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**From Subaltern to Heroine:
Sisterhood and Empowerment in
Alice Walker's *The Color Purple***

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Abstract

This Master's thesis looks at three secondary female characters from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and their respective contribution to the development and growth of Celie's identity, the protagonist. Such analysis supports the relevance of Shug, Nettie and Sofia, and it demonstrates the fundamental role they play over the main character in Walker's work. This research draws upon mostly gender issues, and each character is related to a specific aspect in order to examine how each one contributes to the Celie's empowerment as a woman. Throughout this study it can be observed, therefore, how Shug, Nettie and Sofia become an exemplary image in terms of sexuality, education and behavior, respectively, thus providing a new image of the African-American woman at the beginning of the 20th century.

The aspects explored are contrasted and supported in view of Black Feminist theories in order to provide arguments that defend the importance of African-American women's sisterhood to combat the oppressive presence and power of black patriarchy. The purpose of this study is to analyze the great impact Shug, Nettie and Sofia make on Celie, who probably would not have experienced an empowerment without the help of those three women and sisters.

Key words: black sisterhood, black women's empowerment, Alice Walker, education, sexuality, awakening, *The Color Purple*, Celie.

Resumen

Este trabajo de fin de Máster examina tres personajes femeninos secundarios de *The Color Purple* (1982) de Alice Walker y su contribución respectiva al desarrollo y crecimiento de la identidad de Celie, la protagonista. Tal análisis apoya la relevancia de Shug, Nettie y Sofía, y demuestra el papel fundamental que juegan sobre el personaje principal en la novela de Walker. Esta investigación se basa principalmente en cuestiones de género, y cada personaje está relacionado con un aspecto específico con el fin de examinar cómo cada una contribuye al empoderamiento de Celie como mujer. A lo largo de este estudio se puede observar, por lo tanto, cómo Shug, Nettie y Sofía se convierten en una imagen ejemplar en términos de sexualidad, educación y comportamiento, respectivamente, proporcionando así una nueva imagen de la mujer afroamericana a principios del siglo XX.

Los aspectos explorados son contrastados y respaldados en vista de las teorías feministas negras con el fin de proporcionar argumentos que defienden la importancia de la hermandad de mujeres afroamericanas para combatir la presencia opresiva y el poder del patriarcado negro. El propósito de este estudio es analizar el gran impacto que Shug, Nettie y Sofía tienen en Celie, quién probablemente no habría experimentado un empoderamiento sin la ayuda de esas tres mujeres y hermanas.

Palabras clave: hermandad negra, empoderamiento de las mujeres negras, Alice Walker, educación, sexualidad, despertar, *The Color Purple*, Celie.

1. Introduction

Gender issues have received increased attention across a number of disciplines in the last decades. Moreover, a considerable literature recently deals with a topic that highlights, among other themes, the manifestation and diffusion of an essential social issue: gender equality. This literary blooming arises from the social need to deconstruct old fashioned, restrictive and patriarchal gender schemes and construct them all over again. That is, to improve what needs to be improved, to fix the path people in general and women in particular have to walk so that today's society might become a better one tomorrow.

Justice for equality is a matter that concerns everybody. Consequently, it is society's duty to level the current unevenness and to put an end to present utopias; i.e., the current situation of gender inequality. That is why, among many available options, I have decided to choose gender as the main theme in order to collaborate with and contribute to the ongoing discussion on this field. I hope that my approach to Walker's *The Color Purple* might contribute to help raise awareness of the relevance of the issue at hand.

I personally believe that, at least as gender is concerned, society must take action, put an end to gender borders in order to stop being conditioned by the power of the patriarchy. Therefore, the aims of this essay is twofold: in addition to provide a discussion focused on the analysis of a choice of female characters from Alice Walker's novel, the purpose of this study is to show that some of the gender issues addressed in a fictional work reflect real situations in which gender inequality or violence are the norm. The essay turns into an exclamation mark that incites to break with social apathy related to questions of gender *and* race.

