

From Petrified Wood to Folk Art: A Somatic Reading of Celie's Trauma and Reclamation in The Color Purple

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Abstract

This article examines the somatic experience of Celie's journey from victim to agent, as she traverses the narrative and encounters trauma in the novel, The Color Purple by Alice Walker, concluding that it is a neurobiological and text-based negotiation of trauma. This study combines poststructuralist ideas of Catherine Belsey on gaps in the text with Cathy Caruth's theory of "belatedness" and Bessel Van der Kolk's theory of somatic encoding. It suggests that the healing of Celie is a process of physical reawakening, in which her journey from the dissociated images of "making herself wood" to the tactile act of sewing is similarly a process of physical healing.

Keywords: Somatic Trauma, Alice Walker, The Color Purple, Van der Kolk, Cathy Caruth, Catherine Belsey, Epistolary Narrative.

1. Introduction

The theory of trauma is a critical theory that has emerged in the late 20th and early 21st centuries in the field of literary studies and has provided a lens to examine the ways catastrophic events appear in literature, and the ways in which such events do not lend themselves to easy, linear narration (Makwana, 2019). It arises in a paradoxical way: the unrepresentability of the traumatic experience is accompanied by the ethical imperative to testify to it. The traumatic "wound" is not always felt in the moment, but is "felt" only through comparison to another time and place; this process is called belatedness (Caruth, 1996). In *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker, the trauma of Celie is not just a psychological condition but a physical one. The protagonist, Celie, is subjected to a context of "intersectional trauma" where her feelings of selfhood are continually undermined by racial, sexual, and economic oppression, resulting in an experience of continuous interpersonal violence (Herman, 1992).

While there is a huge amount of scholarship devoted to *The Color Purple*, studies of the novel often tend to focus on the sociological material that it contains, rather than on the form as a representation of trauma. A significant gap exists in the understanding of the neurobiological details of the somatically encoded and narratively processed traumatic experience. This study aims to remedy that by proposing that Celie’s epistolary narrative is not just suffering, but the very act and experience of somatic healing.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The recovery of formal and neurobiological aspects of Celie’s life in *The Color Purple* has been less examined, and the impact of the book on issues of race and gender and women’s solidarity has been well documented. Critics who embrace trauma theory usually adopt a narrowly focused “talking cure” approach, prioritizing verbal communication as the criterion for healing. This investigation proposes that the process of Celie’s recovery is primarily pre-linguistic; that it is a “bottom-up” physical and somatic process that is only verbally and syntactically expressed later. This article triangulates Belsey, Caruth, and van der Kolk in order to present a methodological model for embodying trauma in epistolary fiction.

1.2 Research Question

This study addresses the following question

- How does the act of domestic creation (sewing) serve as a somatic negotiation that facilitates the transition from an “unclaimed experience” to an integrated narrative identity?

1.3 Objective

The study pursues interconnected aim

- To illustrate the recovery process where physical agency (sewing) precedes and enables linguistic empowerment.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Trauma Theory in Literary Studies

An understanding of trauma had evolved over time since Charcot and Janet, then Freud and the World Wars, to a formal diagnosis of PTSD, but its introduction into literary studies was a major theoretical shift. The discipline abandoned the mere cataloging of clinical symptomatology for a discussion of the narratives' form, its breaks, its silences, and its inventions as an expression of the experience of trauma. Trauma was seen as an existential threat to representation, and the most visible sign of trauma was its distortion, gaps, and fragmentation in language by scholars coming from the Yale School in the 1990s (Sharma, 2020).

It was a symbolic cross that was historically rooted in the cultural residue of a catastrophe. The repetition compulsion was one of the insights gained by Freud when he consulted with World War I soldiers in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), who obsessed over their worst trauma instead of forgetting it. He asserted that the bad influence emanating from a traumatic memory persists in the patient's mind, and that if the emotional impact is not discharged, the memory can go into a "second consciousness" – a place where it remains hidden or dimly experienced somewhere in the mind (Freud, 1955a, 1955b). The professional and popular consciousness about psychological injury was gradually transformed during the two World Wars and then the Vietnam War (1969–1975). It ended with the official incorporation of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) into the DSM-III in 1980 (APA, 1980; Young, 1995; van der Kolk et al., 1996), a diagnostic framework that reshaped dominant cultures of trauma, memory, and healing, and on whose basis literary trauma theory would develop.

