

CREATING MYSELF: FRIENDSHIP AS BLACK WOMEN'S LIBERATION IN TONI
MORRISON'S *SULA* AND ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

by

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Abstract

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The talking book trope, begun in the era of and with the authors of slave narratives, firmly establishes a literary tradition for black writers that continues today. Contemporary authors employ this rhetorical device in order to prove the humanity of those of African descent, express a lack of familiarity with the dominant power structure that seeks to disenfranchise the Other, and to illustrate one method of entry into a hegemonic social structure. Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* fit into this trope, with varying degrees of success. In both texts, the relational mode of friendship between the women serves to empower and push each female character towards self-fulfillment and emotional health. It is these relationships that push black women characters from existing on the outskirts of white society to explore and sometimes realize how to participate within this world while countering the social constructs of racism and sexism. Published in 1973 and 1982 respectively, *Sula* and *The Color Purple* offer some of the earliest images of black womanhood in contemporary literature as defined by black authors. The uplifting of black women within the novels can certainly be tied to the Black Feminist Movement, one especially active during the era in which the texts were released.

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Chapter 1

Talking Books: "Shared Texts of [Black] Consciousness

1.1 What Friendship Affords Black Women

In a letter to her friend Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Tara Bynum compares the two's friendship to that between Phillis Wheatley and Obour Tanner. Exchanging digital letters on a social media site, Gumbs and Bynum often discuss literature, slavery, and the black woman's ever-present quest for self-actualization. In simpler terms, much of the discussion revolves around the need for healthy relationships between black women and what such relationships can accomplish. Friendship as the avenue towards wholeness or healing is a concept explored by several authors. Within that concept is the exploration of identity and self that the safety of friendship allows. Alice Walker and Toni Morrison's works often explore these themes, with two of their texts providing the background for my research. In the novels *Sula* (Morrison) and *The Color Purple* (Walker), the women desperately seek to understand who they are within their communities, particularly as they relate to other disenfranchised women.

A relational model of identity is either stunted or wholly achieved in both of the above works, and in performing a close reading, I wish to establish whether parallels may be drawn between the lives of these women and the black feminist movement. I primarily seek to link these texts to black feminism and investigate what they can tell us about its ideals and how women can empower each other through the principles expressed in the novels. To both Morrison and Walker, a woman's self-actualization seems critical to the stabilization of her community. Specifically, both writers are adamant that the self-fulfillment process is facilitated by black women's positive relationships with each other. This mirroring type of relationship, one that cannot be found in the mother-daughter bond but is primarily captured between two peers, is integral to the success of the black

woman and her community. As Elizabeth Abel writes, Sula and Nel exemplify a mode of relational self-definition. In other words, their relationship to each other is what enables the two to define themselves. "Through the intimacy which is knowledge, friendship becomes a vehicle of self-definition for women, clarifying identity through relation to an other who embodies and reflects an essential aspect of the self" (Coleman 149). I am particularly interested in the challenges presented to Sula, Nel, Celie, Sofia, and Shug as black bodies who encounter the systematized acts of racist behavior as they deal with those outside of the black community. Interrelated is the sexism these same women encounter, for it is often these "isms" working together that form a barrier or chasm across which black women seeking wholeness must cross. As Barbara Smith wrote in her 1977 essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," the politics of sex, race, and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers (Showalter 170). Discernible in these two works is the treatment of their subjects: all black women suffering disenfranchisement at the hands of white America, their own black husbands, and sometimes, each other. Facing a mutilating gaze in popular culture, bell hooks posits that the double blocking of racism and sexism is one that interrupts self-actualization for black females. "She must counter the representation of herself, her body, her being as expendable" (Conboy et. al 117). Disputing the expendable nature of black women's mutilated bodies is something black feminist writers work to accomplish.

I am especially interested in examining these two texts through the aspect of feminism that is concerned with the amelioration of gender inequality. Both Morrison and Walker's texts discuss the apparent lack of equality between men and women. It is not just a battle against other oppressing races at work within these novels, but often the two sexes that grapple with each other. I argue that each author offers friendship as a manner for the black woman to co-exist with those who will continually vilify her due to

her race and her sex. Third Wave feminism, notably concerned with the impact of race and class, therefore provides a framework for examining these works.

Before analyzing the texts, I want to establish a meaning for the term “friendship.” Though this would seem a simple concept to define, the nuances of the relationships between the characters of *Sula* and *The Color Purple* reflect the need to distinguish what it is I seek to examine when I discuss the women’s roles in each others’ lives. I wish to go beyond a surface or strictly positive view of how friendship is commonly viewed. Though the relationship between the women in *The Color Purple* easily bears out this primary view of camaraderie, there are several moments in *Sula* that might force a reader to ask if Sula and Nel are in fact friends. There is hurt that occurs on both ends: for example, Sula sleeps with Nel’s husband; Nel tells Sula she’s foolish for thinking she can have more than a colored woman is allowed. Nel feels Sula should never have slept with Jude; Sula feels that Nel should have loved her friend enough to move past this grievance. Beyond these emotional injuries are the grim and rather dark experiences the two encounter together. Sula cuts off a tip of her finger to protect Nel from four white teenage boys who “occasionally entertain themselves...by harassing black schoolchildren” (Morrison 53). The two inadvertently murder a younger child and, though they grieve during the service, they end the day walking home together “wondering what happened to butterflies in the winter” (66). Though their association suffers these chilling occurrences, Nel and Sula’s relationship still manages to fit into a common understanding of friendship: the two are allied against the external forces that seek to overwhelm or constrict them – mothers, the social restraints of racism and sexism, and a community that offers little to no solace. Therefore, it is more than their friendship that I wish to explore. It is the manner in which the two relate to each other and how this bond emotionally uplifts Nel and Sula that I will

focus on in subsequent chapters. So, too, will I study how that same bond moves the women in *The Color Purple* towards emotional health.

1.2 *Sula* and *The Color Purple* as Participants in the Talking Book Trope

Through their use of the “talking book” trope in *Sula* and *The Color Purple*, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker create symbolic gathering places for black women to enter in and engage with each other. These two texts operate as examples of conceptual or abstract meeting places for black women to see themselves reflected through the characters as empowered and self-actualized whole beings. The characters in *Sula* and *The Color Purple* demonstrate how friendship is a route to liberation and fulfillment for black women. Each novel speaks to the roles typically allotted to disenfranchised black women, wife and/or mother, and questions whether these positions are the only way by which we may contribute to society. Further, the friendship between these women is identified as a significant method by which the characters attain self-determined autonomy over their lives. The nurturing bond of friendship allows the protagonists an opportunity to escape the limiting capacity of more traditional relationships such as wife and mother. This escape is necessary because such conventional roles do not focus on the black woman, rather on what she provides or does for someone other than herself. Both Morrison and Walker’s usage of the “talking book” as a rhetorical device parallels such usage in slave narratives of early black writers. Much as the latter sought to express their inherent humanity and confront a domineering Western culture, so too do these contemporary authors work to showcase the value and worth of often disenfranchised black women. Such manipulation of literacy was and still serves as a means of empowerment for the overlooked writer and the community she addresses. The novels “speak” back to the society that would deny the rights of black women. Much as slave narratives made a case against the institution of slavery, *Sula* and *The Color Purple*

argue against the maltreatment of black women. The novels, through the friendship of the protagonists, offer alternative means for black women to succeed in what remains a white, male-dominated world.

1.3 Purposes of the Talking Book Trope

Before I detail the necessity of texts that allow black women readers to participate in prevailing over social attitudes of racism and sexism, the background of the talking book trope must be understood. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argued in 1988 that a common motif uniting the narratives of early black writers was the authors' use of a theme he identified as the "talking book" trope. This trope is considered one of the foundational tropes of African-American literary tradition (Jackson 252). In his analysis of the talking book trope, Gates first provides a historical background for the trope, popular in a wide variety of texts authored by black writers. Gates shows that the African-American literary tradition has its foundations in the slave narratives published between 1760 and 1865 (252). In his essay regarding the talking book and those who research its use, Leon Jackson cites Gates' work that states the trope is often employed to signify the alienation such authors experienced when confronting Western culture, and could perhaps more aptly be named the tradition of the non-talking book (252). The slaves, eventually freedmen, initially were unable to identify with the common practice of reading, feeling as if the books their masters were able to read would not "talk back" to them.

Thus, the first purpose behind using the talking book trope was for African-born authors to illustrate the alienation they experienced in the culture responsible for enslaving them. Gates describes one of the most well-known encounters with the talking book trope that demonstrates that alienation in his examination of Equiano's autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, published in 1789. The talking book scene depicts Equiano as a young boy, just learning English and

incapable of “speaking” to a book, the *Bible*, in the same manner as his master and a young white boy just a few years older than the slave.

I have often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all the things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent. (Equiano, www.gutenberg.org)

Equiano is unable to “converse” with the book and writes this scene to describe his alienation from the dominant European culture. The book and its unwillingness to “speak” with Equiano shows the young slave’s lack of familiarity with the cultural practices of those who have captured and enslaved him. In this manner, Gates’ “non-talking book” and the first objective of the trope are represented.

A second purpose of the trope as provided in Equiano’s narrative is the use of writing as a means for those of African descent to enter Western society and be seen as acceptable members of this community. Early African-born writers identified literacy as an entryway into the dominant Western culture. For example, it was the literacy of Equiano’s master that distinguished the difference between his conversation with the book and Equiano’s lack of ability to have the same exchange. Further proof of literacy as an entryway or accomplishment typically reserved for Western society and denied its slaves can be seen in the prefaces or introductions that often accompanied early texts written by authors such as Gronniosaw or poet Phillis Wheatley. The forewords were written by a white member of the community and would vouch for the African-born author’s ability to read and write and that he or she was the sole author of the text. Because an already - accepted member of the governing population wrote the preface, credibility was now provided to a text whose source might be otherwise questioned. Most enslaved Africans were forbidden to learn how to read or write the English language. Thus, the preface lent authority to the text that followed it.

By combining the two functions of the talking book trope, Equiano and other such authors progressed from alienation to inclusion in the dominant culture partly because they were able to read and write and not just speak white men's languages. The path from "orality to literacy" occurred simultaneously with the "slave's arduous journey to freedom" (Gates 153). The former slave's description of the emancipation process was therefore multidimensional. Not only did such a written work describe emancipation from the literal bondage of slavery, it also illustrated a more symbolic freedom that was produced via proficiency as a reader and writer within the dominant culture. This proficiency granted the formerly disenfranchised individual a chance to prove his or her self-worth and that he or she was just as much part of the human community as their white counterparts. The trope exemplifies the narrator's ability to transform the self from "silent object to speaking subject" for it shows that a "human voice" is present within the previously silenced slave. By moving from alienation to inclusion in the human community and becoming a speaking member of that community, the two purposes of the talking book trope overlap.

The talking book, as a metaphysical entity, deserves some scrutiny or analysis as well, for it proves to be a powerful rhetorical tool. In Equiano's case, it is the Bible that initially refuses to "speak" with him. *The Bible* is viewed as more than the textual representation of God; it is God's Spirit itself that inhabits the pages. "The text has not been anthropomorphized, but it is distinctly unique in that a presence, the presence of God, is understood to inhabit it" (May 197). Christians' belief in the supernatural presence of God inhabiting the scriptures would have presented Equiano with an approach to use Western society's religion against another of its institutions, slavery. Cedrick May contends that the use of the talking book trope allowed Equiano to present a "stronger moral case and ethical argument against the slave trade" (193). The African author surely

understood the necessity to skillfully dispute the primary view of those Christians who saw slavery as consistent with the faith's ideals.

The political nature of this authorial intent cannot be ignored: Equiano's slave narrative and those that preceded it, often featuring the *Bible* as the talking book, were written in response to slavery and as a means to inspire readers to join the abolitionist cause. Equiano works to become a "speaking subject" by "inscribing [his] voice in the written word" (Gates 130). Becoming a speaking subject allows him the opportunity to speak and write against slavery in the same manner that the dominant culture used to communicate: literacy. When Equiano first confronts the non-talking text, he is an outsider to a mainstay of Western culture, namely its religion. Understanding that many slave-holding Europeans used Christianity as a support of slavery, Equiano uses this section of his narrative to discuss the time in his life when he was positioned outside their circle. Therefore, when he is able to engage in "conversation" with the book, a mutual acceptance or relationship between Equiano and God, or at the very least, Equiano and Western spirituality, will allow the author entrance into a realm previously occupied only by those who seek to oppress him and other African-born people. This tactic of speaking with the talking book would support his aim to place himself on the same level as those oppressors and demonstrate that the God with whom they now mutually converse is, in fact, anti-slavery. "The writing of black people in Western languages has, at all points, remained political, implicitly or explicitly, regardless of its intent or its subject" (132). Equiano is thus politically motivated to write his narrative.

The Bible's importance to Christianity and his ability to read this text became the means for Equiano to construct an authoritative and reasonable argument against slavery. The Bible's metaphysical nature, or more accurately, its scriptures, would certainly speak to the heart of those who felt this written Word transcended all others. As

May posits, “unless one encounters the presence of God through scriptures it is not possible to have either true knowledge of the mysteries of scripture or spiritual salvation” (197). Christians, believing the *Bible* is the Word/Presence of God, would therefore profess that those who are able to read the *Bible* are equally enabled to encounter God and be spiritually saved. Being a recipient of salvation and not just the property of one who claimed salvation would place this person into the same sphere as Europeans according to Europeans’ own standards. Realizing this, Equiano’s latter ability to read the *Bible* symbolizes the African’s conversation with God and his transformation into a fellow Christian, a recipient of the same “spiritual salvation” in white men’s eyes. It further symbolizes Equiano’s proficiency in masterfully working within the belief system of Western culture to become part of rather than subjugated by that culture. Thus, the chasm between the African and Western cultures has been bridged.

