” (7). In *Sexuality and the Black Church*, Kelly Brown Douglas opposes heterosexism, arguing that “Jesus made no pronouncement and certainly no condemnation concerning homosexuality” (90). But other than womanist theologians and scholars, many in the academy are unaware of nineteenth-century black preaching women such as Elizabeth, Rebecca Cox Jackson, and Amanda Berry Smith, who preached against slavery and sexism and the strictures of the traditional church, using

the Bible to liberate black women and other oppressed peoples. Of the early black preaching women, only Sojourner Truth is widely known; other early black preaching women are known only within certain circles.

I do not discuss early black preaching women to minimize the import of the biblical hermeneutics performed by contemporary black female theologians and religious scholars; in fact, it is due to their exhaustive work that the histories and writings of early black female preachers have been recovered and appreciated. No, I discuss early black preaching women to underscore the point that black people outside the academy have performed critical and illuminating interpretations of the Bible, and that we need to honor and include the private biblical interpretations of so-called ordinary people, our students included, in our examination of religion in the academy.

USING *THE COLOR PURPLE* IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

In my quest to make public the private religious discourses of my students, I sought a text that would mirror their private discourses, enabling them to engage in religious discourse without feeling that their private religious beliefs were under attack. I chose *The Color Purple* because it contains religious language and ideas familiar to many of my students and represents some of the intimate or private conversations and perceptions that they hold about religion.

The Color Purple is an epistolary novel that chronicles the main character Celie's journey toward self-discovery and love, as she breaks the chains imposed on her by her husband Mr. __ and an oppressive racist and sexist society through letter writing, and meaningful personal, communal, and, most important for our purposes here, spiritual relationships. *The Color Purple* interrogates black religion in a manner that shows love and understanding of the black world while holding black religion and black people accountable for their behaviors and attitudes. Although I could not locate examples of instructors using the novel to discuss religion in the classroom, and I admit those texts may exist, there are numerous critical treatments of religion in *The Color Purple*. For example, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes applauds the novel's "intersection of spirituality and human emancipation" (276), reading the text as a "subversive and critical ethnography" that "offers a prophetic critique of oppression and its consequences" (277). Kimberly R. Chambers believes that the novel's "notion of religion springs from folk tradition" (49), which "flow[s] directly from the piety of church-going Southern blacks, piety with roots in the folklore tradition that Walker respects and defends" (57).

The novel's religious philosophy, according to Chambers, "grants life, an awareness of time past as nourishing and time future as providential" (51). For Diana Hayes, the relationship between Celie and Shug Avery is critical because it promotes both spiritual awareness and healing for Celie, allowing her to reimagine her relationship with God and "reclaim her own spirit and be a source of healing for those around her, thereby mothering a black community, one which is viable economically, socially, and spiritually into life" (35). Spiritual healing is also a critical idea for Karen Baker-Fletcher because "when we don't take responsibility for self-healing, we spread disease to our communities" (86). These critical reflections about religion in *The Color Purple* demonstrate not only the importance of the theme in the novel but also provide a lens through which to view and critique everyday life.

The class took place during the summer, and although it was a freshman composition course, many of the students had taken one or two semesters of developmental writing and still possessed problems of basic writers, including weak paragraph organization and development, and surface level grammatical errors. The students were primarily children of the African diaspora such as African Americans, Caribbeans, and Puerto Ricans. Several students had failed or withdrawn from freshman composition in a previous semester and told me of difficulties they had encountered trying to complete the course. The writing program at my school is reading/writing-intensive, asking students to write in a variety of forms and privileging the process approach and the portfolio system. Those students who had taken developmental writing were familiar with our writing program, but many of them still struggled to generate and adequately develop ideas in their writing. At the beginning of the course, we had discussed favorite interests in order for me to understand their levels of cultural literacy and critique. Students expressed interest in hip hop music, movies, and street literature, and demonstrated some level of critique, although much of it did not move far beyond appreciation.