Regarding the concept of race, the situation of black women is even worse. Thanks to a particular video clip I became interested in black issues. In such video, African American actress Alfre Woodard reads from Sojourner Truth's famous speech "Ain't I a Woman?" (1851). Moreover, I got in touch with former slave and activist Truth through the subject

Literatura Norteamericana nos seus Textos [African American Literature] taught by Prof. María Frías, in which such speech is a key work —and I recognize that is extremely necessary— to get acquainted with African American’s socio-historical context.

The time I attended her classes can be considered as an approach to this literature and its most representative and varied aspects —such as slavery, segregation or the Harlem Renaissance— as well as an introduction to and a first contact with some of the most important authors within different contexts. In addition to having the possibility of learning and extending my borders regarding literature, the fact of being introduced in a general, but at the same time in-depth way to this literature supposed an expansion of my perspective on different aspects that concern human beings, such as, as I have mentioned: gender and race. These are concepts that go beyond their simple definition or meaning; they are concepts that question human relationships that encourage us to think about them, to pay attention, to study and analyze them.

It was also thanks to this subject that I discovered Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982)¹ which was included in the list of optional readings for the final essay that students had to elaborate. My final essay was based on a comparison between Walker’s novel and Zora Neale Hurston’s short story “Sweat” (1926). I focused on discussing how both authors portray aspects of gender such as hegemonic masculinity, gender violence and the role of women. At the end of the academic year, I realized that Walker’s had made a great impact on me to the extent that it became one of my favorites books so far. For that reason, I did not hesitate to choose *The Color Purple* for my Master’s thesis, since I have not had the opportunity to discuss it previously.

¹ See Appendix, figure 1.

On the one hand, this essay reflects on how the author uses her characters to deconstruct the gender roles imposed by the context in which the novel takes place. Following this line, the action of deconstructing such roles leads to the construction of new ones. A reconstruction is needed in order to raise the ideal idea of woman. On the other hand, I explore the relationships that the main character Celie maintains with some of the secondary ones. As I try to prove, these secondary characters have a tremendous influence on and are responsible for keeping Celie standing on her feet, since our protagonist not only endures numerous vicissitudes, but faces them and struggles to fight back, thus, becoming a heroine at the end of the story. Therefore, I will focus on analyzing how three secondary characters — Shug, Nettie, and Sofia, respectively— play an essential role in Walker’s novel since they are instrumental in empowering Celie to grow as a new and a real black woman.

1.1.Methodology

To achieve this objective I have organized my Master thesis in three main chapters. Prior to undertaking the proper analysis, I dedicate the first chapter, “On the Theoretical Framework,” to discuss some differences between black and white feminisms. I believe that this section is necessary for my study, since it will allow me to establish a particular basis, that is, a specific and defined theory in order to address the issues that I deal with in the following sections. Among the different scholars that I include, it is pertinent to highlight works by Patricia Hill Collins, whose extensive and in-depth production serves as one of the main pillars for this thesis. Moreover, I also take as reference other black feminist scholars and writers such as bell hooks, Barbara Smith, Angela Davis or Alice Walker herself, among others.

The second chapter stands for the body of this essay, and I have divided it in three subsections according to my selection of the chosen characters. I examine how those female

characters —Shug, Nettie and Sofia— help Celie to experience a growth as a woman by focusing on different aspects. The first subsection is related to Shug and sexuality, so as to prove that she helps Celie to discover her own sexuality as well as new forms of sexual expression that differ from the constant rape episodes she has suffered. The second one focuses on the importance of education and how Celie’s sister, Netty, plays a fundamental role to motivate and teach her. Finally, the third subsection deals with the role of Sofia, who introduces Celie to a new image of a black woman —that of a powerful wife and mother who fights domestic violence and uses words as weapons. Moreover, as far as the titles of these three subsections are concerned, I should also mention the coalescence of Aretha Franklin's songs in which I have found inspiration to elaborate this Master thesis as she also *sings* about most of the aspects I concentrate on my research.