1.4 Reader-Response Criticism in Analyzing “Talking Books”

Morrison and Walker participate in the continuation of a “shared text of blackness” (Gates 129) by reworking the talking book trope into their texts (129). Specifically, the two authors place themselves into the microcosm of a black women’s collective. The books exist not only as items meant for consumption by readers, but also as metaphysical meeting places for those within the communities they address, namely black women seeking a gathering place or asylum from both racism and sexism. Like all texts, each novel is meant to be taken in and digested by readers; what separates the writing of black women authors from texts authored by those who are male and non-black is that these works are also meant to provide an abstract environment into which black women readers are invited in order to find comfort and encouragement. Characters suffering from and overcoming racist and sexist oppression demonstrate black women’s ability to triumph over both forms of subjugation. *Sula* can be classified as a talking book

due to its characters working against existing sociopolitical norms for black women. As Sula expresses her frustration and disregard for “acceptable” behavior for colored women, Nel bows down to social pressure and exhibits the same behaviors that she initially finds frustrating in her own mother. The alienation both women feel, either as girls or adults, is analogous to the slave narrative author’s sense of estrangement from the dominant social structure. For the characters of *The Color Purple*, the talking book trope is fulfilled when the women confront the disenfranchisement they experience from two sources: white community members and black men, fathers and husbands, who seek to rule the lives of the women they father and/or marry. In each novel, the women seek to insert themselves into the presiding social order just as the authors of the slave narratives worked to do. Much of the encouragement the women receive is via their relationships with each other. While in Morrison’s *Sula*, the characters Sula and Nel fail in this aspect due to the interruption in their friendship, in Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Celie, Shug, Sofia, and Nettie are each allowed to achieve self-autonomous and emotionally healthy and fulfilling lives. The characters within each novel face moments of marginality and they overcome it, to varying degrees of success, by carving out a space for themselves within the world they inhabit. For example, Sula, unfamiliar with life outside the Bottom travels, goes to college, sleeps with men, makes her own decisions, chooses her own path because she’s determined to not be like “every colored woman in this country” and die “like a stump,” but instead go “down like one of those redwoods.” She wants to end her life knowing she “sure did live in this world” (Morrison 143). Sula’s quest is very like the quests discussed in slave narratives in that she spends her life seeking a way to do that which is denied her due her “otherness.”

In *The Color Purple*, the talking book trope is continued as many of the women function as authors and readers at different points – Celie, Nettie, and Shug are all

authors of letters; Celie is a reader of her own letters (seen in the moment where she edits the second sentence of her first letter, "I am I have always been a good girl" (Walker 1). It is via these letters, the written and the read, that the characters determine their positions as women and how they may alter those positions. For example, Celie reads and hears multiple times that she should fight back. She eventually does just this and this is especially seen when she leaves Mr. _____. She speaks up for herself for the first time, curses him, reminds him that she never asked for anything from him, including his "sorry hand in marriage" (201). She calls him a "lowdown dog" and emphasizes that his "dead body just the welcome mat" she needs to "enter into the Creation" if he attempts to stop her departure (199). I would also argue that Alice Walker is a reader of her own text, and because of this further establishes her novel as a talking book. The book's signature illustrates Walker's readership of this work. "I thank everybody in this book for coming. – A.W., author and medium" (289). If she is performing as a medium and channeling the stories and voices of the characters, she functions in multiple roles. She is the author since she puts the words on paper; she is also a reader, for this is not her story she's telling. She is hearing someone about someone else's life. Toni Morrison has discussed a similar quality to her storytelling; she speaks of writing as a process where she becomes a "conduit" for characters who "tell [her] if the rendition of their lives is authentic or not" (Schappell and Lacour). *Sula* and *The Color Purple* are talking books in which the characters, authors, and readers of the book engage with the pertinent themes of disenfranchisement, the uplifting friendships between black women, and one method a black woman has to reverse her position if she's classified as less than: friendship. Although *Sula* does not exemplify all the characteristics of a talking book, the alienation the titular character feels with the surrounding culture accomplishes one goal of the talking book trope. It is more so the relationship between the two girls, Sula and Nel, and how

Sula confronts her alienation from the dominant culture, often thanks to her friendship with Nel, that I will discuss. In each subsequent chapter dedicated to examining these works, I will further elaborate on the way that the texts fit into the talking book trope.

As the talking book trope illustrates, readers take an active role in consuming a book. Similarly, reader-response criticism addresses the role of the reader of the literary text, thus providing a second method of analyzing both works, with the talking book trope as the first. Reader-response theory provides a firm entryway for both texts into the talking book trope. Because this theory is concerned with what happens during the reading process and the active role readers have on the texts, reader-response criticism demonstrates how readers of *Sula* and *The Color Purple* participate in what these novels mean to black women readers. Further, because readers engage with the texts and the texts with them, a symbolic gathering place for black women confronting racism and sexism, two forms of subjugation that each novel discusses, is preserved. As Lois Tyson writes, "Reader-response criticism focuses on readers' responses to literary texts" (Tyson 169). Surfacing in the 1930s, this approach to critical analysis revolves around the "reader's role in creating meaning" (170). "Reader-response theory...maintains that what a text is cannot be separated from what it does" (170, emphasis my own). "The role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature and...readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively make the meaning they find in literature" (170). Therefore, something significant occurs when people read *The Color Purple* and *Sula*. The two texts act upon readers, specifically black women, and these same black women readers act upon the texts. In a symbiotic or cyclical relationship, the novels' meaning is found through its impact upon black women who read the works, not "passively," but taking either text and holding it up against their lives in order to find themselves, their stories, and a lesson in

how to achieve emotional health. The active meaning they find in this literature is one that enables them to identify one path to self-actualization.

Tyson discusses a form of reader response criticism called affective stylistics that most aptly pertains to my discussion of *Sula* and *The Color Purple*. “Affective stylistics is derived from analyzing further the notion that a literary text is an event that occurs in time – that comes into being as it is read – rather than an object that exists in space” (171). In this way, the texts, as meeting spaces, are “built” as readers begin to inhabit the pages. As the characters of the text develop a route out of social persecution, black women reading the novel may understand and identify paths to conquer racism and sexism in their own lives. In affective stylistics, the text is noted for the “results it produces...within the reader” (171). Because the text “acts on us as we read each word and phrase,” the study of such novels, through a reader-response critical lens, would be particularly interested in the manner in which the novels act on readers, and in this instance, black women readers. An application of reader-response theory to *Sula* and *The Color Purple* therefore focuses on what those novels may do to the women who read them. As talking books, the novels act on black women readers by possibly allowing them to see similarities between their personal stories and those of the characters. Further, each text points to the friendships of black women as a conduit to self-realization thereby prompting some readers to develop or maintain friendships with other black women. In case of *Sula* and *The Color Purple*, a possible response might be for a reader to restructure her life or begin to find more value in friendships that allow her to explore her own identity separate from the role she plays as wife or mother. Such agency given to an object confirms the transformative role a talking book performs. In this way, reader-response theory provides a conceptual understanding of how each novel functions within the talking book trope.

The virtual meeting places established by *Sula* and *The Color Purple* thereby may enable black women to engage in the same quest for self-actualization in which the characters participate, yet in a manner that Morrison and Walker's texts identify as the successful means to overpower racism and sexism. While previously silenced due to these social systems, Morrison and Walker's female characters point to ways for black women facing the double-bind of racism and sexism to vanquish these systems and speak themselves into positions of agency. Use of this sophisticated rhetorical structure, the talking book trope, by contemporary black authors is a means of establishing voice or presence for a population that suffered silencing. In the case of these two texts by Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, the voice of previously muted black feminists is expressed.

1.5 Black Feminist Literature in Support of the Black Feminist Movement

Any discussion regarding black feminist literature should acknowledge its connection to the black feminist movement. In my final chapter, I will discuss the Black Power and Feminist Movements, as they precursored the Black Feminist Movement, and how each helped establish a need for black feminist texts such as *Sula* and *The Color Purple*. For now, I wish to focus on the role of literature that discusses the ideals of the Black Feminist Movement. The two form a symbiotic relationship in which the movement sparks and enables the creative efforts of black women artists, including authors, while black feminist art speaks to the principles of the movement. Barbara Smith discusses the need for a critical method devoted to studying texts of and by black women. She links the black feminist movement and the creative efforts of black women. "A viable, autonomous Black feminist movement in this country would open up the space needed for the exploration of Black women's lives and the creation of consciously Black woman-identified art" (qtd. in Showalter 169). Simply put, there should be no separation between the art and life of black women. Ideally, both encourage and enforce the other. In reading

Sula and *The Color Purple*, black women readers will likely notice the explicit parallels between their own lives and the lives of the characters. Morrison and Walker give their characters backstories rooted in racism replete with Jim Crow laws, the separation of “colored” and “white folks,” and women who are supposed to “mind” their husbands in the same manner children mind their parents. The art that the two authors have created is directly related to what these authors have experienced and observed. For Smith, these novels address the longing she expresses for there to be “one book in existence that would tell me something specific about my life” (qtd. in Showalter 183). Besides speaking specifically to the lives of black women readers, such works can also be seen to achieve another purpose set forth in Smith’s essay, that of “breaking our silence and our isolation, of helping us to know each other” (183). Texts like *Sula* and *The Color Purple*, functioning in a talking book role and giving a voice to black women characters who otherwise wouldn’t be “heard,” also provide a forum for black women who read the works and see some of their own experiences reflected in the novels’ pages. The texts bear proof to what black women face and therefore give voice to the women whose lives they explore.

Chapter 2

Emotional Wholeness: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

2.1 Celie's Sexual and Racial Oppression

While in Morrison's novel, *Sula*, Sula and Nel's emotional happiness is prevented by the rupture in their friendship, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* portrays the main character, Celie, as allowed to achieve health and well-being via her friendships with other characters. At the start of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, readers meet Celie, an emotionally and physically damaged girl. It is the American South in the 1930s and the fourteen-year-old, who has "always been a good girl," prays to God via letters, and pours out her anguish regarding her stepfather raping her. "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker 1). Such is the instruction she receives from the patriarch of her family, thus demonstrating the male influence under which she suffers. Not only is this patriarch responsible for abusing her, he commands her to only speak of this act to God, another male, albeit spiritual, force.

As Tokizanae Sanae explains, this act, coupled with Celie's written phrase, "I am I have always been a good girl," immediately confronts readers with the "negation of Celie's body, self, or even existence" further "concretize[d] by her stepfather's command of silence" (Huttenton et. al 278, Walker 1). This command also isolates her from her mother, the woman in whom she might have confided and in turn found support from. The rape is brutal. "First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it" (Walker 1). The emotional aspect of the violence is more intrusive: not only does the rape physically victimize her (the intrusion of her stepfather's penis, his choking of her and grabbing of her breasts), but Celie is told to get used to it. She is forced to mentally realize and resign

herself to the likelihood of continual cruelty. Later, readers learn that Celie has been raped at least once previously, for she is the mother of two children. It is Celie's pregnancies that kill her mother. "My mama dead. She die screaming and cussing. She scream at me. She cuss at me. I'm big...She ast me bout the first one Whose it is? I say God's...She got sicker an sicker" (2). That her mother asks about "the first one" and "whose it is" implies Celie has given birth to multiple children from an unknown father. While her mother interrogates her, her father sits bedside, holding the mother's hand, seeming the sympathetic husband. Readers do not know if Celie's mother suspects what her husband has done; one is only aware of the mother's ailing health after birthing multiple children herself, and that she dies screaming at her daughter for duplicating such maternal efforts, especially without knowledge of who the impregnating man is. Celie's mother dead, and under the impression her father has "kilt" one baby and desires to "kill this one too, if he can" (2), Celie's first two letters to God illustrate the sexual subjugation she faces. It is later in the text that readers become more familiar with the racial parameters that govern Celie's life. As a black woman in the 1930s American South, Celie experiences firsthand the oppression blacks experienced under Jim Crow laws. Blacks are expected to address whites as superiors, using such terms as "ma'am or "sir," while blacks are referred to as "boy" or "gal." Remarkably, since her novel's beginning is not particularly auspicious for the characters, Walker's *The Color Purple* is a text of triumph for black women in learning how to overcome their racial and sexual circumstances. Valerie Babb writes, "*The Color Purple* is not only a novel in which black women make an inhospitable male environment amenable to their growth and development, it is also an epistolary novel in which black women take a form traditionally inhospitable to oral cultures, the written word, and transform it, making it, too, responsive to their needs" (Babb 107). The letters of *The Color Purple* and the communication made

possible via these letters play a significant part in the emotional healing of the novel's female characters.

2.2 *The Color Purple* as Talking Book and Epistolary Fiction

Walker's novel reworks the talking book trope by having women characters use an epistolary format to convey their alienation from both a black and white male-dominated world and to reject their subjugated position, so that they become influential members of the educational, economic, and creative communities present in the text. As stated previously, the two purposes of the talking book trope are for the writer of African descent to express alienation from the oppressive culture and to express the author's humanity, often seen as non-existent by the dominant culture. In establishing both the author's alienation and humanity, the writer is then able to insert herself as a person of influence within the society that seeks to maintain hegemonic control. This can be seen in Walker's *The Color Purple*. Because Celie moves through phases of alienation from southern white culture in the 1930s and the male power structure of her family and marriage, and then realizes her self-worth, she participates in the first two ideals of the talking book. Further, Celie eventually becomes a part of the social and economic structure as a woman who refuses to cow-tow to men any longer and through capitalistic enterprise with her company, Folkspant, Unlimited. The letters she and her sister write, which broker the communication between the protagonists and also between the novel and its black women readers, provide a conduit for friendships that uplift characters downtrodden by forced servitude, imposed wife and mother roles, and isolation or rejection from family. The epistles allow Celie and Nettie to sustain a relationship that seeks only to empower these two disenfranchised women. Writing to each other about what is happening in their lives provides a cathartic release that simultaneously allows for a deeper exploration of their experiences. This exploration leads to a remarkable

conclusion for both the novel's women and black women readers: the trajectory from being powerless to powerful is helped along by the buoying relationships between the female characters.