To increase the students' level of cultural critique before reading *The Color Purple*, I assigned several chapters of Ira Shor's *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, which, among other things, offers an ideological framework for examining everyday artifacts and ideas, of which religion can certainly be included. *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* offers a consistent, detailed ideology, in this case Marxism, which students can read with and against, mirroring their eventual reading of *The Color Purple*. For example, some students admired Shor's concept of "false consciousness" as an internalization of "the ideas of the ruling class" (51), while other students felt the concept

eliminated fun or pleasure from everyday existence. The book also helped students to understand that everyday topics or ideas such as religion could be critically examined in the classroom. In addition to *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, I used three other texts to frame the reading of *The Color Purple*: “The Combahee River Collective Statement”; Alice Walker’s “Womanism”; and Delores S. Williams’ “Womanist Theology: Black Women’s Voices.” From these readings, students explored ideas about resisting multiple oppressions, constructing reality through one’s own experience, and building supportive communities. These ideas and Shor’s ideological framework established a solid critical foundation for students to read and discuss *The Color Purple*. In what follows, I will share the class discussion about religion in *The Color Purple* as well as several student essays about everyday topics that our reading of Walker’s novel helped students to explore more critically.

STUDENT CRITIQUE OF SPECIFIC IDEAS IN *THE COLOR PURPLE*

Patriarchy

Class discussion of religion in *The Color Purple* helped students to see and understand patriarchy as a factor in society and in Celie’s struggles. While some might argue that patriarchy is exaggerated in the novel, many students, both women and men, believed the novel accurately depicts the patriarchal attitudes and practices that permeate secular and sacred institutions and discourses. It was curious that some women defended church patriarchy, perhaps because more women than men attend church services and are extremely invested in their faith communities. When a male student asked why churches were filled with women but most pastors were men, several women responded. One woman said that it didn’t matter if the pastor was male or female, only that the pastor was a “righteous” person. Still the male student’s question about the male-dominated clergy rang true as a critical issue. Although black female pastors have gained the pulpit in churches that have long rejected or denied their spiritual leadership, when we consider the number of black female congregants, women are woefully underrepresented as pastors in many black churches. This point about the absence of female clergy prompted a woman to ask if a solution to patriarchy was womanist theology, not only female pastors but a womanist form of worship. Her question led to a lengthy discussion about alternative religions, with many students saying that traditional religions reinforced patriarchy. “Look at Mr. __,” one woman said. “The church people must

know what type of man he is, how he treats Celie, but the women still fawn over him in church.” “Yes,” a male student responded, “even the pastor mistreats Celie and nobody seems to care. It’s like what Ira Shor talks about with false consciousness. The women take on the ideas of their oppressor.” I was pleased to see students referring to our previous readings to interpret *The Color Purple*. Moreover, they were discussing religion without rancor or recrimination, honestly debating the ideological underpinnings of religion without denouncing religion itself.

Even more, the students saw a connection between the patriarchalism in religion and in other aspects of Celie’s life. A male student asked us to look at this passage in *The Color Purple*:

I can’t remember the last time I felt mad, I say. I used to get mad at my mammy cause she put a lot of work on me. Then I see how sick she is. Couldn’t stay mad at her. Couldn’t be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what. . . . Well, sometime Mr. ___ git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life be over, I say. Heaven last always. (42)

Many students saw Celie’s capitulation to Mr. __ and her father as a misreading of the Bible. One student said that honoring one’s mother and father doesn’t mean that parents have a right to brutally beat their children. Another student said that people should follow the golden rule, do unto others, and that anything which violates that dictum is wrong. However, a female student asked us to look at a passage in Shor in which he says that “[c]ritical learning aids people in knowing what holds them back; it encourages them to envision a social order which supports their full humanity” (48). Excitedly, the student said, “The church and its patriarchy do not support Celie’s full humanity. She’s in a state of false consciousness. She doesn’t think that things can be any different.” A female student nodded her head and said, “Yes, she can’t see any way out of the patriarchy because it’s all around her. She hasn’t seen anything else until she meets Shug.” Although I hadn’t contributed much to the conversation, allowing the students to navigate it, I seized upon the idea of imagination because it is such an important element of change and a critical component of black existence. “Have we encountered any examples of imagination this semester?” I asked. After a brief silence, a student tentatively answered, “Well, in our discussion of emancipation and the Civil Rights Movement. Black people had to imagine themselves