2.2 Cathy Caruth and the Central Paradox of Trauma

Caruth developed a model of trauma in her seminal works *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), which focused on the lateness and irreducibility of trauma, what Freudian theory called the "Nachträglichkeit". Caruth's traumatic experience occurs in part at the time of the trauma: It is only after these intrusions, after the flashbacks and the obsessive behavior, that the mind tries to make sense of what it could not cope with before. This creates a paradox of an irreplaceable but always late witness that continually re-enacts a past that is never fully understood.

Trauma, argues Caruth, is unrepresentable in itself, an unintegrated imprint of the mind that can never be moved into narrative or be told in a linear fashion. The fact of a traumatic narrative is not what it says but what it leaves out. The significance of memory as a sign of epistemological uncertainty is crucial in texts such as Walker's epistolary novel and is analytically essential.

2.3 Beyond Caruth: The Somatic and Social Turns

Caruth's model has had a significant impact, but later scholarship has been developed and challenged in both directions. Clinician-researchers like Bessel van der Kolk showed that trauma, far from being a psychic wound, is in the body itself. Traumatic memories are often remembered instead as snippets of mental images, sounds, and feelings, not as narratives, and the brain's regulatory systems become dysregulated after a significant trauma, according to Van der Kolk (2014). This is a necessary model for understanding how trauma is manifested beyond language in the experiences of literary characters.

At the same time, contextual critics have offered another model of trauma, one that sees trauma as being more social in nature, and warns against universalizing early trauma theory. Trauma experience and expression are always gendered, raced, and classed (Herman, 1992; Ran et al., 2023; Kuzminskaite et al., 2021; Gori et al., 2023; Spytka, 2023). The present study requires a social attentiveness: Celie's trauma is not merely a psychic phenomenon but one that is created and exacerbated by the historical and social circumstances that exist for an African-American woman in the early twentieth century.

2.4 Catherine Belsey and the Poststructuralist Text

The third strand of the theoretical framework for this study comes from Catherine Belsey's poststructural approach as presented in *Critical Practice* (2002). Textual gaps, silences, and contradictions are not artistic failures, but rather a sign of psychic conflict and ideological tension, Belsey argues. For Belsey, language is not a clear, transparent medium, but a place from which subjectivity is created, negotiated, and divided. Her focus on what a text does not say, the pressures that create silence or incoherence in a character's discourse, is exactly connected to the linguistic aspects of trauma theorized by Caruth (1996).

In this study, Belsey's approach to the epistolary form itself (its grammar, syntax, and silences) is used to interpret the letters of Celie's broken subjectivity in the face of long-term suffering. Importantly, as Celie recovers, the development of her written communication, its increasing grammatical fluency, and its recovery of dialect as a place of identity rather than shame, is readable on Belsey's page as proof of a remade identity.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The methodology used in this study is interdisciplinary in nature, combining poststructuralist textual analysis, narrative trauma theory, and neurobiological trauma research. The poststructuralist reading of Belsey (2002) is used to examine the formal characteristics of the epistolary text and to view the gaps, silences, and contradictions as symptoms of psychic tension rather than as "incidental features" of Celie's limited education. Using Caruth's (1996) concept of latency, the analysis examines how Celie cognitively apprehends her abuse only after a considerable time, and how her letters are repetitive and fragmented, as her mind struggles to make sense of an experience that was too much for it to handle at the moment. The clinical foundation for this study is provided by the insights offered by Van der Kolk (2014) into the neurobiology of trauma, as he discusses the effects of trauma on the body, including the symptoms that have been studied here: menstrual cycles, hypervigilance, and emotional numbing.

The textual analysis follows a three-step neurobiological process—freeze (petrification and dissociation), thaw (Sensory restoration, Shug Avery), and integration (sewing, speech, and

narrative reconstitution). The stages do not necessarily occur in order, but are followed by the development of body image, syntactic structure, and the tenor and content of Celie's letters throughout the novel.