Mae G. Henderson argues, "*The Color Purple* subverts the traditional Eurocentric male code which dominates the literary conventions of the epistolary novel" (Bloom 67). Alice Walker transforms the epistolary tradition from one dominated by European men into the means by which black women might reject and disprove social perceptions. She lends this ability to her characters, namely Celie, who, though previously silenced and poorly educated, demonstrates her grasp of literacy through her increasingly thoughtful letters to her sister, Nettie. More importantly, Celie writes or "speaks" herself into a sphere of influence by allowing her newly self-approved voice to flow forward in these letters. Celie's letters, and Walker's narrative structure which provides the format for these letters, emphasize the ability of black feminist writers to "appropriate[e] a form invented and traditionally controlled by men" in order to take control of the "literary images of women," particularly black women (67). In writing this novel, which Henderson maintains "asserts her authority, or right to authorship," Walker produces a text that allows black women to see possibilities for redefining their own images, rather than accepting those handed to them by whites or males (67). Henderson points to Walker's signature in which she refers to herself not just as author, but also as medium, as indicative of her "purpose...not only to create and control literary images of women, and black women in particular, but to give voice and representation to these same women who have been silenced and confined in life and literature" (67). That Walker believes her literature is meant to speak to black women and improve their lives is clear. As Walker asks, "If art doesn't make us better, then what on earth is it for?" (qtd. in Steinem 36). In writing epistolary fiction that details how one black woman liberates

herself from sexual and racial subordination, Walker reworks the talking book trope in order to address black women readers and “make [them] better.” The text’s letters symbolize the book’s ability to “speak” to its readers, engage them in what takes place with the characters, and encourage them to take similar avenues to disrupt social hegemonic structures that disenfranchise the “other.”

The text’s characters exemplify the ability of black women to reform that which damages or alters them, including the language under which they are subverted. In *The Color Purple*, “black women take a form traditionally inhospitable to oral cultures, the written word, and transform it, making it, too, responsive to their needs” (Babb 107). This transformation is further evidenced in the manner that the characters also seek to reconstruct their own lives, namely by removing themselves from the control of racist and sexist circumstances. Babb writes that “in the first half of the work, Celie uses writing to effect self-actualization” (107). Though Babb correctly ascertains the usefulness of the letters, it is the impetus for the letters, Celie’s need to form relational bonds, which provides the actual method of self-actualization. “Celie’s heightened consciousness and self-awareness grows out of a coupling of her own written expression and the reading of Nettie’s letters” (112). First praying to God after her stepfather rapes her, Celie eventually writes to Nettie, from whom she has been isolated by Mr. _____. It is her need for relational support, especially Nettie’s, which inspires Celie to analyze her circumstances and better understand how to perceive her life, the people around her, and what she can do to improve her position. Through the relationships she discusses in these letters, Celie demonstrates the ability of blacks to “minimize their oppression by whites, women [to] free themselves from the dominance of males, and oral expression [as] no longer subjugated by written expression” (107). Carrie Walker writes, “One of the most powerful aspects of epistolary fiction lies in its ability to privilege women’s speech” (C. Walker 7).

Celie, alive in an era of time that brutally subjected women to both racial and sexual maltreatment, learns that she has a voice and is capable of speaking back to her attackers, especially her husband, Mr.____, with whom Celie shares a marriage that is more akin to bondage. Unique to this narrative structure and particular to Celie is that she illustrates the letter-writing woman's potential to better evaluate her life. "It [the letter] allows for breaks and interruptions...a convenient format for 'time poor' writers to meditate and craft responses (8). By considering what to include in her prayers to God and letters to Nettie, Celie examines her life and comes to a deeper understanding of who she is separate from how others view her. This level of analysis is instrumental in the life of someone facing such dire subjugation, because it motivates her to form an identity free from the one that is inscribed upon her by the dominant class.

Epistolary writing allows Celie the chance to reclaim her identity. Celie is initially incapable of recognizing herself because she is held captive by the gaze of men, especially her stepfather who rapes her and sees her only as a strong worker to be bartered away and her husband who imposes marriage, motherhood, and his own sexual demands. Mr._____ continues Celie's imprisonment by viewing her as an object or entity he controls, much as parents control children. The letters, however, afford Celie the opportunity to reimage herself and realize just how capable, creative, and beautiful she is, despite what the men in her life have frequently told her. "The more Celie writes, the more she is able to analyze her experience and subsequently herself" (Babb 109). Celie reclaims the identity stolen from her by her stepfather and husband. It is interesting to note that in Walker's text, it is not only white men who dominate black women, but also black men who perpetuate the attitudes and customs of white American society. In *The Color Purple*, it is often the black men that reinforce these ideals of patriarchy. Yet, as

black women readers consume the text, we, too, experience Celie's triumphant moments of self-affirmation.

Walker's narrative structure of epistolarity also places *The Color Purple* within the talking book trope and allows a second form of communication with the women who allow Celie to progress beyond isolation. A key component of this trope is the African-born writer's displacement from the oppressing culture. Frustration with the author's lack of familiarity with the dominant power structure is a key theme of slave narratives, the beginnings of the talking book trope. Celie demonstrates this theme via her isolation not just from white American social culture or the novel's male hegemonic structure, but also from her own family. "From the beginning of the story, Celie is virtually orphaned, alienated from other people, and isolated in her house. The condition continues after she is '[got] rid of' by her stepfather and married off to Mr. _____. Neither in her former house nor in Mr.'s house can she ever feel she has been at home or had a family" (Sanae 279). This lack of relational support establishes Celie's need for the women in her life who substitute or make up for her practically nonexistent familial foundation. In essence, Celie is homeless. The house where she lives is not "home" until her supportive relationships with other women are established. Celie's and Shug's discovery of Nettie's letter are part of the transformation of Mr. _____'s house into Celie's home. Mr. _____'s hiding of the letters is not just a means of separating the sisters or maintaining Celie's isolation. It also perpetuates Celie's displacement. She cannot receive letters because she has no place at which to receive them. However, finding the letters turns Celie into a "homed" individual. "Celie's recovery of the letters, her establishment as address/addressee evidences the dissolution of her diaspority. Her address is further underscored when she is also able to receive what she had sent out to her sister: 'all the letters I wrote to you over the years come back unopen'" (A. Walker *The Color Purple* 280). Just as formerly

enslaved narrators used the talking book trope to place themselves within the dominant sphere of influence, so too does Walker's narrative structure allow Celie to step into a position of authority and familiarity.

2.3 The Effect of Black Women's Friendships in *The Color Purple*

Celie evolves into a self-fulfilled and emotionally healthy woman as a result of her relationships with Nettie, Shug, and Sofia. Tamar Katz writes "*The Color Purple* remains, above all, a type of Bildungsroman – a novel about the instruction of Celie and her coming to consciousness" and this instruction is modeled by several characters (Bloom 185). In separate ways, each woman interacts with and teaches Celie something that enables her to progress from a silenced victim of racial and sexual oppression to a woman capable of dominating her own world rather than leaving the ruling of it up to others, namely men.

2.4 Celie as Protector: Nettie

Nettie, Celie's sister, is the first woman readers know of with whom Celie forms a supportive bond, and it is their alliance, not necessarily as sisters but as friends, that establishes a relational need between black women in *The Color Purple*. Nettie shapes Celie's growth in multiple ways: she serves as impetus for Celie to protect and nurture, she educates Celie, teaching her what she herself has learned regarding literacy, and it is their separation that serves as the catalyst for Celie's letters and thereby Celie's close examination of her emotions, perceptions, and actions.

Celie's safeguarding of Nettie establishes the older girl's potential as a figure of authority. As the older of the two, Celie is protective of her younger sister, and hopeful that their stepfather will not sexually assault Nettie as he did Celie. "I keep hoping he [the girls' stepfather] find somebody to marry. I see him looking at my little sister. She scared. But I say I'll take care of you. With God help" (Walker 3). Interestingly, Celie possesses

enough strength, mentally, to promise protection to her sister. Though betrayed by her stepfather as a young girl herself, her chief anguish is not over her own maltreatment; it is Nettie's safety that incites this need to defend the weak/er. Though uneducated, Celie does not lack intelligence. To shield Nettie from Pa, Celie plans an escape route for her sister: Mr. _____. "Now I tell her to marry Mr. _____ I don't tell her why" (5). In this instance, Celie and Nettie are not peers – Celie situates herself as one with authority over Nettie. Though readers realize that marriage to Mr. _____ will prevent Nettie's likely rape by their stepfather, Celie does not share her reasoning with Nettie. Celie protects her sister in a maternal manner that implies a level of capability to be later revealed in this character. However, she still relies on someone or something else – God - for assistance.

In a reversal of influence, Nettie has an impact on Celie by stepping into the role of teacher or tutor. As Mr. _____ makes up his mind on whether or not he will accept Celie as the consolation prize, since Pa refuses to permit Albert to marry Nettie, the two girls "both be hitting Nettie's schoolbooks pretty hard, cause [they] know [they] got to be smart to git away" (9). Nettie must operate as her older sister's teacher, since Pa made Celie stop attending school the first time he impregnated her. He does not share the fact of her pregnancy with her and offer this as the reason she may not continue her lessons, ("all us notice is I'm all the time sick and fat") but instead mentally abuses her, telling her she is "too dumb to keep going to school...Nettie the clever one in this bunch" (10, 9). Instead of setting the two girls as each other's rivals, though, Pa's obvious cruelty towards Celie further strengthens the sisters' relationship. Pa's position of authority is not simply sexual but gendered as well; the novel's social hierarchy dictates that he rules over not just the women in his family, but all black women. When the schoolteacher, Addie Beasley, comes to attempt to persuade Pa to send Celie back to school, he simply

has Celie appear to show she is pregnant. "When Pa call me out and she see how tight my dress is, she stop talking and go" (10). Instead of questioning Celie's state or offering assistance, Miss Beasley abides by Pa's decision to keep Celie out of school. In this manner, Celie's isolation from adult women in a position to assist her is once again maintained. The misogynistic structure that insists on the dominance of men over women is further preserved.

Celie still manages to navigate her imposed submission to the male power structure by continuously focusing on how she may protect Nettie. After Celie is bartered into marriage with Mr. _____, he becomes the masculine presence that seeks to physically control her. She allows it, but refuses to permit him to sexually control Nettie, who runs away from home and to her big sister. When Mr.'s _____ advances go unrequited, he informs Celie that the two of them "done help Nettie all [they] can. Now she got to go" (17). Upon informing Nettie, Celie's focus remains on how she can still help her sister. Nettie says Celie's life is like being "buried," and though Celie thinks it's in fact worse, she simply replies that she will be fine as "long as [she] can spell G-o-d" (17). More importantly, she shifts the focus from herself and back onto Nettie, instructing her to seek out the Reverend Mr. _____ and "ast for his wife," the only black woman with money Celie has ever met(18). Celie deems Nettie's survival and the maintenance of her sexual impurity more important to preserve and more important than Celie's own welfare. A second moment that demonstrates Celie's valuing Nettie above herself occurs earlier in the text. While Mr. _____ imposes his sexual will on Celie, she focuses her attention on Nettie instead of what Mr. _____ is doing. "But I don't cry. I lay there thinking bout Nettie while he on top of me, wonder if she safe" (12). Kevin Quashie writes "Celie thinks first of Nettie, her sister, and wishes for Nettie's safety even as she Celie is experiencing an act of violence under Albert" (Quashie 195). Foremost, to Celie, is Nettie's well-being.

Readers observe Nettie's long-lasting effect on Celie's life as the younger sister becomes the catalyst for Celie's letters. The letters bear witness to Celie's development from an insecure young woman who only knows how to survive into a self-autonomous woman who governs her own life. The sisters' relationship is interrupted first by Celie's imposed marriage to Mr. _____, then by Mr.'s _____ unrequited attention to Nettie when she comes to live with them for a short while, and finally by Nettie's move to Africa with a black missionary family. Thus, when Nettie is removed from a position of influence, Celie's progression to fulfillment is momentarily suspended. "I [Celie] say, Write. She say, What? I say, Write. She say, Nothing but death can keep me from it. She never write" (18). This suspension is temporary, however, for other characters form a relationship with Celie that allows her to grow.

2.5 Celie as Warrior: Sofia

Sofia's relationship with Celie gifts her with the opportunity to realize black women do not have to suffer male domination, but can effectively battle such mistreatment. Sofia, Harpo's girlfriend and later wife, is the first woman whom Celie observes acting in a non-subservient role. From her arrival, readers see that Sofia refuses to place herself in a position of lesser than. Celie writes "I see 'em coming way off up the road. They be just marching, hand in hand, like going to war. She in front a little" (30). Refusing to subserviently walk behind her man, Sofia assumes a place of dominance, walking slightly in front of Harpo. When the two arrive at the house, she sits down and fans herself with a handkerchief. Her first words to Mr. _____, "It sure is hot," (30) portray her level of comfort with speaking not just to her boyfriend's father, but to any man. She does not cower from this interaction, but approaches Mr. _____ as if they are equals. When Mr. _____ questions whether the baby she is soon to have is truly Harpo's and insinuates Sofia is simply looking for someone to take care of her and her offspring,

“she laugh[s],” quickly negating this opinion (31). “What I need to marry Harpo for? He still living here with you. What food and clothes he git, you buy” (31). Mr. _____ continues to interrogate her while Harpo sits silent. Observing this, Sofia begins to realize how weak and ineffectual he is. Announcing her departure, she disentangles herself from the emasculated son. “Harpo get up to come too. She say, Naw, Harpo, you stay here. When you free, me and the baby be waiting” (31). Celie’s observation as opposed to her impression is all she records of Sofia’s visit. However, readers later learn what Celie’s opinion of Sofia is when she advises Harpo to beat Sofia in order to make her mind him, and Sofia confronts her sister-in-law for this wrong. Celie is already unable to sleep due to guilt, and it is Sofia’s confrontation of Celie that forges the bond between the two women. Sofia asks Celie why she gave Harpo such advice and Celie admits “I say it cause I’m a fool...I say it cause I’m jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can’t. What that? She say. Fight. I say” (40). In this moment, readers recognize two things: Celie recognizes her deferential status under Mr. _____’s authority and she wishes her life were otherwise. Celie also acknowledges her wish to fight by admitting that Sofia is able to do so. While Nettie awakens Celie’s protective instincts and introduces the role friendship plays in a black woman’s survival, it is through Sofia that Celie understands a black woman’s ability to fight and resist the power structure within which she is located. Although Sofia is not the first to urge Celie to fight, (both Nettie and one of Mr.’s _____ sisters do, too) she is the first woman to whom Celie confesses her desire to do so. Celie previously recorded that she only wished to survive. “I think bout Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don’t fight, I stay where I’m told. But I’m alive” (21). Since no letters have arrived after Nettie’s forced departure, Celie believes her sister to be dead. Prior to seeing Sofia’s successful reversal of gender roles, Celie believes that

fighting back is a path to death. Thus, her focus at that time remains on enduring her position rather than reversing it.