as free.” “Yes,” another student said quickly, “but they needed something to refer to, some sort of model. They had to imagine that they were like the Jews. It wasn’t totally their imaginations.” Another student laughed and said, “It’s like Tiger Wood’s daddy or Serena and Venus’s daddy. They could look at white golfers or tennis players as models, but they had to imagine their kids could be like them. So models are important, but imagination is important, too.” We then discussed Shug as a model for Celie and how difficult it was for Celie to imagine herself as Shug. Celie needs the catalyst of discovering that Mr. ___ has hidden the letters from Nettie to confront Mr. ___’s patriarchalism, reject the patriarchalism of her religion, and following Shug, begin to construct a new religion of her own. As one female student said, “Celie creates a kind of womanist religion, but she can’t do that until she first understands how she is being oppressed and the role she plays in her own oppression.” The students were able to construct a critical reading of patriarchy in the novel seeing how religion could support oppressive attitudes and behaviors but also how religion could be a solution to those very same oppressions. Most important was their examination of the ideologies that undergird discourse and their recognition that religion is a discourse, a story people tell about the world.

Resistance to Traditional Religion

Students had also used the other course texts to fashion a critique of Celie’s relationship to secular and sacred patriarchalism before we began formal discussions of resistance to traditional religion in *The Color Purple*. Although students had mentioned Shor and Williams in our previous discussion, the Combahee River Collective Statement (CRCS) resonated greatly with students during this discussion. Written in 1977 by writer-activists Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier, with input from other collective members, CRCS is a thoughtful and provocative statement about black feminism, and the foundation of womanism. As we discussed traditional religion in the text, several students pointed to this idea in CRCS: “This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression.” The idea of focusing on one’s own oppression seemed important to students because that is exactly what Celie does not do for much of the novel. Instead, she worries about serving others

and ignores her own miserable condition. Connecting Celie's condition to her religion, several students wondered how religion should serve us. One female student said that service was a big part of religious faith and that it was wrong to look for any reward. However, another student said that "service doesn't mean being oppressed. Where does it say that God wants us to be abused?" This level of discussion impressed me because not only were they using CRCS to read *The Color Purple* but they were also individuating the notion of religious faith.

Returning to CRCS, a student noted this passage about freedom and individuality: "Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy." In the novel, Celie is oppressed by church and community values. In order to be a part of both, she must adhere to their beliefs and practices. However, Shug arrives as an embodiment of resistance to church and community values, doing what she wants and serving a religion or spirituality of her own making. Although students had issues with some of Shug's behaviors such as child abandonment, homosexuality (more about that later), and promiscuity, for the most part, they admired Shug's individual spirit and saw her as Celie's personal savior. They also saw many connections between Shug's religion and womanist theology. For example, several students made a connection between Shug's rejection of traditional religion and Williams' reminder about "a liberation tradition in black history in which women took the lead, acting as a catalyst for the community's revolutionary action and for social change" ("Womanist" 7). In the novel, Shug, through her nontraditional behavior and attitude, is a catalyst for Celie to change her relationship with God, and Celie's change transforms Mr. ___ and the other members of the community, essentially replacing patriarchy with personal and community love. Although some students thought the novel had fairy tale aspects, they nonetheless admired the revolutionary nature of Shug's religion, according all creatures equal status because everything is connected. The students also saw similarities between Shug's religion and the pantheism practiced by the Olinka tribe, for which Nettie serves as a missionary. While they admired the Olinka religion overall, they condemned the practice of female circumcision.

I was impressed with the students' ability to make connections among the texts and consider seriously an alternative response to traditional religion. This is not to say that most or any students adopted womanist theol-

ogy; rather, almost all the students were able to engage with ideologies that undergird traditional religion, womanist theology, as well as Shug's religion, creating a perspective that allowed us to interpret these discourses.

Homosexuality

Although the students were able to discuss critically most aspects of traditional religion, I feared that discussing Shug and Celie's homosexual relation would prove problematic. Homosexuality is a very sensitive issue in many black churches, where it is often summarily condemned. Whenever the issue of homosexuality comes up in my writing classes, some students invariably argue against it on religious grounds. However, as Kelly Brown Douglas points out, attitudes about homosexuality within the black church stem from the fear of any sexual act or behavior that might be construed in any way as abnormal or deviant because black sexuality itself has been construed that way in mainstream society (90). Thus, black church people hypercorrect for sexuality and are wary of anything that seems to go against the norm. What troubled me the most was the level of discourse about homosexuality that I had experienced in other classes. While most students understand that racist or sexist comments are condemned in the academy, some students feel free to spout homophobic statements.