The final chapter of my thesis comprised a review in which we can easily observe the transformation of Celie, which serves as a proof of the previous discussion. Taken together, the findings of this essay —which are presented in the conclusions— highlight the tremendous potential and benefits of women’s relationships, or black women’s sisterhood, based on solidarity, since they are essential to empower other women.

2. On the Theoretical Framework

In the last few decades, a considerable literature has been written around the theme of Black Feminist Thought. Thus, it is extremely important to take into account and consider such theories in order to approach not only the similarities that exist between Black² and non-Black Feminisms, but also the existing differences that must be acknowledged between them. In the pages that follow, I focus on the evidence for such

² The terms “Black” and “non-Black” are used by current criticism. However, I will use “black” —in small letter— throughout my thesis since I agree with some scholars that considerer it less discriminatory than the one in capital “b”.

need in order to establish the framework for this Master thesis.

2.1. Some Specific Aspects about Black Feminist Thought

Comparisons are odious; however, sometimes they are both unavoidable and necessary. Consequently, for the purpose of this essay, it is essential to be rigorous about the aspects that belong to one frame of thought or the other, and to establish fair and necessary connections between both branches of feminism. In order to do so, we will start by exploring the specific traces that are associated with black feminism as well as to analyze the reasons why both branches of feminist thought do not necessarily contradict themselves. The fact is that the reality of black women's circumstances differs from those of white women's.

Generally speaking, critical responses exist as a result of a particular vision regarding certain human experiences. In the case of feminism, Greene and Kahn draw on arguments by the critical theorist Sydney Janet Kaplan, by stating that "Feminist criticism begins, according to [Kaplan], in the personal response of women readers to women writers, and in the implicit repudiation of any critical stance which claims to be objective" (37). Notwithstanding, feminist criticism does not necessarily circumscribe to women—who, nevertheless, deserve to be in the spotlight—but also men can and should develop a critical vision of certain circumstances that affect the different stages of women's lives.

Such women could be of all types, come from all places and, accordingly, show different *colors*. It is appropriate to include women as a whole in this type of criticism and theories and, as it has been stated, it is pertinent to clarify also the distinctions that exist particularly between one type of woman and a different one. The case that

concerns this study focuses specifically on the experience of women from the African-American community, who have been traditionally ignored, thus their absence within the theory of feminism from the inception of the first wave of white feminist theories. For the most part, such early theories do not incorporate, therefore, the image and reality of black women. Up to now, a large number of published studies discuss the reasons of such absence.

By the same token, such studies have proliferated to build a foundation for a “black thought.” A pertinent instance of such contributions is that of Barbara Smith, among many others, who complains that the fact of “writing about Black women writers from a feminist perspective and about Black lesbian writers . . . [has] not been done. Not by white male critics, expectedly. Not by Black male critics. Not by white women critics who think of themselves as feminist” (7) and, therefore, she adds,

there [has been] no political movement to give power or support to those who want to examine Black women’s experience through studying [their] history, literature and culture. There [has been] no political presence that demand[ed] a minimal level of consciousness and respect from those who write or talk about [their] lives (9)

It seems that —or at least this is how I see it— the base for a black feminist theory did not begin until women of color realized that they were being marginalized not only by men—whether black or white—but also by other women. Reasons for this seem to be clear, but also rather complex. Collins (1990) discusses black women’s challenges when she argues that “Black women's experiences with both racial and gender oppression that result in needs and problems distinct from white women and Black men, and that Black women must struggle for equality both as women and as African-

Americans” (20).