As Celie prizes Nettie's safety over her own, so too does she temporarily assume a role of protector when another woman's life is threatened. Sofia is brutally beaten and jailed for forcibly refusing to work for the mayor and his wife. It is Celie who visits the jailhouse and tends to her. "When I see Sofia I don't know why she still alive...Scare me so bad I near bout drop my grip. But I don't. I put it on the floor of the cell, take out comb and brush, nightgown, witch hazel and alcohol and I start to work on her" (86). During another visit, Sofia's frank answer regarding how she copes with prison inspires Celie to regard her frustration with her own life and then commit to action on Sofia's behalf.

How you manage? us ast. Every time they ast me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I'm you. I jump right up and do just what they say. She look wild when she say that, and her bad eye wander round the room. Mr. _____ suck in his breath. Harpo groan. Miss Shug cuss. She come from Memphis special to see Sofia. I can't fix my mouth to say how I feel.
(88)

This passage demonstrates another act of Celie being silenced. Initially, she is unable to verbally respond to Sofia's declaration. However, she counters this silencing with the words and actions she uses to prepare another character for her role in freeing Sofia from jail.

Soon after they visit Sofia, Celie and the others gather to discuss what they can do to better Sofia's situation. Upon realizing Squeak, Harpo's girlfriend, is related to the warden, the group decides to send her as emissary. When Squeak is unsure what to say, Celie takes lead and gives Squeak the first words to utter. Significantly, Celie is able to speak up and out when it comes to bettering another woman's life. While she may not do so for herself, readers see that Celie is at least becoming more comfortable with assuming a position of authority. As Nettie informs Celie's literacy, Sofia informs Celie's

ability to confront submission, both at the level of race and gender. Celie's nurturing of Sofia mirrors the protective stance Celie adopts with Nettie.

Celie's relationship with Sofia is representative of black women's rage due to racial oppression. Sofia is released from jail only to be imprisoned in the mayor's house as maid and governess – exactly what she fought against becoming. During Celie's visit, Sofia asks “why we [blacks] aint already kill them [whites] off” (100). Celie understands this as only a hopeless, helpless anger, stating that even though Sofia has managed to make it out of the jail, is starting to become healthy again and “look like her old self,” she still isn't mentally healthy – “just all the time think bout killing somebody” (100). Sofia's anger is marginally effective, though, despite what Celie observes are detrimental effects. When one of Sofia's wards stabs his foot with a rusty nail and screams in pain, Miss Millie, the mayor's wife and the child's mother, runs out of the house but stops short of questioning the woman who is supposed to be her servant. “Everytime she talk to her it like she expect the worst. She don't stand close to her either. When she git a few yards from where us sit, she motion for Billy to come there...Miss Millie cut her eyes at her, put one arm round Billy shoulder and they limp into the back of the house” (101). Miss Millie doesn't even dare speak to Sofia to ask how Billy injured himself. Though she may be an easily cowed white woman, Miss Millie still embodies the controlling class. *The Color Purple* illustrates the potency of black women questioning the fact of their suppression by having Miss Millie's control be somewhat usurped by Sofia's defiance. The end of this exchange offers another instance of Celie managing to uplift and encourage someone despite her personal downtrodden state. After Celie tells a joke, Sofia laughs. “She giggle. Miss Celie, she say, you just as crazy as you can be. This the first giggle I heard in three years” (101). This interaction illustrates the healing effect of women's friendship.

2.6 Celie as Creator: Shug

Shug, the third woman who provides a mentoring toward Celie's self-fulfillment, awakens her both sexually and artistically. Her arousal due to Shug's naked body is apparent. "First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples...I thought I had turned into a man [...] I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying. My hands tremble and my breath short" (49). Her reaction to Shug's nakedness foreshadows the sexually intimate relationship in which the two later engage. In fact, there is an intimacy established even before the two women meet. Celie examines a photograph of Shug and sees a masked woman outwardly laughing. "She grinning with her foot up on somebody motorcar. Her eyes serious tho. Sad some"(6). Before the two women physically meet, a spiritual kinship begins when Celie's gaze penetrates and discovers what is beneath the superficial. The very fascination Celie has with Shug's photograph foreshadows the importance of their relationship. "I ast her [Celie's new mammy] to give me the picture. An all night long I stare at it. An now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery" (6). She dreams of a "whirling and laughing" Shug, one readers know has serious and sad eyes. Celie's dreams are not necessarily of Shug as she is presented, but the Shug Celie would like to effect – a gleefully dancing Shug. Shug's awakening of Celie's sexuality before the two physically meet is also apparent during a scene when Mr. _____ forces himself on his new wife. Daniel Ross writes:

Celie thinks of Shug while Albert rapes her on her wedding night, and, even though his lovemaking is uncaring as her stepfather's, Celie begins to imagine the sexual act with some affection: 'I know what he doing to me he done to Shug Avery and maybe she like it. I put my arm around him.' Even as an imaginary construct, Shug stirs Celie's first erotic feelings. When the real Shug steps into Celie's life, these feelings become activated. (Ross 76)

Shug allows Celie to see physical intimacy as an enjoyable act, something Celie is never able to experience in her previous encounters with sex. Their relationship allows Celie an opportunity to explore the positive emotions she now has regarding her sexuality.

Through the intimacy of their relationship, Shug provides Celie an opportunity to step from under the patriarchal constraints that have molded her life. One manner in which Shug accomplishes this is by persuading Mr. _____ to stop physically abusing Celie. Unaware of Mr. _____'s behavior, Shug announces it is time for her to get back on the road. She is healthy, singing at Harpo's "every week-end now," and proclaims that June is "a good time to go of into the world" (Walker 74). Celie is once again unable to speak. Though the initial command – "you better not never tell nobody but God" – is given in reinforcement of masculine control over Celie's life, her inability to speak at Shug's announcement illustrates Celie is still not emotionally whole at this point in the text. She still faces feelings of isolation and abandonment. "I don't say nothing. Feel like I felt when Nettie left" (74). By comparing Shug's leaving to Nettie's, readers realize that the relationship between the two women exceeds sexual desire. There is also an intimacy of sisters, and Celie's anxiety over Shug's leaving is not only due to the impending suspension of their physically intimate relationship; Celie understands that she will be, once again, separated from a member of the community of women who love her. It is this realization that prompts Celie's silence. But, she is able to break it when she tells Shug about Mr. _____'s maltreatment, and this is a step towards Celie removing herself from the role of silence masculine dominion has played in her life.

She come over and put her hand on my shoulder. He beat me when you not here, I [Celie] say. Who do, she say, Albert? Mr. _____, I say. I can't believe it, she say. She sit down on the bench next to me real hard, like she drop. What he beat you for? she ast. For being me and not you. Oh, Miss Celie, she say, and put her arms around me. Us sit like that for maybe half a hour. Then she kiss me on the fleshy part of my shoulder and stand up. I won't leave, she say, until I know Albert won't even think about beating you. (75)

Celie's verbal expression of her mistreatment affords her the opportunity or path to remove herself from Mr. _____'s physical and sexual abuse. By refuting the way her husband silences her, Celie makes a conscious choice to live other than how Albert dictates.

Celie's painful admission to Shug (previously unaware of how Albert treated his wife during the singer's absence) is powerful in that Celie chooses to tell someone other than God. She breaks her silence, not simply pouring it out in a letter to a God readers later learn Celie pictures as old and white, but to one of the sisters in her community of women. It is one of the initial steps towards becoming her own woman that she takes, and it is by means of deciding she will speak and be a part of, rather than denied, a supportive collective of women. This moment exemplifies what Daniel Ross describes as "the discovery that must necessarily precede Celie's discovery of speech: the discovery of desire – for selfhood, for other, for community, and for a meaningful place in Creation" (Ross 70). Part of Celie's discovery of herself is her understanding that she belongs and has a place in the world. Celie realizes that she must orally stake that place in order to throw off the inscription of silence that starts the novel.

A second way Celie steps away from patriarchal domination through her relationship with Shug is through an education in sexuality. Shug's tutorial regarding sexual pleasure is a means for Celie to reclaim her body from Mr. _____'s control. Shug discovers that Celie does not enjoy sex with Albert. It is an emotionless act where Mr. _____ mounts Celie, hoists her nightgown, and plunge[s] in – "just do his business, get off, go to sleep" (Walker 77). When Shug likens Celie's description of the marital act to someone "going to the toilet on" her, Celie agrees, and Shug points out to Celie that she is therefore "still a virgin" (77). Shug then explains to Celie how her clitoris is a site of stimulation that can be manipulated by hand or tongue. "Button? Finger and tongue? My

face hot enough to melt itself" (77). From Celie's reaction, one that seems motivated by embarrassment rather than arousal, readers see why Shug classifies Celie as a virgin. Her body is not a site of sexual pleasure for herself; it is instead a receptacle for male authority. Urging Celie to take a mirror and look at herself, Shug teaches Celie that her personal pleasure matters. At first, Celie seems to reject the mirror's image, – "Ugh. All that hair" – but she soon says the "inside look like a wet rose" (78). The comparison of her vagina to a rose is Celie's positive way of speaking of herself. More important, Celie claims her vagina as her own. "It a lot prettier than you thought, ain't it? she [Shug] say...It mine, I say" (78). Though Celie previously regarded her body as "torn or fragmented," her pondering of it in the mirror coupled with her claim ("It mine") is an early step towards refusing to allow Mr. _____ to continue his sexual aggression (Ross 70). "She no longer perceives her body as something to deny or annihilate but as a source of pleasure" (77). Celie takes ownership of her sexual pleasure, removing the masculine inscription of silent suffering, by verbally reclaiming her body and learning a way to ensure her personal sexual gratification.

With her newfound identity, Celie is able to break free from the masculine prohibition against speech and join a community of women, thus freeing herself from dependence on and subjection to male brutality... Shug does initiate such activities for Celie, helping her through the mirror stage to a discovery of her own body, her capacity for speech, and her ability to love an other(71, 75).

Celie now sees herself as a woman capable of speech, act, and sexuality.

Shug and Celie have a complementary relationship in which each serves a need that lacks fulfillment in the other – Shug nurtures Celie's sexual becoming and Celie tends to Shug's health. When the singer is ill and Mr. _____ brings her home, Celie nurses Shug and physically restores her. This opportunity is presented when Shug becomes sick and is isolated from the community. "Shug Avery sick and nobody in this town want to take the Queen Honeybee in. Her mammy say She told her so. Her pappy

say, Tramp” (Walker 43). By severing Shug’s familial ties, Walker maintains a created community of women who must form their new families in which each assists in fostering the other’s transformations. Susan Willis argues, “Unlike the monstrous inequality between husband and wife, theirs is a reciprocal relationship – Celie giving of herself to heal the sick and exhausted Shug...and Shug giving of herself, patiently and lovingly teaching Celie to know the joys of her own body and to follow the intuition of her mind,” Susan Willis writes (Bloom 88).

Shug also precipitates Celie’s capitalist venture into society by encouraging her creativity. Shug suggests Celie sew some pants in an effort to mitigate Celie’s anger once she discovers Mr. _____ has been hiding Nettie’s letters, the hiding of which causes Celie to believe her sister is dead. “A needle and not a razor in my hand” Celie understands will allow her from exacting revenge upon her husband (Walker 147). Eventually, Celie begins to dream up the perfect pants for those in her life whom she loves. She makes pants that suit the personality of the wearer: “soft” with “teeny patches of red” so Shug can “sing in ’em and ’em sort of like a long dress,” ones that are “soft and strong” for Jack, Odessa’s husband, and with “big pockets so he can keep a lot of the children’s things,” “something he can lay back in when he hold Odessa in front of the fire” (213). At this point, offers pour in requesting Celie’s handiwork. From Shug, to Squeak, to Shug’s band members, to Odessa, people recognize and reward Celie’s artistry. Celie does not herself realize this is a means to make a living. It is Shug who suggests putting “a few advertisements in the paper” and to “raise [Celie’s] prices a hefty notch” (213). Shug even offers the dining room as Celie’s “factory” and plans to hire “some more women in here to cut and sew,” so Celie is able to “sit back and design” (214). It is Shug’s own ability for creative expression that she instills in Celie. Celie represents the stifled ancestral mothers of whom Walker speaks in her essay, “In Search of Our

Mothers' Gardens." Celie, like these women, is an "Artist; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there [is] no release" (Walker, In Search 233). Celie is granted a release, however, through her sewing, quilting, and pantmaking.

Celie's artistic breakthrough, influenced by Shug, facilitates her movement away from socially constructed gender roles and sexual subjugation. She designs pants meant to be worn by both men and women, she becomes the owner of her own business, thereby establishing herself as the (female) person in charge, rather than her (male) husband, and she records these events in her letters, illustrating a woman voicing her newfound freedom to make decisions and govern her own affairs. As Martha Cutter states,

When Walker's text conflates needle and pen, then, it undermines the most basic binary structures of patriarchal society: male versus female, public versus private, empowered versus disempowered, spoken versus silent. For if the needle has become the pen and the pen has become the needle, if the feminine and the masculine cannot in fact be separated, if patriarchal discourse has been replaced by a discourse that admits of both masculine and feminine subject positions, what pedestal remains for the subjugation of women and other "minorities" within culture? (Cutter 176)

This disruption of racism and sexism achieved through *The Color Purple's* letters allows Celie to challenge what constitutes the "feminine" or the "masculine." By doing so, she destabilizes the social structures that seek to displace black women.