I addressed this issue with the class at the beginning of the semester, but I think our course readings greatly helped students to locate a much more respectful discourse. For example, a woman quoted a passage from Walker's "Womanism" in which Walker states that a womanist is "a woman who loves other women sexually and/or nonsexually" (xi-xii). Through reading the novel, the students admired Walker's intelligence and humanity and didn't want to dismiss her ideas. In fact, some students wanted to defend or support Walker, and a male student located this passage from CRCS: "Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand." I thought the quotation would lead to a discussion of lesbian male bashing but was surprised when a student said, "I don't think the problem is lesbians and gays hating straight people but straight people hating lesbians and gays, particularly in churches." This condition was vividly displayed when another female student said that she believed her church choir director was gay, but everyone just acted as if he weren't. Several students reported the same occurrence at their churches. One student said that her choir director was very talented and extremely devoted to the church but "people refuse to

admit that he might be gay.” The students discussed the attitudes about their various churches toward gays, using Walker and Williams to problematize the argument. One student pointed out that Williams says that “respect for sexual preference is one of the marks of the womanist community (“Womanist” 9). She then asked the class if they would ban Celie or Shug from their churches just because they are gay. Some students said that *they* would not ban them, but openly gay people would not be warmly received. Thus were students implicitly evaluating the ways in which private discourses around homosexuality in church contexts registered in the day to day responses of church members to one another.

As with the traditional religion discussion, our discussion of homosexuality did not, as far as I know, make any converts, although some in the class openly voiced support of gay people. However, our discussion demonstrated that students were able to engage in a critical discussion about homosexuality in *The Color Purple* using critical sources to explore the idea. Further, they shaped a critical discourse that was intelligent, sensitive, and honest, and which may even transfer to a critique of their church communities. As Shor explains, “[b]y critically studying the lives they live uncritically and the culture which eclipses reason, students begin changing their powerless places in society” (49), and perhaps changing the powerless positions of others.

ANALYSIS OF STUDENT TEXTS

Because the course was reading/writing-intensive, students read and responded to a variety of texts through both informal and formal writing. Students wrote three formal essays multiple times, but only the final essay had a research requirement, although I encouraged students to incorporate source material into their work throughout the semester. As I said before, the class was freshman composition, but many students were “former” basic writers who still exhibited basic writing skills. As we know, writing improvement can be a slow process, and although I didn’t have students who represented the lowest range of basic writing skills, many of them were still struggling to be successful college writers.

The essays represented here are in response to the third and final formal essay of the semester, which asked students to use multiple sources to investigate some aspect of everyday life. Shor provided some useful models for this assignment, as his text includes analysis of everyday things such as marriage, education, housing, sex roles, and family life. I asked students to

select an everyday thing and analyze it critically, seeing it as if for the first time and determining how it operated in society. My hope was that our investigation into religion in *The Color Purple* would help students to ask more critical questions about everyday artifacts that they may have ignored or taken for granted, to dig deeper to discover the apparatus that lies within. I might have assigned religion as a topic, but the overall point of the class was not to interrogate religion. Rather, my goal was to help students critically examine a private discourse so that they would understand how it matters in the ways they read and write about the world. Critiquing religion in *The Color Purple*, I hoped, would have prepared them to critique ideas, practices, and policies that have significant meaning in their lives. I believe that the essays presented here are interesting and even courageous attempts by students to engage their topics and, as Shor says, to “extraordinarily re-experienc[e] the ordinary” (93). In the examples that follow, the names of students have been changed to mask their identity.