In this regard, it may be stated that race and gender collide. One well-known study that is often cited to refer to such collision is that of Kimberlé Crenshaw, who has provided one of the most significant current discussions about this controversial issue. She uses the term “intersectionality,”³ in order to explain how black women have been obstructed and doubly discriminated. The term was coined by Crenshaw in 1989, and, as the author herself comments in an interview, it was originated when,

[She was] trying to conceptualize the way the law responded to issues where both race and gender discrimination were involved. What happened was like an accident, a collision. Intersectionality simply came from the idea that if you’re standing in the path of multiple forms of exclusion, you are likely to get hit by both. These women are injured, but when the race ambulance and the gender ambulance arrive at the scene, they see these women of color lying in the intersection and they say, “Well, we can’t figure out if this was just race or just sex discrimination. And unless they can show us which one it was, we can’t help them. (4)

History seems to have positioned black women off the social ladder; they have not even been included in the lowest step. Nevertheless, if unity makes strength, it can be argued that unity has made black women more powerful. As Collins (1991) highlights, little by little, “a wide range of African-American women intellectuals have advanced the view that Black women's struggles are part of a wider struggle for human dignity and empowerment” (37).

³ Patricia Hill Collins (2016) also contributes with her own definition to such term by arguing that “intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences” (25). Moreover, she points out some aspects that are related to the term such as social inequality, power, relationality, social context, complexity and social justice (25-30).

Those female intellectuals have endeavored to raise a critical tradition which broadly supports the fact that black feminism differs significantly from white feminism since it has to pay attention to different needs. Collins (1991) mentions some instances of women who have helped to raise black women's pride. Such is the case of Maria Stewart (1803-1879)⁴ who "challenged African-American women to reject the negative images of Black womanhood so prominent in her times, pointing out that racial and sexual oppression were the fundamental causes of Black women's poverty" (3).⁵ As it has been stated, black women suffer from a double discrimination and, hence, this results in a double fight: on the one hand, they struggle to obtain the same privileges white women have long enjoyed; on the other hand, they have to confront black male privileges too. In a comprehensive study on white privilege, Peggy McIntosh (1992) provides a very personal perspective by offering an exhaustive critique of the way in which white privilege has been embedded in her social context. Referring to what this kind of privilege involves, McIntosh argues the following:

In proportion as my racial group was being made overconfident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely being made unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated. Whiteness protected me from exhausting daily anxiety, worry, fear, and anger owing to others' treatment of people in my racial group. At the same time, I was being subtly trained to perpetrate or at least ignore the hostility and violence against people of color

⁴ Maria W. Stewart (1803—1879), abolitionist, and women's rights activist, "she was the earliest known American woman to lecture in public on political issues. Stewart is known for four powerful speeches she delivered in Boston in the early 1830s—a time when no woman, black or white, dared to address an audience from a public platform." Available at <https://ehistory.osu.edu/biographies/maria-stewart>.

⁵ Collins stresses the role played by different African-American women "who have convincingly showed that they had to talk and they needed to be heard: Anna Julia Cooper, Sojourner Truth, Mary McLeod Bethune, Toni Morrison, Barbara Smith, Ida B. Wells, and countless others have consistently struggled to make themselves heard and have used their voices to raise essential issues affecting Black women" (1991, 5).

which exhausted and angered them. (34)

Put in a nutshell, for McIntosh, race was—and still is—a factor that determines how a person’s life would develop.⁶ Historical events speak by themselves and the evidence of slavery illustrates this point clearly. Thus, a number of scholars have considered the effects of slavery in relation to black women. Such is the case, again, with Collins who elaborates on the distinction of gender oppression, when she argues that “the process of objectification, commodification and exploitation took different forms for African American women and men” (2004, 55). The critic highlights how black women had to not only work as men did, but that they were also conceived as sexual objects to the point that their “sexuality and reproductive capacity presented opportunities for forms of sexual exploitation and sexual slavery” (55-56).

Within the African-American community and as far as gender is concerned, black women suffer an oppression which is consequently—but not always necessary—related to the domestic environment. A significant analysis and discussion on such oppression is denounced by Collins (1991), among many others. She presents her own arguments as well as those formulated by other black scholars who devote their attention to black women’s domestic burden “during specific historical areas such as slavery and the urbanizing South” (44). Such a burden can be considered as a way of silencing and making black women invisible, which, therefore, contributes to reduce women’s agency.