2.7 The Evolution of a Woman

Nettie, Sofia, and Shug are equally important to Celie's development for they contribute in different ways to her evolution. It is through their relationships with each other, often seen in the sharing of their stories, that Celie, as well as the other women, move towards emotional health and stability. According to Shany Fiske, "This narrative exchange validates the poignancy of each woman's private experience and, through that

validation, binds them in a healing bond of friendship..." (Fiske 152). This healing bond of friendship does not end within the confines of the text. Though on one level Celie's letters are addressed first to God and eventually to Nettie, Celie's letters also convey meaning to black women readers. This is accomplished through the two sisters' imagined perception of a recipient although neither initially receives a response to her missives.

Although Nettie has never received a letter from Celie, Nettie still feels as if she is communicating with her sister: 'I imagine that you really do get my letters and that you are writing back: Dear Nettie, this is what life is like for me.' Similarly, Celie discovers that she can converse with Nettie despite receiving no response, and even despite the possibility of Nettie's physical death: 'And I don't believe you dead. How can you be dead if I still feel you? Maybe, like God, you changed into something different that I'll have to speak to in a different way, but you not dead to me Nettie. And never will be. (Cutter 168-169)

Celie's conviction of Nettie's life underscores the importance of the two characters' relationship and how it affords Celie solace and respite from the harm she suffers at Mr. _____'s hands. Celie needs Nettie to be alive in some form.

2.8 *The Color Purple* Talks Back

The spiritual nature of the sisters' communication enables *The Color Purple* to play the same role as the Bible in slave narratives. Much as a supernatural presence is believed to inhabit the holy text and speak to readers, so too do the sisters describe an otherworldly presence that enables their communication despite tangible evidence of one sister's letters in the hands of the other. The immaterial nature of their relationship extends beyond the characters, turning the novel itself into a talking book. "Celie subversively reconfigures her audience so that an imagined, rather than actual, person is the receiver of the message" (Cutter 169). Nettie is not the only imagined receiver; readers also receive Celie's message. *The Color Purple* operates as a space in which black women establish "home and belongingness" (Floyd-Thomas and Gillman 529). The novel "further examines how Black women through their 'fictions' imagine and create a

space for both the subversion of oppressive sociopolitical structures and the possibility for liberatory self-determination” (529). Readers, or receivers of Celie’s and the book’s messages, will ideally realize that liberation from the social structures seeking to dominate their lives is possible through the establishment of a women’s commune, symbolizing black women’s home.

It is via *The Color Purple*’s epistolary structure that readers become part of the novel’s search for black women’s liberation. “In no other genre do readers figure so prominently within the world of the narrative and in the generation of the text...the epistolary experience...is a reciprocal one. The letter writer [Walker] simultaneously seeks to affect [her] reader [readers] and is affect[ed] by [her]” (Altman 88). If Walker, as author, is given the status of “letter writer,” then it is readers of *The Color Purple* she seeks to affect. By telling Celie’s story, Walker’s text also seeks to effect change in the lives of those who consume it. It conveys the message that black women seeking fellowship with each other will be richly rewarded, just as Celie’s pursuit of fellowship is rewarded – she is granted home, family, and economic success. The sense of home exceeds the physical sense of a house; it is kinship that Celie most values and that most influences her. “Celie’s establishment of home and family is represented as a ‘gathering up’ or convergence of power” (Sanae 281). Walker’s *The Color Purple* manifests a world in which black women gather up power through their alliances with each other. Though Celie begins the novel as an oppressed young girl, she evolves into an assertive and emotionally healthy woman, primarily due to the mentoring of her three friends: Nettie, Sofia, and Shug.

Chapter 3

When Friendship is Interrupted: Partial Healing in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

“And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives” (Lorde 43).

3.1 Reversing the Silencing of Black Women

Audre Lorde spoke the preceding words after undergoing surgery to remove a malignant breast tumor. In facing her own mortality, Lorde realized that what she “most regretted were [her] silences” (41). Literature written by black women and expressing their viewpoints breaks this silence and serves as a way for them to speak back to cultures that have worked to oppress black women. “Race and sex have always been overlapping discourses in the United States. That discourse began in slavery...Then, black women’s bodies were the discursive terrain, the playing fields where racism and sexuality converged” (hooks Reflections 57). Such literature allows black women’s bodies to reject the racist and sexist attitudes that seek to overpower them.

Because literature is a representation of cultural attitudes, texts produced by the hegemonic class can perpetuate the silencing of black women. Citing several colonial works, including Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Abena P. A. Busia argues that both race and gender are used against black women (Busia 84).

The problematic, for the purpose of interpreting or decoding the master’s text, arises from the place of black women as receptors of two paradigms of alienation and otherness within this dominant discourse: that of femaleness and that of blackness. Both of these factors are major metaphors of strangeness within colonial discourse. (84)

Colonial texts, therefore, use black or native women to express qualities of peculiarity or the suspicious.

Spanning literature from the early 1600s into the 1960s, Busia examines the often overlooked silencing of black female characters in texts by both white men and women. She correlates colonization with a “conquering masculine sexuality” that seeks to conquer “native female ‘space,’” (85).

bell hooks voices a similar argument in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. For hooks, male domination fuses with masculine sexuality in the political determination of what role black women play in society.

Sexism has always been a political stance mediating racial domination, enabling white men and black men to share a common sensibility about sex roles and the importance of male domination. Clearly both groups have equated freedom with manhood, and manhood with the right of men to have indiscriminate access to the bodies of women. Both groups have been socialized to condone patriarchal affirmation of rape as an acceptable way to maintain male domination. It is this merging of sexuality with male domination within patriarch that informs the construction of masculinity for men of all races and classes. (59)

Therefore, it is clear that there is a need for a textual space by and for black women where their voices can be explored and heard. Such texts fulfill a need not otherwise provided. “When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the farthest corner” (Walker In Search 237). Texts written by black women authors that focus on black female characters provide an opportunity to reverse the distortion Alice Walker references above in her essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens.”

3.2 Literary Spaces for Black Women

Black women’s writing can create a literary space for black feminists in which the necessity of friendship and how it shapes black women’s lives is reflected. As a participant in the talking book trope, *Sula* expresses the alienation of black women from western culture and provides an example of how to confront that culture in order to

reverse black women's positionality. The book speaks to black women, telling us our stories, providing a safe environment to see ourselves as powerful, enfranchised beings possessing agency. The reader and the novel make meaning together, as women who read the novels participate in an affective stylistics mode of reader-response criticism. As Valentine Cunningham explains in *Reading after Theory*, there is a reciprocal relationship between the reader and the text. The text acts upon the reader, and the reader acts upon the text.

Here's a body of text, and the text as body, the body of the other, the text as other, to be consumed, ingested, in a memorial act, an act of personal reception and reflection, an inward event which is also an outward-facing act, an act of testimony, of worldly witness – something with an invisible but also a visible effect; a sharing of signs, a mutual signifying system, in which signs are given, received, taken up and in, and also made manifest, especially in the results for the recipient. In this sacrament, this holy communion, the believer is blessed and graced, signed as Christ's own, marked as sanctified. In reading on this model, the reader is, in some way or another, also graced, blessed, marked as the text's own. (Cunningham 148).

Cunningham is talking specifically of a reader's relationship with the text of the *Bible*; however, parallel avenues to healing, wholeness, and self-actualization for black women are provided in *Sula*, often demonstrated through the medium of friendship. The characters take these paths to fulfillment while the text invites readers to do the same.

3.3 Friendship's Power in *Sula*

The protagonists in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* demonstrate the capacity of friendship to enable black women to rise above circumstances dictated by ethnicity and gender. Morrison wrote this novel in order to speak back to the black feminist movement and to address its struggles and achievements. In this way, *Sula* can be argued to function as a kind of talking book, in so far as black feminists are given both encouragement and counsel regarding their sociopolitical interactions. At different stages in the text, and to different degrees, the characters step from under the governing social

norms and delight in their own choices. Often, female characters in novels such as *Sula* face some opposition or hindrance to their emotional health, and it is the close friend with whom she allies that becomes an inspiring factor in growth and progress. In *Sula*, this relationship is interrupted by many factors, and the two longtime friends become estranged with the eponymous character dying at the novel's end only for her friend, Nel, to realize too late what this loss means. While Sula and Nel both achieve a measure of healing, it is just that. Their healing is partial. Before each is allowed to fully realize her success, the actualization process is interrupted. *Sula* allows black women to see that existing inside of traditional roles will not be enough to move her forward in growth and progress. Morrison establishes the significance of friendships between women as a form of personal empowerment.

In *Sula*, it is the suspension of Sula and Nel's friendship that disturbs the self-realization process for both women. Neither character is allowed to become fully whole and developed due to Nel's marriage to Jude, Sula's subsequent departure from the Bottom, and Sula's affair with Jude. More significantly, each character disrupts her own movement towards a whole self when she sets aside the friendship, lowering its value in comparison to some other ideal or relationship. The two women both enter in the process of making themselves during the preteen years, but the very nature of their friendship dictates that in order for a whole person to be created, Sula and Nel must rely on the other. The way in which Morrison describes the two girls and their friendship illustrates this. The previous "solitary" lifestyles of the two prior to meeting does not sustain them. In fact, their "loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into Technicolored visions that always included a presence, a someone, who, quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream" (Morrison 51). As Nel fantasizes of a "fiery prince" to complete her fairytale and Sula daydreams of riding horseback with a

sweet taste in her mouth and a sweet scent in her nose, the two are each aware of a second presence, besides herself, with “smiling sympathetic eyes,” a riding partner who “share[s] both the taste and the speed” of the adventure (51-52). This presence cannot be viewed as separate: it is Sula inhabiting Nel’s vision and vice-versa. Instead, Morrison solidifies the very connectivity of the two: they are able to reside in each other’s dream-space, one realistically understood as reserved for the dreamer alone.

3.4 Sula and Nel’s Relational Identities

When observed through psychoanalytic criticism, I argue that Morrison has created characters that function as fragmented parts of one consciousness. Much of how Sula and Nel develop is intricately linked with how the two interact with each other, their families, and the community of the Bottom. Their personalities evolve according to how they perceive and negotiate their experiences in the structure of family, friendship, and community. Alisha R. Coleman appraises the bond between the two girls and how it affects the formation of each child’s personality. Coleman identifies the relational friendship between the two characters as beyond complementary; instead, the two complete each other.

I prefer to view them as two halves of a personality that combine to form a whole psyche. In other words, Sula and Nel represent two parts of a psychological self: individually or apart, Nel is the superego or conscience, and Sula is the id or the pleasure and unconscious desire of the psyche; together they form the ego, the balance between the superego and the id, and what is usually considered to be a single identity. (Coleman 151)

The two characters need each other in order to form one whole person.

As Elizabeth Abel states, it is identification with each other, not simply a quality of being complementary, that is seen as a “psychological mechanism that draws women together” in “serious novels that focus on the actual friendships of women” (Abel 415). In terms of Sula and Nel, the two identify with each other both practically and spiritually. In

the practical sense, both girls come from rather turbulent families, with Sula's the more openly disordered, including a physically disabled grandmother ruling from a wagon, a mother who will "fuck practically anything" (Morrison 43) but is so giddily sweet-natured that even the women whose husbands she temporarily steals don't blame her much, and a house full of boarders, all contributing their own upheaval to the jumble of the Peace homestead. Nel's home-life, on the other hand, is quietly chaotic, with a frequently absent father (a ship's cook on one of the Great Lakes lines...in port only three days out of every sixteen) (17) and an oppressively loving mother who is happy to devote the full brunt of her focus on maintaining her lifestyle and her daughter. But, in addition to coming from less than joyful homes, Nel and Sula connect in a far more symbolic manner that showcases the transcendence of their bond. The two are so in tune with each other, they function without speech.

Sula lifted her head and joined Nel in the grass play. *In concert, without ever meeting each other's eyes, they stroked the blades up and down, up and down.* Nel found a thick twig and, with her thumbnail, pulled away its bark until it was stripped to a smooth, creamy innocence. Sula looked about and found one too. When both twigs were undressed Nel moved easily to the next stage and began tearing up rooted grass to make a bare spot of earth. When a generous clearing was made, Sula traced intricate patterns in it with her twig. At first Nel was content to do the same. But soon she grew impatient and poked her twig rhythmically and intensely into the earth, making a small neat hole that grew deeper and wider with the least manipulation of her twig. Sula copied her, and soon each had a hole the size of a cup. Nel began a more strenuous digging and, rising to her knee, was careful to scoop out the dirt as she made her hole deeper. *Together they worked until the two holes were one and the same.* When the depression was the size of a small dishpan, Nel's twig broke. With a gesture of disgust she threw the pieces into the hole they had made. Sula threw hers in too. Nel saw a bottle cap and tossed it in as well. Each then looked around for more debris to throw into the hole: paper, bits of glass, butts of cigarettes, until all of the small defiling things they could find were collected there. Carefully they replaced the soil and covered the entire grave with uprooted grass. *Neither one had spoken a word.* (58-59, emphasis my own)

As the italicized passages show, Nel and Sula are able to work together without two common means of communication: looking into another's eyes and speech. Their link

to each other surpasses the more ordinary relationships with others in which verbal and nonverbal messages are the only form of communication. They are able to speak to each other supernaturally as if their minds are one, sharing the same thoughts and desires.

This relational identity, one that establishes the girls' need for each other, is borne out by examining how Morrison describes the interaction between Sula and Nel. Their "intense" friendship provides "relief" for the two who are "unshaped, formless things" with Nel being "stronger and more consistent than Sula" who oscillates rapidly between feelings, unable to "sustain any emotion for more than three minutes" (53). It is their individual psyches that are initially unshaped and formless, prior to their friendship, and so, as Morrison writes, the two "use each other to grow on" (52). In their first year of friendship, the two are dedicated to becoming. "Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about *creating something else to be*" (52, emphasis my own). Unable to be free or triumphant due to being black females, Sula and Nel realize early in their lives they will need to shape themselves in a way that will allow for liberation from the double-bind disenfranchisement of black womanhood. Using each other to grow is simply an alternate method of identifying their friendship as the vehicle to the liberation the two seek. "They found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for" (52).