Richard’s Essay on Colorism

Richard is a light-skinned student whose identity, he informed us, is questioned continually by others. Although he is African American, many people have asked him if he was bi-racial. Richard doesn’t believe that people should be marked by their color. In one of our discussions about *The Color Purple*, several students noted that Squeak tires of being reduced to her color, to be constantly desired for being a “yellow” woman. This prompted a discussion about colorism, the privileging of white skin, which Williams notes “often separates black women from each other” (“Womanist” 9). Richard was particularly vocal during these discussions; thus, I wasn’t particularly surprised that he chose to write about colorism, but I do admire the honesty in which he addresses it, a very private discourse made public. In this excerpt, Richard offers a rather sophisticated critique of colorism and the social and psychological damage it produces:

The standard of beauty in America has always been white. Magazines advertise fashion, hair, and makeup tips for the general white population. When blacks are featured in these magazines, they are usually fair skinned with features that are close to those of white people. Even the Barbie dolls of color look like they could be called “sun-tan Barbie” because they look like white dolls with a dark tan. When some dark skinned blacks look at light-skinned

blacks, they see them as being closer to white, and this is what has [encouraged] a lot of darker blacks to believe that they might not be as attractive as lighter skinned blacks. My grandmother's generation didn't have cosmetic lines special[ly] for women of darker colors, and many women wore shades [that] were two to three shades lighter than their complexion. . . . These creams were marketed towards darker women with promise of prettier lighter skin. A 1957 advertisement for Golden Peacock Bleach Cream pictured the familiar dark-skinned "before" and light-skinned "after" picture of a model, with a headline [saying] that the cream turns "black shades lighter" (Susannah Walker 109). Today there are many darker skinned women in Africa who are actually using these bleaching products on themselves. This colorism goes past beauty and also effects many African Americans socially, economically, and politically. There aren't many darker skinned politicians because many of the white population do not see them fit for office. In the case of Barack Obama, one of the reasons he was able to ". . . defeat Hillary Rodman Clinton was that large numbers of white voters saw him as 'post-racial'" (Mabry 1). Many voters see Barack Obama as being black, but he isn't too far from being white because of his light complexion and his white maternal heritage.

Questions about Richard's organization and generalizations aside, I think he produces a rather astute critique. He takes a very difficult and sensitive subject, a subject, I might add, that many people of color try to ignore or dismiss, and addresses it openly and with considerable insight. Earlier in his paper, he shows sensitivity toward light-skinned people by citing Margaret Hunter's idea that "dark-skinned people of color are typically regarded as more authentic or legitimate than light skinned people." Richard then offers a historical explanation of colorism when he discusses the "eight-page letter written by Willie Lynch in 1972, in which he presented his personal view on making [and controlling] slaves." Richard analyzes colorism from different perspectives and strives for honesty and clarity. His admission that "my mother and I have an automatic advantage over many darker toned blacks" is a clear-eyed statement about color privilege that, to me, is enlightened and ultimately healing. Our course readings and discussions helped Richard to explore this sensitive topic because not only had we discussed colorism rather extensively in class but had studied models for cultural critiques. In addition to Shor, the Williams article clearly details the progression of

historical and social analysis that produced womanist theology, including the recognition and scholarly analysis of “black feminists like Sojourner Truth, Frances W. Harper, and Mary Church Terrell” (“Womanist” 9). Furthermore, our systematic analysis of important religious issues in *The Color Purple* provided Richard with the reassurance that private concerns deserve a public hearing.

Sheila’s Essay on Video Games

Sheila, a young Hispanic woman and a huge fan of video games, didn’t appear that fond of writing but could be enthusiastic when she located something that interested her. Initially, Sheila had difficulty finding a research topic, but when I asked her about her interests, she reluctantly told me that she liked video games. Her reticence was due to fact that, in Sheila’s words, “girls aren’t supposed to be good at or interested in video games” and many people consider video gaming a waste of time, or, as Sheila put it, “any time I tell someone I like playing videos, they treat me like I’m a slacker or something.” Although Sheila was not my most enthusiastic student, she attended every class and completed most of her assignments on time. I think some of Sheila’s seemingly disinterested attitude was due to the fact that she felt misunderstood and didn’t believe that education recognized the individual. When I told her I thought video games was a great topic, she was surprised but happy and immediately began telling me about articles and books she had read on the activity.