4. Analysis

4.1 Phase One: The Freeze — Petrification, Dissociation, and the Unclaimed Body

4.1.1 The Freeze Response and Tonic Immobility

Neurobiologically, Celie's parallelism to wood is a very literal description of tonic immobility. Van der Kolk (2014) argues that the autonomic nervous system will close down the body in response to an inescapable terror, in order to reduce pain and sensory intake. This is not a cognitive strategy; it is a physiological event. The self cannot run away, cannot fight, and is exiled from the body as a means of survival.

One of the characteristics of Celie's early letters is that there are no adjectives used to describe her emotions. She tells about Alphonso's rapes and her loss of her children in a reportorial syntax, as if they were happening to someone else. Trauma is unclaimed because it happens so quickly or it is too traumatic to process in real time, as Caruth (1996) states. What has left Celie is the self, and she is now left with only a wooden and latent presence: she is in the body, but her "self" is not.

In such early entries, Belsey's (2002) methodology is critical regarding the "dispassionate and impersonal syntax" of these pieces. Where Celie does not mention her pain or violations in subordinate clauses or not at all, it is not an indication of limited vocabulary; it is an indication of a fractured subjectivity. Her letters to God are deliberately separated into parts because she feels herself to be divided. The omissions from the text do the trauma of which it speaks.

4.1.2 Dehumanization and the Somatic Encoding of Shame

The negotiation scene with Alphonso and Celie's marriage to Mr ___ epitomizes the way trauma gets lodged in the body. The stepfather's language becomes Celie's discarded property:

Well, He say, real slow, I can't let you have Nettie. She too young. Don't know nothing but what you tell her. Sides, I want her to git some more schooling. Make a schoolteacher out of her. But I can let you have Celie. She the oldest anyway. She ought to marry first. She ain't fresh tho, but I specs you know that. She spoiled. Twice. But you don't need a fresh woman no how. I got a fresh one in there myself and she sick all the time. The children git on her nerve, she not much of a cook. And she big already. (Walker, 1982, p. 9)

When Celie does not speak, does not protest, this is just exactly the tonic immobility noted by van der Kolk (2014). Alphonso's assertion that "Celie is spoiled" is both an act of shaming and of planned somatic inscription. He inscribes his body onto her body while she remains present, silent. His next characterization of her as "She ugly. He say. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna let you feel it or feed it or clothe it" (Walker, 1982, p. 10) is a dehumanization so complete that Celie's response to provocation is not the passivity that one might expect, but the psychological mechanism he identifies in traumatized persons: that they are unable to respond appropriately to provocation: complete dissociation (p. 111).

The impact of traumatic events is so extreme that it causes an identity disruption that is not something that can be integrated into an individual's identity, as explained by Caruth (1996). This exchange does not happen to Celie; it happens to her later, and in disorganized repetitions, not being able to look at men, not being able to talk to the man that marries her, not being able to hear him. The trauma is created later, as a result of the involuntary perpetuation of the trauma, which Caruth feels is an inherent characteristic of traumatic experience.

4.1.3 Somatic Scores: Menstruation and the Hypervigilant Gaze

Two physiological markers in the novel bring to a clear focus the somatic encoding of Celie's trauma, which is most pronounced. There are two physiological markers in the novel that bring to a clear focus the somatic encoding of Celie's trauma, which is most pronounced. The first is her comment: "I don't bleed no more" (Walker, 1982, p. 7). This is a typical somatic score, meaning that the loss of period was the only symptom. Van der Kolk (2014) describes chronic stress and interpersonal violence as having the potential to permanently alter the endocrine system in the body. The body marks the score (p. 253) for Celie, who was forced to procreate and was raped systematically. Belsey's framework shows how Celie says this: Celie's observation is given without emotion, without the attribution of a cause, as a biological truth. Between the symptom and its lack of explanation is just Caruth's unclaimed experience, a traumatic trace whose etymology is latent; a sign for what has not yet been fully explained.