3.5 Establishing a Need for Friendship through the Mother-Daughter Schism

The intimacy of friendship is one that cannot be found in the mother-daughter bond for each girl. One faces an overbearing mother-love at home; the other is the recipient of negligent or dutiful love of a mother who loves but doesn't like her daughter. Sula is twelve when she, by accident, discovers the lack of depth to Hannah's feelings for her. Getting ready to leave for an adventure with Nel, Sula runs into the house to use the restroom first. Hannah and her friends, mothers themselves, are discussing "the

problems of child rearing” and how much of a “pain” children are (56). When one friend remarks that love isn’t quite how she would describe how she feels about her grown daughter, Hannah responds that love is assuredly there. “You love her, like I love Sula. I just don’t like her. That’s the difference” (57). Hannah has no affinity for her daughter, no interest in her beyond what she is obligated to feel, according to nature. It is an empty mother’s love, and Sula is now aware of just what shape Hannah’s disinterest takes. “The pronouncement sent her flying up the stairs. In bewilderment, she stood at the window fingering the curtain edge, aware of a sting in her eye” (57). She is bewildered and on the verge of tears when rescued by the only person in the novel to whom she is allowed to fully relate. “Nel’s call floated up and into the window, pulling her away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight” (57). Again, friendship serves as a vehicle of deliverance. It is able to mentally transport black women from sorrow to contentment. Thus, Nel frees Sula from dark thoughts (a bereft, lonely existence where her own mother doesn’t like her and which can be seen as a type of oppression) and pulls her back into bright, hot daylight (the happy plane where the two girls discover the world and each other through their adventures). Friendship rescues Sula from the lack of genuine, authentic love of a mother.

While Sula faces Hannah’s negligence, Nel is burdened by Helene’s overbearing and manipulative nature. Helene approaches motherhood as a project. “Her daughter was more comfort and purpose than she had ever hoped to find in this life. She rose grandly to the occasion of motherhood...” (18). Comfort and purpose, however, are not typical adjectives to describe a mother’s love. Rather than nurturing Nel into a happy, healthy, and productive adult, Helene is much more concerned with taking “comfort” and finding “purpose” in someone over whom she can exert control. This comfort is exhibited, in one instance, in her “grateful[ness] deep down in her heart, that the child had not

inherited the great beauty that was hers: that her skin had dusk in it, that her lashes were substantial but not undignified in their length, that she had taken the broad flat nose of Wiley...and his generous lips” (18). While Helene realizes she is unable to change Nel’s complexion, lash length, or the thickness of her lips, and although, realistically, she can’t transform the shape of a nose either, she is determined to alter or “improve it somewhat,” forcing Nel to pull on her nose throughout the day. “Don’t just sit there, honey. You could be pulling on your nose...” (28). She even forces Nel to wear a clothespin on it, something Nel rejects upon embarking on her friendship with Sula.

When Mrs. Wright reminded Nel to pull her nose, she would do it enthusiastically but without the least hope in the world. ‘While you sittin’ there, honey, go ‘head and pull your nose.’ ‘It hurts, Mamma.’ ‘Don’t you want a nice nose when you grow up?’ After she met Sula, Nel slid the clothespin under the blanket as soon as she got in the bed. And although there was still the hateful hot comb to suffer through each Saturday evening, its consequences – smooth hair – no longer interested her. (55)

The formation of Sula’s friendship with Nel helps her actualize a way from beneath Helene’s controlling authority.

There are circumstances Helene is unable to control: her mother’s life as a prostitute, her grandmother’s passing away before she can say goodbye, and the people of the town calling her Helen. Motherhood, however, is an area in her life that she can approach with a sense of pride and duty; it is a task for her to complete, and in this sense, it provides purpose in her life. Sula flees Hannah’s lack of attention via her friendship with Nel; in turn, Nel escapes Helene’s domineering disposition by way of her friendship with Sula. The girls break free of relationships incapable of satisfying their needs through each other.

Because both girls experience a schism from their mothers, they are available for the formation of a friendship. Nel’s rift from Helene takes place after a journey from the Bottom to New Orleans to visit Helene’s dying grandmother, Cecile. In the security of the

Bottom, Helene is able to maintain a self-produced aristocracy. "Helene Wright was an impressive woman, at least in Medallion she was...A woman who won all social battles with presence and a conviction of the legitimacy of her authority" (18). But leaving the Bottom means encountering Jim Crow laws that segregated whites and "coloreds." Helene and Nel mistakenly board the train through a compartment meant for white people. "Rather than go back and down the three wooden steps again, Helene decided to spare herself some embarrassment and walk on through to the colored car" (20). Doing so garners the attention of a white conductor who immediately expresses his disapproval, almost apathetically, using his pinky finger to remove wax from his ear as he asks Helene what she "think[s]" she's doing. Immediately, Helene is thrust backwards into memories of southern living and hostility in the city where she was called "gal," a pejorative term often assigned to black women during this timeframe. "All the old vulnerabilities, all the old fears of being somehow flawed gathered in her stomach and made her hands tremble. She had heard only that one word; it dangled above her wide-brimmed hat, which had slipped, in her exertion, from its carefully leveled placement and was now tilted in a bit of a jaunt over her eye" (20). As feelings of being lesser than hang over Helene, she does something

for no earthly reason, at least no reason that anybody could understand, certainly no reason that Nel understood then or later. She smiled. Like a street pup that wags its tail at the very doorjamb of the butcher shop he has been kicked away from only moments before, Helene smiled. Smiled dazzlingly and coquettishly at the salmon-colored face of the conductor (21).

Nel, watching and seeing "her mother's foolish smile" is both "pleased and ashamed" at her mother's response to the conductor and at how she is now appraised by the black men who bear witness to Helene's illogically coquettish behavior. She is pleased, for this scene illustrates that even the mighty Helene, who has claimed such presence and mastery over her daughter's life, is not always an object of worship as she

is for Nel's father. She is ashamed, not wanting to risk seeing the soft "custard" of her mother's skin beneath the "heavy brown wool" of her dress for fear that she too may be just as insubstantial in the face of racism. "If *she* were really custard, then there was a chance that Nel was too" (22).

Upon returning to Medallion, Nel evaluates her trip and this evaluation pushes her to completely split from her mother. Though she acknowledges being "frightened of the soldiers' eyes on the train...the custard pudding she believed lurked under her mother's heavy dress" she is proud for having been on a real trip, for leaving the Bottom and seeing more than her typical environment (28). In fact, she sees herself as "different." Getting out of bed and examining her face in mirror, she studies herself. "She looked for a long time and suddenly a shiver ran through her. 'I'm me,' she whispered. 'Me.' Nel didn't know quite what she meant, but on the other hand she knew exactly what she meant. 'I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me.' Each time she said the word *me* there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear" (28). Leaving the Bottom and discovering this new part of herself enables Nel to break from her mother and in turn form a connection with Sula. "The trip, perhaps, or her new found me-ness, gave her the strength to cultivate a friend in spite of her mother" (29). This cultivation of friendship portrays Nel's feminist leanings if feminism is defined as the ability of a woman to decide her life for herself, by herself. Nel is emboldened by Helene's show of "custard" and smiling like a kicked dog; she decides for herself to be friends with someone her mother disapproves of, realizing she is not her mother, but someone and something separate. Nel's break with her mother allows the formation of her friendship with Sula. Though the two are unable to find fulfillment in their mother-daughter relationships, the friendship between the two girls allows both to begin the process of maturing into women of agency, rather than girls bound by social mores. Unfortunately, neither Nel nor Sula

fully achieve emotionally healthy or self-autonomous lives. Because of rifts in their friendship, the two remain stunted and are denied the opportunity to possess a fully liberated life.

3.6 The Devolution of Friendship

The first of three separations between the two friends occurs with the death of another character. Chicken Little's death subtly, and only momentarily, interrupts Nel and Sula's friendship. A little boy from the neighborhood appears as the girls are playing in the grass, and they invite him into their enjoyment of a day spent riverside. Sula offers to help him climb a tree and enjoy the view, gently taking "him by the hand and coax[ing] him along," "steadying him" with her hand and voice as he climbs higher and higher (59-60). He sees the "far side of the river" and, thrilled with the vista spread beneath him, announces he "ain't never coming down" until Sula pretends she will leave him alone in the tree (60). Back on the ground, Chicken is "still elated," crowing that he is going to share his adventure with his "brovver," spurring the girls into mocking him. They chant together "I'm a tell my brovver; I'm a tell my brovver" (60). Without warning, Sula picks up Chicken Little by the hands and begins to swing him round and round with the younger child's happy shrieks ringing in the background. But his "frightened joy" serves as an omen that this moment will not end well; Chicken Little slips from Sula's hands "sail[ing] away out over the water (60-61). He drowns happily with his "bubbly laughter" the last they hear of him as "the water darken[s] and close[s] quickly over the place where Chicken Little" sinks (61). At the funeral, readers observe the fracture this has caused in the girls' once cohesive solidarity. "Nel and Sula did not touch hands or look at each other during the funeral. There was a space, a separateness, between them" (64). For once, there is a rupture in their bond with the two expressing discordant rather than harmonious emotions: Nel feels guilty yet is outwardly calm; Sula's very appearance

suggests distress, as she cries “breathlessly and soundlessly” with the “tears roll[ing] into her mouth and...down her chin” (65). But the estrangement between the two dispenses quickly, for by the end of Chicken Little’s interment, “Nel and Sula [stand] some distance away from the grave, the space that had sat between them in the pews had dissolved. They held hands and knew that only the coffin would lie in the earth; the bubbly laughter and the press of fingers in the palm would stay aboveground forever” (66). Morrison imbues that space with physical properties, allowing it to reside between Nel and Sula. She subsequently banishes the space, though, reunifying the two friends, simultaneously restoring their innocence, allowing them to “trot up the road on a summer day wondering what happened to butterflies in the winter” (66). Though the two seem to have happily returned to the innocence of former days, the tone of their friendship has changed. The possibility for the two to endure apart from each other now exists.

3.7 Further Rifts in the Friendship

This first of three rifts occurs five years prior to the next - Nel’s marriage to Jude. It, like Chicken Little’s death, is a subtle interruption though, for Sula supports this relationship that exists outside of her alliance with Nel. “Sula made the enjoyment of [Jude’s] attentions keener simply because she seemed always to want Nel to shine” (84). In fact, Sula encourages the celebration, “no less excited” about it than Nel, thinking it the “perfect thing to do following their graduation,” wanting to be the only bridesmaid, encouraging Mrs. Wright to put on a fabulous and festive event, handling “most of the details very efficiently” (84). She handles these details so well because she realizes most of those involved in pulling together such a ceremony will be “anxious to please her since she had lost her mamma only a few years back and they still remembered the agony in Hannah’s face and the blood on Eva’s” (84). There is a cool detachment to Sula that allows her to exploit peoples’ kindness for her friend’s gain. Though she performs the

above manipulation in order to fulfill Nel's hopes, Sula's capability to orchestrate circumstances to her own liking cannot be overlooked. Sula's ability to act in a way detached from the emotions of the moment will later allow her to deliver a striking blow to her friendship with Nel.

Nel covets marriage and in terms of how she relates to Sula, this longing to be married is significant. At first, she is indifferent to marriage, yet when she determines how deeply hurt he is by not having his dream fulfilled of building a major road through the Bottom simply because he is black, those indifferences "disappear...Jude could see himself taking shape in her eyes" (83). Nel exhibits Helene's characteristic of finding comfort and purpose in what she can do for another person. "Greater than her friendship [for Sula] was this new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly" (84). Nel revels in being requested to "create" another person: a stronger Jude who finds himself as capable and important versus forgotten, a nonentity due to his skin color. She also yearns, for the second time in the novel, to be an independent being, and not always seen as one half of the Sula and Nel combination. "She didn't even know she had a neck until Jude remarked on it, or that her smile was anything but the spreading of her lips until he saw it as a small miracle" (84). In this sense, it becomes possible to see the downside of her bond with Sula: there is such continuity between the two, that at times it is hard for each to distinguish her own boundaries from the other. "Their friendship was so close, they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's" (83). While this relationship certainly allows "respite" for Nel from "her stern and undemonstrative parents" (83), and a chance for her "sparkle" and "splutter" to "have free reign," it is still a friendship that focuses on the two of them as one instead of their separate identities enforcing the other's (83). Nel is ready to step out, at least partly, from this relationship, at least as much as she needs in order to discover who she is autonomous of Sula. This

rupture, though necessary and amicable, precipitates Sula's departure from the Bottom. As Nel and Jude slow dance during their wedding reception, Nel sees her longtime friend leave. "Even from the rear Nel could tell that it was Sula and that she was smiling...It would be ten years before they saw each other again," (85). It is an amicable departure, and one that allows Nel to begin envisioning her identity and existence as separate from Sula's.

Although Nel delights in being seen "singly," she soon begins to coexist inside another relationship, again veiling her personal desires inside the inclinations of another. Instead of the focus being on how Nel and Jude can satisfy and make the other happy, it is instead centered around Jude's well-being. "Whatever his fortune, whatever the cut of his garment, there would always be the hem – the tuck and fold that hid his raveling edges; a someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up...The two of them together would make one Jude" (83). He pledges to "shelter, love" and "grow old" with Nel, but the hub of their relationship points to Jude's completion or self-fulfillment. Though some sympathy exists for Jude who is consistently overlooked as a black man, readers still observe that the focus of the relationship seems to be on satisfying Jude's needs rather than a mutually beneficial marriage. Nel is therefore consumed by this relationship in a way that contrasts her relationship with Sula. In that friendship, both girls "use each other to grow on;" in her marriage, Nel is simply a conduit to restore Jude's injured masculinity: "without that someone he was a waiter hanging around a kitchen like a woman. With her he was head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity" (83). Jude relies heavily on Nel for his identity formation, thus, Nel's growth towards happiness is much hindered. She is existent only through her marriage to Jude, rather than as a woman who seeks to satisfy her own desires. Nel's life with Jude post-marriage is given so little space in the text that ten years flash by with the next chapter,

1937, starting Part Two of the novel. No depth of explanation is given to their relationship beyond the fact that the two have had children and that “Nel’s love for Jude...over the years had spun a steady gray web around her heart” (95).