In the sections that follow, I will refer to the some oppressions that a black woman, Celie, has been suffering within the African-American community. Moreover, I will examine, as I have indicated in the introduction, how three different fictional characters, Shug, Nettie and Sofia, manage to overcome such manifold and simultaneous

⁶ As a pertinent example of such difference regarding the race of a person, McIntosh provides a list of conditions that she, as a white woman, can count on, in contrast with African-American friends and co-workers (see McIntosh 31-33).

oppressions.

3. Secondary Female Characters and Sisterhood in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

In the following sections, I analyze the aforementioned secondary characters that contribute to the awakening and liberation of Celie.⁷ Therefore, I demonstrate how they are a perfect example of women that stand up for black sisterhood since, according to hooks (2000) in reference to this concept, “women come together, rather than pretend union, [they] would acknowledge that [they] are divided and must develop strategies to overcome fears, prejudices, resentments, competitiveness, etc” (65).

3.1. Shug Avery's Sexuality: “Making Her Feel Like a Natural Woman”

The transcendence of Shug Avery's role in Walker's novel is undeniable.⁸ Through her character, the author expresses themes that, perhaps, are more intimate⁹ than any other that are present in her-story. Consequently, Walker is giving some visibility—as well as sonority¹⁰—to certain aspects of the lives of women that tend to remain hidden both in literary and social discourses. These aspects are related to sexuality, which, as I have already mentioned in a previous section, have been one of the most problematic issues in the lives of African-American women since slavery.

Although she appears well into the middle of Walker's novel, Shug Avery gradually

⁷ See Appendix 1, figure 2.

⁸ Margaret Avery performs Shug Avery in *The Color Purple* movie (1985). See Appendix 1, figure 3.

⁹ The use of the term “intimate” here refers to aspects of life that are used to being private for oneself, as the Oxford Dictionary's definition states: intimate refers to something “involving very close connection” or “having a cosy and private or relaxed atmosphere”. Definition available at <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/intimate>.

¹⁰ I consider it appropriate to allude to *sonority* since it refers to two aspects that I mention throughout this section. On the one hand, music is an important factor to consider about Shug Avery. On the other hand, sonority is also related to the breaking of silence that Celie will experience.

emerges into Celie's life. At first, her scandalous presence is introduced within the narrative through rumors and comments made by the sisters of Mr. ___ because, for country, illiterate and untraveled women, she seems to be larger than life. Shug is described as a mysterious and gorgeous woman who never ceases to attract the attention of Celie's —she admires her even before she actually meets the famous blues singer. The reason why might be questioned, but it is presumable that Celie's admiration for Shug is due to the image that this woman confers. To put it briefly, Shug is everything that Celie is not. Shug is the female image of an unattainable woman —much less for Celie. Shug is a free spirit and a successful blues singer woman who is noticed wherever she goes. She is “like a queen to [Celie]” (20). From my point of view, by introducing Shug Avery in her novel Walker has developed a very complex character. For a detailed analysis of Shug Avery one could consider discussing issues such as: the life of the woman artist, the effects of fame and the prejudices that such a life involves, the illness that almost puts her career at risk, the abandonment of a relationship for the lack of family approval, and the so-called “burden of motherhood,” among others. However, as it has been already mentioned above, in this section I will mainly focus on one of the issues that is related to this character which I have found most interesting: namely, sexuality. I consider that as a character Shug Avery transcends the theme of women's repressed sexuality and, in addition, I think it is through her sexual self that Shug exerts an enormous influence over Celie's: that is, thanks to Shug's friendship and advises, Celie finally liberates herself, learns about her own sexuality and eroticism, and grows as a woman.