Furthermore, our course work, she told me, had compelled her to look more critically at video game playing. She noted that our discussion of patriarchy within traditional religion had persuaded her to look more closely at the gender roles within her own church and to consider the possible impact of other activities in her life. For Sheila, video game playing occupied an important part of her life, but she had never considered how it might affect her and others, or why particular people might be drawn to the activity. For example, she said that while she was pleased to see the diversity and seriousness among the players in her recent foray into online game playing, she was somewhat dismayed at how angry some players got during team play, and she wondered if playing somehow provoked hostility or whether aggressive people were drawn to gaming. This critical stance helped Sheila write a very interesting paper about video gaming. Here Sheila discusses the pleasures and dangers of gaming in a way that situates her within the

activity in an essay, that is, in its own way, as deeply personal as Richard's examination of colorism:

As a person who grew up playing video games alone and with others, video games are a type of investment for many people. Some children who didn't grow up in the best neighborhoods see video games as a form of escape from their everyday circumstances. The unrealistic situations that these video games produce awaken most people's imagination to the point where they become part of the story, almost in the same way as if they were reading a good book; the difference is that through video games you feel more involved and are more engaged with the characters. However, the downside to people finding escape in video games is that some people don't know how to draw the line between the fictional story line of a video game and the real world, [not] realizing that video games are like fictional or sci-fi books. Some people start playing these seeming[ly] harmless games but become so involved that they lose sight of reality. They base their entire lives around the concept of these games which can then be argued that it's not the video games but people who just can't handle them. A more widely known example is Star Wars, which is idolized by thousands of people. There will always be people who when given a venue to let the imagination go free lose sight of reality or even just become too intermingled with the concept that it becomes a part of who they are. In an article in [U.S. News and World Report](#) by Jennifer Seter Wagner she interviews a boy named Ollie Morelli about his day to day life which supports the idea that some people can become literally addicted to video games especially online games when they play with other people.

Even with the diction and punctuation problems, this essay represents Sheila's best effort in the class. All of Sheila's paragraphs were well developed, and she was able to argue consistently different sides of the argument. Frequently, it is difficult to teach students to look at an issue from different perspectives, but our discussion of *The Color Purple* helped the students to understand that being critical about something didn't necessarily mean dismissing it, particularly if the topic under consideration is something with which the student is personally involved. Although Sheila seems to "blame the victim" in this excerpt, she later uses several sources to explore the harm of video

games, explaining that “[t]hese observations show the tremendous impact video games now have on the youth of today, effecting a child’s ability to relate to his peers and socialize with other children.” Sheila later discusses obesity and violence as possible effects of gaming, before ultimately saying that gaming can educate and bring people together. Sheila doesn’t master the present/refute strategy, but she does employ it with some skill. Sheila demonstrates a vital aspect of critical literacy: the ability to locate, understand, and acknowledge an opposing viewpoint and analyze that viewpoint in relation to one’s thesis. Although Sheila’s overall thesis is supportive of gaming, she is able to explore the negative consequences of gaming without being dismissive of or defensive about opposing ideas. After sharing in the productive discussions of religion in *The Color Purple*, Sheila had a model for how to explore different sides of an issue without rancor; instead, she explores gaming with curiosity and is open to what that exploration uncovers.

Jamal’s Essay on the Liberal Arts Curriculum

Jamal, an intelligent young Caribbean American man with plans of being a lawyer, was upset that he had take a freshman English course after already matriculating in the Honors program. Apparently, someone had misread his transcript when he transferred into the college, and Jamal was now paying the price. I thought Jamal might be a problem in the class because he clearly was not happy being there. Although most students seemed to enjoy Shor’s book, Jamal contributed only if I prodded him, until I offered my own criticism of Shor’s somewhat negative evaluation of community colleges, which I feel offer most students wonderful opportunities, even through their vocational programs. My critique of Shor seemed to ignite a critical spark in Jamal, which he carried over to our reading of *The Color Purple*. Although Jamal never discussed his religious affiliation, he had much to say about problems he saw within religion and was particularly vocal about sexism and classism within churches, an idea that Williams discusses forcefully in her article. Jamal thought that Shor’s overall argument was somewhat class-based in that he seems to privilege the liberal arts education at elite universities while denouncing the working class vocationalism at community colleges. Although Jamal’s own admittance to a good law school might make his stance seem ironic, he made the point that law was, in some ways, vocational and that he could be a good lawyer without a liberal arts education. We discussed class issues in Shor, Williams, and Walker, including class based ideologies and the relationship of class to power. Jamal felt that elites forced liberal arts