Though it seems her heart has been encapsulated by her love for Jude, there is a pinprick of light allowed in thanks to the otherworldly and continuous connection Nel has with Sula. This connection is illustrated with Nel’s response to Sula’s arrival, one the former has not physically proven, but knows by virtue of “the peculiar quality of the May” in which her friend arrives. “Although it was she alone who saw this magic, she did not wonder at it. She knew it was all due to Sula’s return to the Bottom” (95). Their friendship attunes them as forcefully as ever, for Nel realizes that Sula’s return is “like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed” (95). She sees more clearly, with a lifting of the blindness that marriage and motherhood and life without Sula have dropped over her life. This is not to say that she finds the two former relationships binding or ill-fitting; it is just a recognition of the clarity her friendship with Sula brings to her existence. “Was there anyone else before whom she could never be foolish? In whose view inadequacy was mere idiosyncrasy, a character trait rather than a deficiency?” (95). With Sula, Nel cannot be seen as inadequate or less than – she is instead “clever, gentle and a little raunchy” (95). There is a selflessness to Sula, for Nel recalls that her friend “never competed; she simply helped others define themselves. Other people seemed to turn their volume on and up when Sula was in the room” (95). The gray web of loving Jude presents a subdued Nel, while Sula’s Nel loves her husband in such a way that she exhibits “a bright and easy affection, a playfulness that was reflected in their lovemaking” (95). She becomes a better wife and a better mother: “she could listen to the crunch of sugar underfoot that the children had spilled without reaching for the switch” (95). Not

only does Sula's friendship allow Nel the freedom to be herself, it enables her to be better to those around her.

3.8 The Final Split

The betrayal of Jude's affair with Sula constitutes the third rupture of Sula and Nel's friendship, cementing what will become a split of three years before the two speak again and almost 30 before Nel realizes what she's lost. Initially, Nel frames the affair as the loss of her relationship with her husband. She ponders their intimacy, unable to understand how Jude could have committed such an act and followed it with leaving her.

But Jude...you knew me. All those days and years, Jude, you knew me. My ways and my hands and how my stomach folded and how we tried to get Mickey to nurse and how about that time when the landlord said...but you said...and I cried, Jude. You knew me and had listened to the things I said in the night, and heard me in the bathroom and laughed at my raggedy girdle and I laughed too because I knew you too, Jude. So how could you leave me when you knew me? (104-105)

This, for Nel, is particularly disturbing. She is unable to comprehend how Jude could have betrayed the shared intimacy of their relationship as husband and wife, father and mother to their children. "But they had been down on all fours naked..." (105). Nel's visualization of the naked bodies of her husband and friend points to the bond between Nel and Sula. "Somehow she didn't look naked to me, only you did" (106). In this moment of intense disbelief and shock, Sula's frame is still the more familiar to Nel. The intimacy of the husband-wife relationship is again superseded by the friendship between the two women. Nel's grief at the loss of her friendship with Sula because of Jude's affair physically manifests itself, appearing as "a gray ball hovering just there. Just there. To the right. Quiet, gray, dirty. A ball of muddy strings, but without weight, fluffy but terrible in its malevolence" (109). She is disturbed by the gray ball, unable to sleep on her own, and frequently climbs into bed with her children. So unnerved by the ball, Nel begins to

consider who she can ask about it in order to work through its presence and meaning to her life.

She would have to ask somebody about that, somebody she could confide in and who knew a lot of things, like Sula...ooo no, not Sula. Here she was in the midst of it, hating it, scared of it, and again she thought of Sula as though they were still friends and talked things over. That was too much. To lose Jude and not have Sula to talk to about it because it was Sula that he had left her for. (110)

Nel first construes the gray ball to be her grief at losing Jude. It is after Sula's death that she realizes who she really missed after her husband's affair. The gray ball disintegrates, prompting the realization of the actual target of her grief. "A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze. 'All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude...We was girls together...O Lord, Sula...girl, girl, girlgirlgirl'" (174). Morrison concludes the novel with the mournful awareness of friendship lost. The "circles and circles of sorrow" point to the true betrayal of her protagonists: allowing circumstances, painful ones certainly, to supplant their friendship. Nel understands this too late, for more than 30 years have passed and Sula is dead. Morrison issues a warning in Nel's too late understanding of what she has lost. When friendship is not prioritized and nurtured through difficulties, when its strength is tested and that bond fails, black women invite a circle of sorrow with no end into their lives.

3.9 Consequences of Estrangement

Despite how necessary in each other's lives the two prove to be, Nel and Sula eventually face an interruption in their friendship, borne out by the death of another character, Nel's marriage to Jude, and Sula's subsequent affair with Jude. While a fissure appears in their friendship during childhood, it is primarily as women that the separation between the two forms and becomes complete. Girlhood affords Sula and Nel the opportunity to explore themselves and each other while entering into womanhood brings about different demands and pressures, including marriage and children. Discussing the

overburdening of black women and quoting Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker states that “black women are called...‘the mule of the world,’ because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else – *everyone* else – refused to carry” (Walker 237). The burdens that Nel carries are marriage and motherhood. In seeking to be seen singly and given love based on her identity separate from Sula, Nel marries Jude. She asks for love, but instead is given a spouse more interested in how she can cover over his lack. The children, who could be a source of love for Nel as a mother, are only shown in the novel as recipients of what Nel does, clamoring for her attention rather than bestowing affection. Life as a wife and mother stamps out the creative and curious side that Nel expressed easily as a girl.

In fact, because Nel and Sula’s friendship devolves, the creativity enabled by their friendship is stifled. In Walker’s “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” she discusses how she was able to find her own artistry through discovering her mother’s. “Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength – in search of my mother’s garden, I found my own” (243). Black women have the capacity to create ourselves through connections with each other. Sula and Nel create their identity/ies through their friendship; when that friendship is severed, the creative energy that allows Nel to recognize the “magic” in the air upon her friend’s return to the Bottom eludes her and she becomes her mother, taking on the comfort of respectability and staid maturity. Without their friendship, Sula loses the medium of creative expression their bond provided. She searches for the same depth of connection but through men and sex. “She went to bed with men as frequently as she could. It was the only place where she could find what she was looking for: misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow” (Morrison 122). She seeks sadness because it is a way for her to express her grief at the loss of her and Nel’s friendship. Not only does sex provide a way to grieve over Nel, it allows Sula the

opportunity to bond with herself. After sex, she “impatiently” waits for the man to “turn away,” so that she is left to “the postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony” (123). But sex proves empty, for all along she is looking for friend: someone who would “be that version of herself which she sought to reach out and to touch with an ungloved hand.

In a way, her strangeness, her naïveté, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous. (121)

3.10 Falling into the Trap of “Normality”

Sula is not the only dangerous character; Nel also demonstrates the danger of falling into the comfort of imposed traditional concepts of black womanhood, namely as wife and mother. Though once a young girl who exclaimed her pride at discovering her “me-ness,” Nel, without Sula’s friendship, ends the novel reinforcing the very attitudes and mannerisms of the mother from whom she sought separation. The first example of this comes in her sickroom visit to Sula. Her words of comfort are meant to express “sympathy – for the illness though, not for the patient” (138). Out of a sense of duty, Nel visits her former friend, for like Helene, “virtue, bleak and drawn, was her only mooring” (139). Nel chastises Sula for being alone, remarking that at least if she had children, she’d have somebody. In fact, at her “arrogance,” Nel expresses her frustration with Sula’s desire to live autonomously. ““You can’t do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can’t act like a man. You can’t be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, talking about what you want, leaving what you don’t” (142). Exasperated because Sula is on the verge of dying and yet has no “legacy” of man or children, Nel is incapable of understanding how Sula can be so triumphant on her

deathbed. These moments of astonishment lead Nel to finally voicing her why – “Now she would ask her. ‘How come you did it, Sula?’” (144). The two remain unable to resolve the circumstances governing the downward spiral of their friendship. Sula’s nonsensical answer doesn’t clarify anything for Nel; Nel’s anguish is just as irrational to Sula. “‘And you didn’t love me enough to leave him alone. To let him love me. You had to take him away.’ ‘What you mean take him away? I didn’t kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn’t get over it?’” (145).

3.11 A Partial Reuniting

The novel’s conclusion illustrates that though the two remain at odds, their last thoughts are still of each other. Sula, dying, realizes there is no pain in the process, and immediately plans to share this with the woman who she still understands to be her best friend. “‘Well, I’ll be damned,’ she thought, ‘it didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I tell Nel’” (149). Just as Sula’s final thoughts are of Nel, so are Nel’s. The ball of grief breaks, prompting her recognition of the person at the root of the heartache: not Jude, but Sula. Her cry of “‘O Lord, Sula...girl, girl, girlgirlgirl’” illustrates the same lasting effect of friendship that Sula’s final thoughts prove. A level of their friendship remains intact, regardless of the depth of its rupture. However, the two are unable to achieve complete emotional self-fulfillment because they understand too late how meaningful each is to the other. This is one of *Sula*’s morals: without the ability to move beyond whatever seeks to interrupt friendships, black women will achieve only a measure of satisfaction.

Chapter 4

Bringing It All Together: What Literature Means to a Movement

“Essentially, the black woman as artist, as intellectual spokesperson for her own cultural apprenticeship, has not existed before, for anyone” (Spillers 297).

4.1 The Importance of Self-Definition & Black Feminist Texts

Published in 1973 and 1982 respectively, *Sula* and *The Color Purple* offer some of the earliest images of black womanhood in contemporary literature as defined by black authors. “Given the ubiquitous nature of controlling images, it should not be surprising that exploring how Black women construct social realities is a recurring theme in Black feminist thought” (Collins 93). The social reality that Morrison and Walker each construct is a sphere in which the women choose for themselves what their lives will look like, and bring about this reality through their relationships with each other. *Sula* is allowed to travel, at her discretion, away from the Bottom and explore the country. Though she eventually returns to the Bottom and dies there, she is still given the agency to leave. Once she returns, she continues to exhibit her self-autonomy in the choices she makes. Whether putting Eva in a nursing home or sleeping with married men are viewed by readers as proper or poor choices, the fact still remains that they are *Sula*’s choices to make. Multiple women in *The Color Purple* exemplify this same autonomous lifestyle – Sofia strives to resist working for the mayor’s wife, Shug refuses to settle down into the “respectable” life of a preacher’s daughter: “Why any woman give a shit what people think is a mystery to me” (Walker 200), and Celie eventually evolves into a self-defined woman who works within being “pore, black, ...may[be] ugly” to unlock her personal artistry, establish her own business, and love the woman she desires.

In order to resist derogating images, black women writers frequently create narratives and characters in which black women define themselves, empowering

themselves by rejecting the demeanor or role ascribed to them by the dominant society. In fact, this method of character portrayal illustrates the manner in which Walker's and Morrison's texts exemplify one of the ideals of the talking book trope: placing the oppressed within the dominant power structure. Patricia Hill Collins categorizes the protagonists of literature by black women into four different groups with the emergent woman as the most contemporarily identified in the listing. It is the latter who embodies resistance in black women's literature. According to Collins, these women concern themselves with their objectification as the Other as they document the process of personal growth toward self-definitions (94 – 95). In literature dedicated to exploring black women's responses to circumstances of subjugation, their stories manifest "the moment when silence becomes speech, when stillness becomes action" (96).

Since the 1970s, increased literacy among African-Americans has provided new opportunities for U.S. Black women to expand the use of scholarship and literature into more visible institutional sites of resistance. A community of Black women writers has emerged since 1970, one in which African-American women engage in dialogue among one another... (109)

Black women writers, therefore, communicate with each other through their texts.

It is the commonality of this dialogue between black women that sets this literature apart – the relational support of friendship is often established as a mainstay in black women's literature. Though gains have been made, the double bind of racism and sexism still exists in western culture, making the need for black feminist texts still apparent. As recently as 2014, black women writers cite the need for texts that incorporate or focus on non-white voices. For example, as black author Jacqueline Woodson accepted the National Book Award for young people's literature, the show's host joked about Woodson being "allergic to watermelon" (Associated Press). In responding to those comments, she clarified her mission as one "to write stories that have been historically absent in this country's body of literature, to create mirrors for the

people who so rarely see themselves inside contemporary fiction, and windows for those who think we are no more than the stereotypes they're so afraid of" (Associated Press). Stories by authors such as Woodson allow for the interruption of such stereotypes.

4.2 Cultural Arts and Social Justice Correlations

Sula and *The Color Purple* are significant to the Black Power, Feminist, and Black Feminist movements, and the novel's importance to the three movements is important to examine. That cultural arts and social justice projects are mutually beneficial is a view touted by many academics and artists. In this chapter, I have examined *Sula* and *The Color Purple*, each text's author, and the movements taking place at the time of publication in order to demonstrate the novels' ties to feminism. I have tied each novel to the black feminist movement and discussed how the works function as black feminist texts. My goal has been to explore the racial and sexual social customs Walker and Morrison address in *The Color Purple* and *Sula*, discuss how each of these cultural norms functions within American society, and analyze how friendship is a method of deliverance for the female characters.