The second physiological marker is Celie's refocused look: "I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I stare at females, tho, cause I am not afraid of them" (Walker, 1982, p. 7). It would be classified as hypervigilance, a threat detection mechanism that has been sensitized after years of interpersonal violence to trigger the male form as a predatory trigger, according to Van der Kolk (2014). This is not a cognitive option but a reflex. Developmental trauma: the nervous system has been re-patterned, so that early exposure to male violence has impacted Celie's attachment and threat-response system.

4.1.4 The Wedding Day: Compartmentalization and the Collapse Response

When Celie enters Mr. ___'s house, it is a step up in somatic entrapment. As she is being physically assaulted by her stepson, who opens her head with a rock and sprays “blood down tween her breasts”, she records on her wedding day: “But I don’t cry.” (Walker, 1982, p. 14).

A complete lack of self-pity is the disjunction between severe physical injury and no safe attachment, or when there is no protective figure intervening, the survivor has to compartmentalize physical pain to meet the practical demands of survival, as van der Kolk (2014) calls it: the collapse response. Then Celie bandages her head and starts to cook. What she means by resilience in this context is not something that one feels like celebrating, but the adaptive dissociation of a person who has lost emotional processing. The wedding should be a new beginning, but it is something different here, a traumatic initiation as it were, an event that is not quite assimilated because the violence is normalized by the silence of the Patriarch.

4.2 Phase Two: The Thaw — Shug Avery and the Restoration of the Senses

4.2.1 Mirroring, Co-Regulation, and the Safe Gaze

The arrival of Shug Avery signals the start of van der Kolk’s (2014) thawing of Celie’s petrified condition. Van der Kolk is clear that trauma healing can only happen in the presence of a safe, attuned other: Trauma healing cannot happen in isolation: the nervous system needs a safe, attuned other to begin to down-regulate from the chronic state of alarm (p. 79). Shug gives Celie the “safe gaze” that she has been missing in her whole life. Her sensuous, uninhibited relationship with her own body provides Celie with a model of embodied selfhood that is radically different from the objectified body she is been marked with by Alphonso and Mr. ___, a body instrumentalised to serve various ends.

As Celie’s relationship with Shug grows, so does her lettering in register. The early letters are synthetic and express the side of the bystander until sensory observation, color, and the first inklings of desire take over. This transformation of the “Color Purple,” which is the novel’s central metaphor and which signifies the beauty found where one does not expect, echoes the shift from unclaimed experience to sensory ownership, which Caruth (1996) correlates with the movement towards a cognitive integration of traumatic memory. It is instructive here that Belsey had paid so much attention to the form of the letters, for both of Celie’s letters become more grammatically complex as she becomes more subjective in her evaluation and sensations.

4.2.2 The Somatic Flashback: Pregnancy and the Limits of Recovery

Although Celie is making strides towards independence, the score again manifests in an unpredictable manner in the body. Walker’s notes for her first pair of pants for pregnant women read, “But just the thought of getting pregnant make me want to cry . . . And like a fool, I started to cry” (p. 230). This is the first time in the novel that tears are experienced by anyone, a departure from the emotional coldness that Celie has felt since she was first abused.

The somatic flashback that occurs with the thought of pregnancy makes sense of the insistence of Caruth (1996) that trauma is not “past.” The traumatic score is left in the body, and is triggered back upon when sensory or cognitive stimuli match previous pain. This is known as the ‘collapsed response’s shadow’ as the nervous system falls into immobilization, a protective state that is characterized by fatigue, dissociation, and inability to function, as described by Van der Kolk (2014, p. 111). But the tears are indeed steps toward progress. Celie has expanded her “window of tolerance” (van der Kolk, 2014) so that she can feel the feeling without it turning into a somatic symptom.