curricula on students, and he questioned the efficacy of such a move, arguing that since students aren't very interested in courses unrelated to their majors, they are likely to forget what they learned in these courses. I spent considerable class time discussing the present/refute strategy of argument, and perhaps because of his lawyerly leanings, Jamal really took to it. When Jamal told me he wanted to take on Ira Shor and his defense of liberal arts education in his essay, I was pleased but not surprised because he had strong feelings about this topic. Here Jamal uses a present/refute strategy to discuss Shor's position on liberal arts education:

Ira Shor argues that liberal arts courses offer you an experience outside of your major that teaches you and encourages you to think more broadly (52). He claims that through the liberal arts curriculum you are being taught to think critically and assess and analyze certain situations better. Most people who value a liberal arts education feel that without the foundation that liberal arts creates for individuals, they will struggle throughout their lives because they won't know how to properly deal with certain situations, and they won't be able to think of alternate solutions for any problems they may face. The[y] feel liberal arts courses give you knowledge that is necessary and [can] be applied in an individual's everyday life, where as simply focusing on the subject that you plan to pursue a career in will limit you and may create [more complex] future problems, especially if you find that the career you chose is not desirable.

Opposing this position, I feel that the liberal arts education is completely excessive, unnecessary and shouldn't be obligatory for students. If an individual needs 128 credits to officially graduate with a Bachelors degree, I don't feel that roughly half of those credits should be in subjects that they do not need or want to take. I do feel that liberal arts courses should be required, but it should only be about twenty credits of the 128 credits you need to graduate. I feel that students are being pushed and forced into courses they do not care for and are wasting their time in meaningless courses learning about people and topics they will forget about as soon as the semester comes to a close. There is no need for a person who wants to have a career in a financial institution to have to sit in three science classes, four English classes, two philosophy classes, and take other courses completely irrelevant to their anticipated

career objectives. A student should definitely be required to take a smaller number of liberal arts courses; however the current number is ridiculous.

Admittedly, Jamal overuses “you” and neglects to address Shor’s point about critical thinking; however, Jamal does present some interesting arguments of his own and engages thoughtfully in a topic that has real meaning for him. Of course, Jamal is referring to the core curriculum at our institution and surely not all colleges have a core that requires three science classes. Nonetheless, Jamal may have a point about some students forgetting core content “about as soon as the semester comes to a close” and clearly some students feel that they are “pushed and forced into courses they do not care for.”

In the next movement of the paper, Jamal addresses what he believes is Shor’s claim that “individuals at prestigious universities such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and other Ivy League schools are learning liberal arts and they have a great emphasis on it throughout their curriculum. [Shor] also states that these individuals are the future leader of our country; thus the liberal arts is beneficial and necessary.” Jamal counters the liberal arts at prestige schools argument by discussing grade inflation at those schools:

[S]ince the beginning of this decade, grade inflation at top universities has been investigated, exposed and proven, which discredits this argument. “Grade inflation is running rampant at America’s colleges and universities. The situation has become so severe that two years ago at Harvard University 91 percent of the seniors were graduating with honors. At many colleges and universities a grade of C, once considered the standard for average work, is now almost never given” (37). Students at Ivy League institutions are not getting the grades that they deserve nor are they truly educated like they should be. This is the truth about the individuals who go on to run our country and become leaders.

Jamal neglects to attribute his source in this excerpt, although he does list the source in the Works Cited and attributes his other sources. However, what is important here is the information he chooses to refute Shor. Grade inflation is a rather cunning argument against the significance of liberal arts at prestige schools. And even though Jamal doesn’t provide examples of Ivy League leaders who are not “educated like they should be,” it might not be that difficult for us to identify some names on our own. In addition

to grade inflation, Jamal discusses current market capitalism as a challenge to the liberal arts curriculum; moreover, Jamal eventually addresses Shor's critical thinking argument when he says, "I feel that we can already think when we enter college and most people already have set mannerisms and views and liberal arts courses can't alter their thought and opinions at this point." Jamal overstates the case, in my opinion, but at least he has a counter-argument, even though it reflects his personal beliefs and reality. What I admire about Jamal's essay is his eagerness to engage with Shor, to add his voice to the conversation, to believe that his ideas are as valid as those of an authority. Reading and discussing religion in *The Color Purple* helped Jamal to reinforce his own authoritative voice, I believe. His writing certainly became more assured after our experience with the topic, and his ability to engage an argument definitely improved.