Regarding the relationship between Shug and Celie, a transition can be appreciated. As it has been mentioned above, Celie comes into contact with Shug through rumors that have been circulating around her —or, echoing the African American folk saying,

she hears about Shug through the grapevine. Shug is known as a famous singer with a long and successful career. It is by chance that she is on tour and will perform close where one of her former lovers live —Mr. _____. It is at this point in the story when the lives of these two women meet. Given their different personalities and social background, both women might share the same man, but he plays a different role with each of them. This is perfectly reflected in the way in which each woman refers to him; while for Shug her former lover is simply Albert, for Celie he remains Mr._____ (no name). Furthermore, the way either Shug or Celie refer to one's former lover and the other's current husband should not go unnoticed, since it is one of the signs of power that define their respective relationships. As a consequence, in this love triangle one can appreciate a scale of dominance in which Shug is at the top and Celie is placed in the lower step, thus, she is being subjugated under two forms of power: male power —the dominance that Mr._____ exerts over Celie— and female power —the superiority that Shug reflects over Celie. For example, Shug is able to control Albert's behavior when she is not even present in the *scenario*. Besides, the moment Albert gets ready to meet Shug, he shows quite an inappropriate behavior for a married man since he does not hide his feelings for Shug from Celie. A pertinent example of Celie's assumption of her inferior role can be observed in the following passage, in which she seems to perform the role of the enslaved wife. These are Celie's own words:

He dress all up in front the glass, look at himself, then undress and dress all over again. He slick back his hair with pomade, then wash it out again. He been spitting on his shoes and hitting it with a quick rag. He tell me, Wash this. Iron that. Look for this. Look for that. Find this. Find that. He groan over holes in his sock. I move round darning and ironing, finding hankers. (24)

In this respect, Shug and Albert maintain a completely different relationship to the one that Celie maintains with Mr. _____. While Shug shows a strong, resilient and courageous character, Celie is the opposite: she is weak, pusillanimous and insecure. This difference—in terms of their personalities—results in the establishment of a certain distance between one woman and the other. On the one hand, Shug disposes of an agency that exerts her freedom to act based on her own decisions. On the other hand, Celie's long-life submissive attitude and her lack of self-confidence prevent her from acting as boldly as Shug does. When dealing with submission, it is relevant to mention one of the most worrisome problems in Walker's novel: that is, the issue of rape or, rather, the series of violations Celie suffers since she is very young. This will allow me to initiate the main point of discussion in this section.

As it has already been pointed out in the section of the theoretical framework, one of the forms of sexual oppression that African-American women were forced to suffering is that of constant sexual abuses that, from a very early age in their lives, defined the (unwanted) sexual practices of many black—and slave—women. This is the case of Celie who since childhood is subjected to this type of traumatic oppression within her family atmosphere. From the first time Celie is raped by her step-father, the violation both deprives of and blocks her healthy sexual experimentation. Due to the recurrent acts of sexual assaults, Celie's sexual knowledge will be, therefore, limited in that regard. Therefore, given her young age, the routine of the rape act becomes the norm, i.e., it is no wonder that she associates rape with sexuality. Besides, she is ordered by her victimizer to “better shut up and git used to it” (3); and, due to her youth and her ignorance on sexual matters, Celie's submission simply increases. Moreover, it could be stated that, in this case, Celie's lack of knowledge is also a form of oppression that adds

to the denigrating effects of the rape. Following Collins's on the recurrent trope of rape,

Rape and other acts of overt violence that Black women have experienced, such as physical assault during slavery, domestic abuse, incest and sexual extortion, accompany Black women's subordination in a system of race, class, and gender oppression. These violent acts are the visible dimensions of a more generalized system of oppression (177)

One of the most obvious consequences of the sexual oppression Celie is subjected to is the silence imposed on her by her two aggressors; first by her stepfather and later, when she marries against her will, by her husband. As for her stepfather, Celie is threatened to keep silent or her mother's life will be at stake: "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (3). However, as I will point out later, she is able to break that silence thanks to her friendship with Shug Avery. Notwithstanding, although it is certain that Shug is responsible for altering Celie's conception of sex, at first she does not do it consciously. Since the sexual relations that Celie has experienced—up to the moment she meets Shug—have been forced and, at times, painful and violent, it is impossible for her to link any sexual behavior with pleasure. Celie does not possess such an understanding of pleasure because she has never experienced it. However, this changes and sexualized Celie the moment Shug shows up in her life. She first feels attracted to Shug's when Celie states that "first time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long *black body with it black plum nipples*, look like her mouth. I though I had turned into a man" (45, my italics).¹¹ At this precise moment Celie's previous