4.3 Classifications as Feminist Texts

Both novels were published during times of unrest or immediately following shifting social changes. Works produced during the 60s, 70s, and 80s that featured feminist or black nationalist ideals are classified by Deborah Silverton Rosenfelt as "inscribing the radical consciousness and deliberately intervening in the ideological struggles of its time" (Howe 269). Rosenfelt argues that such texts are primarily concerned with "the indicators of power – gender, race, class, sexuality – that affect women's lives and their privileging of women's consciousness, women's subjectivity, and, therefore, women's agency" (269). Certainly *Sula* and *The Color Purple* can be seen as artistic works that broker discussion regarding women's agency or positioning: *Sula*

struggles throughout the novel to assert this agency and is largely successful in doing so, while Nel's creativity and artistry is effectively snuffed by social constraints. Celie realizes her agency after understanding what women's subjectivity looks like through an examination of her own life and then what she can do to reverse her status by evaluating and often duplicating the same mannerisms or attitudes of women who refuse to conform to social standards such as Sofia and Shug. At first, Celie is content to survive by not pushing back against the mistreatment she suffers at her stepfather's and husband's hands. As she watches the way in which Sofia and Shug navigate similar attitudes towards women and journals about these experiences in the novel's letters, Celie understands that it is both possible and liberating to act outside what is expected of black women during this era. Both texts work to move their respective heroines "from oppression and suffering through consciousness-raising to resistance and finally to a form of victory or transcendence [that] is characteristic of many feminist novels" (272). Though Celie's ascension in the established hierarchy is much more successful than either Sula or Nel's, the latter characters still live lives that exemplify the previous theme of transcendence. Celie moves through stages of suffering and victimization, awareness of her plight, a sexual awakening that precedes a political awakening, resistance, and into transformation. As Rosenfelt expresses, "*Sula* plays a variant on the dynamic of female oppression and resistance, transforming it into a novel of social rigidity and female subversion" (274). Regardless of how adroitly the character progresses through these phases, they both "compound rage at women's oppression and revolutionary optimism about the possibility for change" (270). A final determination of the novels' roles as feminist texts is that the main female protagonists participate in a bonding experience, essential to the nurturing and growth of one or more characters.

Sometimes the narrative of female bonding constitutes the central movement of feminist novels, as two women enact dramas of separation

and individuation, rupture and reconciliation, renunciation and consummation. Indeed, the movement toward (or, in some instances, away from) the bonding of the two female figures, whether friend and friend, aunt and niece, loved and lover, constitutes one of the most pervasive of feminist narrative strategies. (Rosenfelt 275)

It is the strengthening relationships between Sula and Nel and Celie, Shug, and Sofia that foster the development of the women.

4.4 Connections: Movement to Movement and Literature to Movements

Both the Black Power and Feminist Movement leaders realized the necessity of an artistic culture in transforming and shaping the social movements. Eight months before Malcolm X's 1965 assassination, he "called for a black cultural movement" stating that "Culture is an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle. We must take hold of it and forge the future with the past"(Collins 275).

We must launch a cultural revolution to unbrainwash an entire people. Our cultural revolution must be the means of bringing us closer to our African brothers and sisters. It must begin in the community and be based on community participation. (Collins 275)

Activists in the Black Power movement used X's words to inspire the cultural correlation between the social justice project and artistic expression of liberation. So too did the Women's Liberation movement turn to Simone de Beauvoir and her "enormously influential 1949 book *Le deuxième sexe* – translated into English four years later as *The Second Sex*, for intellectual guidance and political direction" (276). Beauvoir links culture and liberation in her text. "The force of Beauvoir's findings, the brilliance of her writing, and the originality of her life all served as critical inspiration for the Women's Liberation Movement" (277). In many senses, both movements battled for the same ideals: that of self-awareness as a means to liberate the oppressed and overturn alienation experienced by these communities. The Black Power and Women's Liberation Movements also emphasized a communal aspect to healing, with identities bound to "blackness and femaleness, respectively" (279). Self-definitions, collective identity, and

cultural expression were foundational to the above alliances. Art's purpose in both movements was one of agency – leaders believed that art was a manner to shift each oppressed group out of persecution and into power.

4.5 A Black Woman's Home

But it was not simple for black women to find a “home” within either movement. The necessity for feminist organizations dedicated to non-white women became apparent. As the successive periods of feminism took place, each became more and more concerned with women of color. Each of the three phases of feminism has moved deeper into the underpinnings of discrimination in an effort to challenge policies that subjugate women. The first wave of feminism, which took place in the 19th and early 20th century, was primarily concerned with women's suffrage. Led in America by feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, and lauded for its purpose by Frederick Douglass, the movement was primarily concerned with women of a certain race and class, ignoring black women and even white women who earned a wage for a living. “The [Seneca Falls] Declaration all but ignored the predicament of white working-class women, as it ignored the condition of Black women in the South and North alike” (Davis 53 – 54). For middle-class white women, the movement proved successful. However, for the marginalized women of society, black and/or poor, the gains achieved for upper-class white women did not trickle down to those outside this more privileged circle. It is curious to note that while many of the leaders of the women's suffrage movement were part of abolitionist families and circles, they still did not concern themselves with the inclusion of black women within this initial era of the feminist movement.

The so-called second wave of feminism hit in the 1960s, and just as the first wave learned tactics and gained momentum from the abolitionist movement, so, too, did this age of feminism, acquire strength from its association with the Civil Rights struggle.

There was also a reoccurrence of the distancing of white women from the people they initially served alongside once they had achieved a certain status or height. "Echoing the scenario of the nineteenth century, White women developed their feminism in a Black organization [SNCC] and then turned the thrust of their activist energies elsewhere" (Giddings 303). Not only did the ideals of this feminist era seem to speak to middle-class, suburban white women, there was a growing distrust between Black women fighting for the same rights as their white counterparts, largely due to the reluctance of white women to embrace the same standards of freedom for all women. "Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you, we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying" (Lorde 119). This proved alienating to black women as seen in the below anecdote describing an incident at the 1970 Liberation Day march of the women's movement.

Taking part in the demonstration was the Third World Women's Alliance, a Black feminist group that was the only SNCC project still functioning successfully. Led by Frances Beal, the Alliance brandished placards about Angela Davis, who had been expelled from her teaching position at the University of California earlier that year, and in August had been charged with first-degree murder, first-degree kidnapping, and conspiracy to commit both. Fearful that if caught she would be killed in California...she fled, and became the first Black woman to make the FBI's Ten Most Wanted List. Naturally there was great concern about Davis at a time of increasing violence against Black radicals, but that concern was evidently not shared by some leaders of the feminist movement. "We had signs reading "Hands Off Angela Davis,"" Frances Beal recalled, "and one of the leaders of NOW ran up to us and said angrily, "Angela Davis has nothing to do with women's liberation." "It has nothing to do with the kind of liberation you're talking about," retorted Beal, "but it has everything to do with the kind of liberation we're talking about." (Giddings 305)

This alienation from feminism highlighted the necessity of a movement that spoke to both race and sex.

For black feminists, race and racism were still primary considerations of any women's movement, for this sort of treatment still proved a great impact on their lives. Unfortunately, black women who felt estranged by the women's movement fared no better in the black liberation movement. Kathleen Cleaver, an officer in the Black Panther Party, described having to "genuflect" when offering suggestions for initiatives within the organization. Multiple times her ideas would be rejected, when, if offered by a man, those same recommendations would be implemented. "The fact that the suggestion came from a woman gave it some lesser value" (317). Not only were their suggestions sometimes ignored, there were those within the Civil Rights movement who felt threatened by black women, viewing them as "castrators" or even as the "property" of their men (317-318). Faced on one hand with a movement that ignored their struggles against racism, and on the other with one that ignored their oppression by sexism, many black women realized the need for something of their own, a movement on the same level as the previous two, yet particularly concerned with them. In this way, they would occupy the central role, not just in terms of power, but as the beneficiaries of a more equalized system of ideology. Writing in *Black Woman's Manifesto*, Maxine Williams states "Women's Liberation must not isolate itself from the masses of women or the Third World community. At the same time, white women cannot speak for Black women. Black women must speak for themselves. The Black Women's Alliance has been formed in New York to begin to do this. We felt there was a need for a revolutionary Black women's movement that spoke to the oppression of Black women as Blacks, as workers, as women" (*Third World Women's Alliance* 17).

Black feminism, therefore, focused on the interconnected nature of three evils against which it fought: racism, classism, and sexism. A second group besides The Black Women's Alliance that sought to challenge these three forces was the Combahee River

Collective. Chartered in 1974, the group of black lesbian feminists drafted a statement, asserting its principles, projects, and even the difficulties it faced in organizing itself into a party that could work towards bettering life for black women. On behalf of the Collective, Zillah Eisenstien wrote:

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face. (Smith xxxiv).

Other organizations that focused on black women's rights included John F. Kennedy's Presidential Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW) with a special committee, the Consultation of Negro Women, the National Organization of Women, whose membership "overlapped" with that of PCSW and the subsequent National Black Feminist Organization, according to Duchess Harris (Collier – Thomas and Franklin 286).

Much like previous organizations seeking civil freedoms and liberties, black feminists felt the need to mobilize themselves in collective bodies. Interestingly, the trend continues today with associations including the National Collective of 100 Black Women, Inc. and even social media clubs such as Facebook's Black Feminist Thought Discussion Corner.

Collaborating with each other is not a recent development, but one that evolves as issues and needs transform. Before social media opportunities presented themselves, the talking book would (and continues) to provide a possible space for this population of women to convene. Within the pages of novels such as Walker's *The Color Purple*, black women see nurturing friendships and witness how these characters become progressively self-realized through their alliances with other women. Much as the above

organizations involved black women working together to get their goals recognized and achieved, so too do the characters in *Sula* and *The Color Purple* collaborate to establish the influential role black women can play in society.

4.6 Reversing Oppression through Black Women's Literature

As language articulates human thought, so too does literature express the inner passions of humanity. In her 1993 acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature, Toni Morrison expresses that language is partly a system, partly a thing that can be controlled, but mostly an entity of agency – “an act with consequences” (Morrison *What Moves* 199 – 200). Types of language and the consequences of using different types vary, but particular attention should be given to any that could be deemed repressive, for that repression foretells danger.

Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge...whether it is the malign language law-without-ethics, or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek – it must be rejected, altered, and exposed. It is the language that drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascist boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism as it moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the bottomed-out mind. Sexist language, racist language, theistic language – all are typical of the policing language of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas. (Morrison 201)

“Policing language of mastery” that establishes a hegemony is exactly what writers such as Morrison work to eradicate. She cites the lack of stories focused on “the most vulnerable people in the society” as what prompted her to publish stories denouncing the “social construct” of racism (Colbert). “I wanted to show how painful this constructed horrible racism was on the most vulnerable people in the society: girls, black girls, poor girls and that it really and truly could hurt you” (Morrison “The Colbert Report”). It is this literature for and about black girls/women that many who were in some way alienated from either the Black Power or Women's Liberation movements craved.

Eleanor Holmes Norton expresses this sentiment in her article “For Sadie and Maude.” “The new crop of literature concerning women – attuned to the peculiar relationship between white women and white men in America – has inspired me much, but less than the poetry of the great black poet, Gwendolyn Brooks, who writes for me and about me,” (qtd. in Morgan 353). Literature dedicated to exploring and discussing black women’s lives creates a means by which a doubly-oppressed population may discover paths or tactics to aid in self-discovery and the progression towards autonomy. As Tara Bynum says, “Black women intellectuals still have to create spaces in which their freedom to be is affirmed and valued” (Bynum and Gumbs).

In their tumblr, “Most Affectionately Every Yours,” created to consider Phillis Wheatley’s life, namely her relationship with another enslaved woman, Obour Tanner, and to collaborate on different avenues of research focused on the well-known poet, Tara Bynum and Alexis Gumbs “connect to [Wheatley’s] legacy” and examine the strength Wheatley and Tanner took from their relationship with the other. The blog, set up in epistolary fashion, mirrors the communication the two friends established through the years with the blog’s title mimicking the signature Wheatley and Tanner used in their correspondence to each other. Gumbs, echoing Wheatley’s statement that she longed to hear from her friend, considers her friendship with Bynum to also be one based on mutual affirmation.

We affirm each other on purpose. And it matters that we do so. We may not need a pass to visit each other, but our communications are missives into forms of isolation shaped by our shared oppression and possibly exacerbated by our shared tendencies for rebellion and creativity. As Wheatley writes to Tanner, “I long to hear from you...I wish you much happiness.” And it has something to do with getting free. With staying free? (Bynum Gumbs)

As seen above, an intrinsic connection between freedom and friendship is evident. The way in which black women may affirm each other is offered by Gumbs as a

route to freedom, whether that freedom be from the institution that enslaved Wheatley and Tanner or the social constructs of racism and sexism that seek to deny black women from living self-governed realities. Though she recognizes the difference between her and Bynum's status and that of Wheatley and Tanner, Gumbs maintains that as "black women intellectuals we are still seeking multiple forms of freedom in our own lives. I think that black women can support each other in experiencing freedom and navigating the systems that still limit our freedom in capitalism today" (Bynum Gumbs). Bynum agrees. "And I suspect for all of us that's what we seek by way of choices, friendships, relationships, etc. Sometimes we cannot name it but it's often the freedom to be who we are" (Bynum Gumbs). As Patricia Hill Collins has written, "Traditionally, U.S. Black women's efforts to construct individual and collective voices have occurred in three safe spaces. One location involves Black women's relationships with each other" (Patricia Hill Collins 102). She continues,

Black women writers have led the way in recognizing the importance of Black women's relationships with one another. Mary Helen Washington points out that one distinguishing feature of Black women's literature is that it is about African-American women. Women talk to one another, and 'their friendships with other women – mothers, sisters, grandmothers, friends, lovers – are vital to their growth and well-being. (104)

As the novels *Sula* and *The Color Purple* demonstrate, the friendships between black women are an avenue towards emotional health and happiness. By participating in Gates' "shared text of consciousness," Walker and Morrison place their narratives into the talking book trope – one in which stories of populations less familiar with the dominating class seek to establish an oppressed person's humanity and participation in the influencing social structure. Within Morrison's *Sula* and Walker's *The Color Purple*, the female characters collaborate to subvert the social order that oppresses black women. Readers of the two texts discern the successful role friendship plays in

overturning the systems that subjugate the population represented by the characters. In this way, the novels communicate with black women who read and see their lives and the cultural structures that influence their lives mirrored in the texts' pages. The talking book trope, as a rhetorical device, allows Morrison and Walker to write characters who argue against alienation and isolation and instead interject themselves into the dominant class.

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