

## Book Reviews

# Review of *Gathering Blossoms Under Fire: The Journals of Alice Walker 1965-2000*

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Walker, Alice. *Gathering Blossoms Under Fire: The Journals of Alice Walker 1965-2000*, edited by Valerie Boyd, Simon and Schuster, 2022.

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I was a teenager when I found a cardboard box of books from my mom's college classes. Three books were by Alice Walker: the short story collection *In Love and Trouble*, and the novels *The Temple of my Familiar*, and *The Color Purple*. This was the first time I encountered the work of one of the twentieth century's greatest authors. From that moment, I joined multiple generations of readers enthralled when I read Walker's work or saw it performed. Valerie Boyd's edited volume of Walker's journals is for those readers curious about Walker's life and interested in how diaries expand knowledge of how Black women have authored literature and social movements.

Throughout the curated first volume of diary entries, readers learn of Walker's fierce desire to participate in racial justice movements as well as write, fall in love multiple times, experience exhaustion from media tours, and reflect on challenges brought on through achieving financial independence and security. The individual entries also function as a collection of diverse written material: aphorisms ("The bad news is that most of us will have to struggle. The good news is that the struggle makes us beautiful" [261]), drafts for stories (Boyd notes Walker began *The Color Purple* in an entry in its published form in 1980, see pg. 170-1), dream journal entries, notes of thanks to The Great Spirit, documentation of finances, and descriptions of international travels. In the 1960s, a young Walker back from a Spelman College study abroad trip in Europe participates in Civil Rights marches, recognizes her fierce desire to write, and falls in love. In the 1970s, Walker marries, gives birth to her daughter Rebecca, and becomes a professional author. Walker in the 1980s and 90s frequently describes her professional obligations and turns to describing her different houses, declaring "All the houses in the world can't make you happy if they're empty" (393). In the "Postscript," Walker explains her decision to keep the first of two planned volumes of her journals at a manageable length. Walker also provides readers a glimpse into some excluded entries that describe her romances, reflections on religion, and different houses. It remains tempting to speculate about which details of Walker's life remain unknown until the end of the embargo on the original journals at Emory University in 2040. And still, it may

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not be until decades from now that scholars of Walker's work gain more detailed insight into Walker's life.

While Walker's frequently banned work has been well studied within literary criticism, and her life has been the center of biographies, her status as a cultural icon has eclipsed knowledge of her life. In the "Introduction," editor Valerie Boyd, Charlayne Hunter-Gault professor of Journalism at the University of Georgia, writes that this compilation of journals "is a workbook for artists, activists, and intellectuals" (xv). Walker's five decades of journals may be most valuable through the icon's personal descriptions of the interwoven relationship among her work and life as a daughter, teacher, mother, lover, activist, and author. As an example, readers may be familiar with Walker's eye injury from her essay "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self," within *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. In a July 8, 1977, entry Walker explains that the six years a scar covered her pupil "made me a human being [and] that made me a writer" (75). Walker adds: "What I internalized from all this, but repressed, was, among other peculiarities, an attraction to light/dark couples (symbols, I now suppose, of my parents)" (76). Walker's journals' span public achievements—her marriage in defiance of Mississippi's marriage segregation laws, winning the Pulitzer Prize for *The Color Purple*, publishing work on Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, and tenure at *Ms. Magazine*—and more intimate awakenings—musings on religion, descriptions of romances with men and women, her relationships with her parents and siblings, and descriptions of her writing process.

Although the journals may be best understood by scholars familiar with Walker's work, *Blossoms* is a gift for *Peitho* readers interested in not only gaining context to Walker's work, but further including Walker's influential voice within the study of 20<sup>th</sup> century social movements, literature, and intersectional rhetoric. Intersectional rhetoricians gain an abundance of previously unpublished insights on the key post-second wave project to understand how Black women's experiences are related, yet different, to those of Black men or white women and circulate histories of social movements and rhetoric that include Black women's vital contributions. As Walker writes of her time at *Ms. Magazine*, "I want desperately to be rid of the yearning for the material beyond adequate food, lodging and shelter and clothing," and in a January 1984 response to a cover story in the *New York Times*, Walker pens, "I don't chose womanism because it is 'better' than feminism since womanism means black feminist, but because it is mine" (65; 220). Scholars interested in feminist movements outside of the US learn about Walker's advocacy to draw awareness to female genital mutilation, the subject of Walker's book *Joy* and the documentary *Warrior Masks*. Those who extend work considering how language as symbolic action relates to language as social action gain first-hand accounts of an author who embraced both purposes, describing herself as "A pair of eyes. Only occasionally a fist" (65). For scholars expanding the work of Geneva Smitherman, Vershawn Ashanti Young, carmen kynard, April Baker-Bell, and scholars of linguistic justice, Walker's descriptions of her linguistic choices within her novel *The Color Purple* may be of special interest to consider how one author reacted to the circulation of her Black English prose.

Walker recognized her journals may not always remain private, and through becoming publicly available, readers may recognize how Walker's purposes relate to those of other journal writers in "our

attempt to face our authentic selves, not fantasies. And indeed to *exist* in our own lives” (144, emphasis in the original). Feminist rhetoricians have recognized journals, or diaries, allow for suspending pressures to make ideas legible for readers, to instead claim a voice so often denied in other spheres. The remove from the pressure to be understood is perhaps one of journals’ greatest affordances, as seen in *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* or Audre Lordé’s *The Cancer Journals*, to name but a few. In her journals, Walker has been highly aware of the rhetorical affordances of journaling. Walker describes herself after finishing *The Color Purple* in a Black feminist tradition as “[t]he womanist writer is the story herself as well as the person telling it” (181). Her journals also illustrate a conscious awareness of future readers and the challenges to shape interpretations of one’s life, such as when Walker writes in a 1972 entry, “At times I am dismayed that there are things I am afraid to write about in this journal for I know they might be misunderstood” (44). Walker’s efforts to not have her journals misunderstood are greatly aided by Boyd’s editorial choices.

Boyd’s editorial choices are not intended to condense the entries into a memoir or present the entries as decontextualized original archival documents. With Walker’s permission, Boyd provides readers a great service through taking on the labor-intensive process of finding corresponding entries from Walker’s habit to write in journals easily at hand to place the journal entries in chronological order. Boyd organizes the journals by decade, from Walker’s first journal in June 1965 as a Sarah Lawrence college student and ending with a reflection in 2000 on connecting with nature and the delights of living. Boyd maintains Walker’s abbreviations and original spellings and provides detailed footnotes to orient readers to the meaning of abbreviations, and biographical information that includes frequent appearances by Walker’s friends and partners among many celebrities and activists.

In *Blossoms*, Boyd rises to the occasion of curating the journals of a well-regarded, and still living, central figure of twentieth century literature and culture. The edited entries illustrate Walker’s life involved in multiple activist and cultural movements, and less publicly visible long-term relationships, processes of establishing a career as a writer, and quest to understand the divine. A planned second edited volume is sure to provide additional details of interest to students, teachers, and scholars. Walker’s diaries provide new material to provide context to Walker’s work and the vital contributions of Black women in the US to politics, culture, and rhetoric. *Gathering Blossoms* is a text worthwhile to analyze to understand Walker’s life that has been so memorably lived and composed to influence the history of rhetoric.