¹¹ In her essay entitled "Black women writers: taking a critical perspective" (1985), Susan Willis reflects about black women's sensuality and sexuality by arguing that "colour is here not just a visual perception, but a deeply physical experience. In a number of novels by black women writers, colour is the code for describing a woman's capability of achieving sensual gratification. This is the case in *The Color Purple* for Celie, whose growing

admiration for Shug turns into and adds a stronger same-sex sexual attraction. Nevertheless, such statement is a particularly troubling one in terms of sexual identity and/or sexual options. The moment Celie feels some unknown visual pleasure when observing Shug's body; she seems confused about her own sexual preferences —or about the way she *should* feel— and she compares herself to a man. She is not aware of the possibility of finding pleasure with other women, which makes evident her ignorance of homosexual relationships.

It is possible to hypothesize that a love relationship between Shug and Celie is less likely to occur in this context. On the one hand, the existence of such a relationship might result controversial and difficult to manage by the author herself. It is no secret that Walker has immersed her black female characters in a chain of (real) oppressions; therefore, by inciting her characters to suffer a new type of burden (that of a lesbian relationship) would add more violence to this story that is yet too cruel —although, for Walker herself, such homoerotic relationship might be likely to happen¹². This suggests that, probably, the reason why Walker does not define a specific homosexual relationship is because she does not want to add another struggle within the story¹³. In this thread of thought, and cited in Collins (1991), Barbara Smith points out that “heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privilege; almost none of us have class privilege, maintaining 'straightness is our resort'” (194). On the other hand, it would be futile to try to deny the

awareness of her own body as a source of pleasure coincides with her ability to remark upon colours and how they affect her.

¹² Barbara Smith assesses the presence of homophobia within the African-American community. As she argues, “Homophobia is usually the last oppression to be mentioned, the last to be taken seriously, the last to go. But it is extremely serious, sometimes to the point of being fatal” (99).

¹³ However, two years after the publication of *The Color Purple*, Walker pays attention to this topic in her essay “Breaking Chains and Encouraging Life” (1980). She states that “one of the most exciting and healthiest things to happen lately in the black community is the coming out of black lesbians” (281).

presence of lesbianism.¹⁴ The next paragraphs will focus on some instances when Shug plays a decisive role in the sexual and sentimental life of Celie or, in other words, how Shug makes Celie *feel like a natural woman*.

The bonds between the two women are increasingly strengthened which gives rise to really intimate scenes through which the complicity between both characters can be observed. A scene that illustrates the maturing process of their friendship is when Shug confesses Celie that she has been the inspiration for one of her songs. These are Celie's words:

She reach for another cigarette. Start hum a little tune. What that song? I ast. Sound low down dirty to me. Like what the preacher tell you its sin to hear. Not to mention sing. She hum a little more. Something come to me, she say. Something I made up. Something you help scratch out my head. (48)

The singing and celebration of issues related to what Celie takes for a *sin* can be conceived, also, as stimulation for Celie. By means of this private moment, the relationship of power between Celie and Shug is attenuated as they begin to establish a more egalitarian relationship through which they will help each other. For instance, Celie helps Shug to find inspiration to sing again, and the very fact of singing is determinant for Celie's self-esteem, since it gives her reasons to feel special and loved by someone. This is accurately portrayed the moment when Shug sings to an all-black

¹⁴ Therefore, the author decides to heed homosexual issues since they are extremely important and disturbing for African-American people —whether male or female. Walker points out the delicacy of being silenced by quoting Audre Lorde, among others. In one of her poems, Lorde complains against black women's silence: "Whether we speak or not, / The machine will crush us to bits— / and we will also be afraid / Your silence will not protect you" (283).