4.3 Phase Three: Integration — Sewing, Language, and the Reconstituted Self

4.3.1 The Somatics of Sewing: Grounding and Repetitive Motion

The longest evidence of Celie’s somatic integration is in her pants-making business. Her description of the “obsessive happiness” of the crafting process is quite lengthy and worth quoting at length:

I sit in the dining room making pants after pants. I got pants now in every color and size under the sun. since us started making pants down home, I ain't been able to stop. I change the cloth, I change the print, I change the waist, I change the pocket. I change the hem, I change the fullness of the leg. I make so many pants Shug tease me. (Walker, 1982, p. 191)

Van der Kolk (2014) mentions that tactile activities such as sewing, drumming, and weaving are extremely calming and restore calmness to the nervous system, a grounding mechanism, or a way of bringing the organism back to the present instead of the temporal distortions of trauma (p. 205). The physicality of textile labor (the texture of cloth, the exactness of measurement) helps to ground Celie in her body, directly challenging the disembodiment of her earlier life.

The compulsory quality of her work is indicative of the urgency of trauma processing (van der Kolk, 2014) but also suggests what Caruth (1996) may refer to as the “driven” nature of traumatic repetition, here generative and not destructive. Every change to the waist, pocket, hem, and fullness of leg is a step toward taking ownership of her surroundings and body, especially since she had had her reproductive freedom stripped from her with rape and forced pregnancy. Folkspants Unlimited is the material proof of healing: She is no longer the “object” acted upon by others, but the subject who acts upon fabric.

4.3.2 The Language of Integration: Belsey and the Reconstituted Subject

What makes Belsey’s framework analytically most productive is its use with regard to the development of Celie’s written language throughout the novel. The grammatical flaws in the early letters are not only a sign of Celie’s limited schooling, but they are also,

as Belsey (2002) would claim, the formal record of a “systematically fractured subjectivity”. It was not because of her stupidity, as Walker suggests, but because Alphonso took her out of school on purpose to keep her from being able to access networks of help or support. Her education was an epistemic violence to restrict her cognitive and linguistic autonomy. The act of correcting the speech of Darlene in the scene is a second violence that takes place:

Darlene trying to teach me how to talk. She say us not so hot. A dead country give-away. You say US where most folks say WE, she say, and peoples think you dumb. Every time I say something the way I say it, she correct me until I say it some other way. Pretty soon it feel like I can't think. My mind run up on a thought, git confuse, run back and sort of lay down. (Walker, 1982, p. 194)

This passage speaks to the stakes of Belsey’s (2002) discussion of language as a field of competing subjectivity. The way Celie speaks is not a mistake, but a language through which she has maintained her existence as a person. Darlene’s corrections are an epistemic micro-aggression because they pathologize the voice that is already natural and make Celie’s voice detract from her cognitive and cultural roots. The result is “My mind run up on a thought, git confuse, run back and sort of lay down” — a state of unassimilated traumatic experience, as Caruth (1996) calls it, when the linguistic medium of thought, itself, is assaulted.

Van der Kolk (2014) situates this disruption in a neurobiological frame of reference. This ongoing silencing of Celie’s vernacular causes an executive function to freeze; there is a sudden demand to reorganize, and the mind deposits. Trauma can change the organization of the brain (p. 53), and this linguistic oppression does not just damage Celie’s confidence; it also reactivates the patterns of helplessness and shutdown in her nervous system that were formed by her past trauma. In syntax here, it is not simply a stylistic question, but a struggle of self-determination.

But the trajectory of Celie’s language in the novel is contrary to this oppression. The evolution of her somatic healing practice, through Shug, and her creative work, leads to a gradual change in her writing: the sentences become grammatically more precise, and her vocabulary becomes both broader and more precise, and most importantly, she develops a more assured voice, incorporating her dialect into a more confident and expressive register. It is Belsey’s reimagined subject, the writing self and the physical self, healing together.