CONCLUSION

In the academy, private discourses are often ignored or rejected as modes of inquiry; however these private discourses are important to students, representing their beliefs and knowledge about language, culture, and society. Exploring these private discourses through reading, writing, and discussion, students might not only understand better the origin and nature of their discourse but also those of the academy, particularly the language and ideologies that shape and maintain discourses. We often see private discourses as academically irrelevant or distinctly private; however, private discourse is shaped by participation in particular communities; thus, they are in a very real sense always already public. Unearthing the social and ideological nature of private discourse can enhance students' critical thinking and reinforce the notion that critique is a part of their everyday lives, even though they might not regard it as such. Moreover, every critique represents an ideological stance, socially formed, so student critique is also open to further reflection and analysis.

For many students, religion represents a private discourse that is often prohibited in the academy, except in special circumstances such as those involving religion courses or programs. Many students order their lives through their religious beliefs, and for these students, private religious discourse greatly impacts their daily social existence, both inside and outside of school. It is both empowering and frightening for some students to engage in discussions of religion in the writing classroom; however, students often engage academic material through a religious lens, even if they don't share

their thinking in the classroom. Rather than pretend that religious discourse or ideology doesn't exist, it might be more efficacious to discuss religion in the classroom, making sure that we do so in a manner that does not directly challenge students' religious beliefs. The goal of discussing religion is not to dismantle or undermine students' religious discourse but to enhance their critical thinking by showing them their beliefs are formed through critique, and that critique is a necessary function of any viable discourse or ideology. In other words, their religious discourse will not dissolve if it is examined because it continually undergoes examination by the discourse users themselves. If it did not, there would be no need for continual discourse reinforcement through private and social acts of religious engagement.

According to Lee Galda and Richard Beach, students are particularly critical of texts that represent their lives or environments because students "interrogate texts for their authority in terms of whether social norms portrayed actually represent a culture, as well as the stance regarding these social norms" (65). Exploring religion in *The Color Purple*, along with the other critical texts, allowed students to engage with a private discourse without feeling that their beliefs were under attack. Instead, reading and discussing the novel supported critical discussions of important religious issues such as church and biblical patriarchy, homosexuality, and biblical hermeneutics, encouraging students both to critique and defend existing religious ideologies. What is most important is that students engaged in critical inquiry related to a private discourse they cared deeply about and about which they felt authoritative. To discuss a private discourse in the academy gives credence both to that discourse and the academy in the minds of students. Students not only learned new ways to talk and think about religion but also about other topics, both private and public, as evidenced by the essays they wrote for the course.

The research papers reflected enhanced critical engagement by the students because they were able to see a topic from different sides and use those positions to form their own evaluations. Students were, for the most part, more flexible in their thinking and became attuned to the ideological construction of meaning. For example, Richard sought to uncover the social construction of colorism and connected it to the ideological nature of racism; Sheila observed and examined her own relationship to video gaming and was able to extend that analysis to encompass the social, psychological, and cultural impact of the activity. Jamal challenged the notion of the best and the brightest to reveal a societal and ideological acceptance of a privileged ruling class that in many ways contradicts the notion of a meritocracy.

Overall, exploring religion in *The Color Purple* brought a private discourse into the public realm of academic discourse and showed students the ideological nature of discourse while enhancing their critical thinking. Students were able to engage critically with a discourse that mattered to them and to participate in a larger, socially transformative tradition of interpretation and critique, reimagining the social forces that shape them. Exploring private discourses is critical for student writers, particularly for basic writers, because they need to understand that they are involved in discourse production and dissemination and that all discourses become more meaningful when they are openly critiqued. Our students come to us full of language, meanings, beliefs, and desires. When we fully embrace the linguistic, intellectual, cultural, and emotional wealth our students bring to the classroom, we make the learning experience more enriching for them and for us.

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