4.3.3 Forgiveness, Witnessing, and the Post-Traumatic Subject

The latter half of the novel features a relationship between Celie and Albert (Mr. __) that gives the best chance to articulate what van der Kolk (2014) describes as the social dimension of recovery. Trauma recovery, then, is relational in nature, concerned with the reorganization of the damaged relational matrix in ways that encompass the potential for

repair as well as damage (p. 79). The degree to which Celie's account of why she does not hate Albert is carefully calibrated:

After all the evil he done I know you wonder why I don't hate him. I don't hate him for two reasons. One, he love Shug. And two Shug used to love him. Plus, he look like he trying to make something out himself. I don't mean just that he work and he clean after himself and he appreciate some of the things God was playful enough to make. I mean when you talk to him now he really listen, and one time, out of nowhere in the conversation us was having, he said Celie, I'm satisfied this the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man. (Walker, 1982, p. 236)

Reworking trauma does not mean forgetting what happened, but learning to live with it without its load being too much (p. 62, Caruth 1996). When Celie refuses to hate Albert, that is not forgiving Albert for his cruelty, and that is not forgetting his cruelty; it is an emerging ability to see a human in him, coexisting with the cruel one she has known. This is what van der Kolk (2014) sees as a sign of post-traumatic development: the reconstituted subject's ability to contain the complexity, the reality of trauma, and the possibility for change, without idealizing or becoming paralyzed by rage.

Albert's own change, in his ability to listen, to reflect, to name his failure as a "natural man", that is what van der Kolk calls the neurobiological and emotional shifts that can take place in a perpetrator who does some "true" self-reckoning. What little is accomplished here is proof of Celie's recovery: she can see another person grow while not losing sight of her own growth.

4.3.4 The Return to Community: Reunion, Joy, and Somatic Integration

The climactic family reunion with Nettie and Celie's grown children conveys the last phase of somatic healing; recovering pleasure and restoring the bonds of community (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 205). They reunite, and Celie's story is unmanageable; she can not talk, can hardly stand, and she is too full of feelings. But, it is important to note that this physical overload is not the dissociative shutdown of her childhood; that is the opposite – too much feeling that the body can no longer handle. This moment is the most formally significant moment in the novel, as this reflection on it is one of the most.

I feel a little peculiar round the children. For one thing, they grown. And I see they think me and Nettie and Shug and Albert and Samuel and Harpo and Sophia and Jack and Odessa real old and don't know much what going on. But I don't think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt. (Walker, 1982, p. 261)

For Caruth (1996), recovering from traumatic numbness is a process of re-emergence, a self (re)turning to itself on its own terms (p. 108). "This is the youngest us ever felt," is an inversion of the temporal logic of trauma: where trauma keeps the past ever present, even then, even now,

the present is rendered “frozen” in the moment of injury. Celie’s joy reconstitutes her in the present tense, which is truly “new.” Van der Kolk’s ability to see the whole picture in recovery, including the body, is realized here, that the body needs to learn to feel safe and enjoy pleasure as well. The lightness Celie speaks of is not metaphoric, but physiological: The nervous system is no longer on guard, and is able to dwell now.

5. Conclusion

The Color Purple is not a story solely about social liberation, as it has been argued throughout this article, but rather a careful log of somatic transformation – of Celie’s body and her words – within a variety of overlapping fields of research: van der Kolk’s neurobiology (2014), Caruth’s narrative theory of trauma (1996), and Belsey’s poststructuralist examination of textual form (2002). From the stone and wood of her youth, to the thaw facilitated by Shug Avery, to the folk art and generative repetition of her pants-making, Celie’s evolution is a neurobiological process of a terrorized body moving from frozen terror to integrated, creative life.

It is the epistolary form itself that does this healing: the gaps, the silences, the broken syntax of the letters that Celie writes in the beginning are not restraints but formal enactments of dissociated consciousness. A reconstitution of Celie’s written voice happens concurrently with and is indistinguishable from the reconstitution of her physical self, as she heals. Her letters are not just the report of a body which kept the score, but the score’s slow, slow and irrevocable revision.

The methodological productiveness of the triangulation of somatic and poststructuralist perspectives in the analysis of literary trauma is also illustrated in this study. The Belsey – Caruth – van der Kolk group helps the critic to shift between the formal and the physiological, between what the text expresses and what it is unable to say and what the body is later to record. This kind of thing seems to be applicable to other epistolary and autofictional works that depend on the writing subject as a wounded body, in which the form is neither about the content nor is it content, but is the body itself from which wounds are inspired and to which wounds are healed.

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