audience and dedicates a song to Celie entitled *Celie's Blues*.¹⁵ In spite of the unrequited love that is reflected in this scene as well as in the lyrics of the song, the way in which Shug performs is extremely meaningful, especially if we take into account that there are many people observing —Albert, among others. Here, Shug shows a humble attitude, which moves away from the haughtiness and arrogance she presents herself at the beginning of the story. Through these few lines, readers can appreciate how Shug, the blues singer, transmits kindness with her song for Celie:

She look over at Mr.____ a little when she sing that. I look over at him too . . . I look at Shug and I feel my heart begin to cramp. It hurt me . . . And Mr.____ looking at Shug's bright black skin in her tight red dress, her feet in little sassy red shoes. . . He love looking at Shug. I love looking at Shug. But Shug don't love looking at but one of us. Him. But that the way it spose to be. I know that. But if that so, why my heart hurt me so? . . . Then I hear my name. Shug saying Celie. Miss Celie. And I look up where she at. She say my name again. She say this song I'm bout to sing is call Miss Celie's song. Cause she scratched it out of my head when I was sick (64-65)

This can be considered a key moment in the relationship between both women, since Shug shows Celie's worth to her audience at the same time she openly gives voice to her appreciation for her. Furthermore, this moment —and the consecutive intimate relation they establish— can be also interpreted as one of the many instances Celie gathers her strength back thanks to Shug's attitude. The fact of having a person nearby that simply does not underestimate her is reason enough to increase Celie's resilience

¹⁵ "Miss Celie's Blues," also known as "Sister" (by Quincy Jones, Rod Temperton and Lionel Richie) became the unofficial anthem of the African-American lesbian community. See Appendix 1. Figure 2.

and be able to face the many difficulties Celie has encountered on a daily basis. Therefore, *Celie's Blues* confers a key factor that, on the one hand, serves to tie the knot between Celie and Shug and, on the other hand, and from Celie's point of view, this song is instrumental for her to step towards mental and emotional liberation —thus breaking the chain of her manifold oppressions. Furthermore, music can play a central role in addressing the issue of identity that has been a particular research topic for Angela Yvonne Davis,¹⁶ among others. Moreover, Davis points out the importance of the relation between music and the breaking of oppression by pointing at people who have helped to convey that message, such as Sojourner Truth,¹⁷ Ma Rainey,¹⁸ or even W.E.B. Du Bois¹⁹ who “described the coming of freedom for Black slaves in the South as the rising of a new Song” (223). Historically, the songs of African-American people have played a central role in the transmission and dissemination of their innermost and deepest feelings.²⁰ Through the lyrics and the sound, they are able to express feelings that arise from the cruelest situations and the injustice that they have been witness to and suffered in the past —and that it are a constant at present, too. In the same way, songs serve as an instrument to confess their thoughts. According to Davis, “to

¹⁶ American political activist, academic, and writer, Angela Davis is representative figure within Black Feminism and Critical Race Theory. She has published numerous works such as *Women, Race and Class* (1983), *Women, Culture and Politics* (1990) and *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003), among others.

¹⁷ Sojourner Truth is one of the most famous African-American abolitionist and women's rights activist. One of her most prominent contributions to denounce the degrading situation of black women in her time is her well-known speech “Ain't I A Woman?” (1981) that she delivered in the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Akron (Ohio).

¹⁸ She was one of the earliest African-American professional blues singers. Some of her most famous songs are, for instance: “Deep Moaning Blues,” “Trust No Man” or “Black Bottom,” among many others.

¹⁹ William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was an American sociologist, historian, civil rights activist and writer, and “he became the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University. Du Bois wrote extensively and was the best known spokesperson for African-American rights during the first half of the 20th century” (more biographical information available at <https://www.biography.com/people/web-du-bois-9279924>).

²⁰ I consider it relevant to mention, in reference to music, a genre that is particularly characteristic of the musical tradition within the African-American community: the Blues. As I have mentioned, this genre is incorporated into the narrative of Walker's novel, who mentions one of the most recognized singers: Bessie Smith (1894-1937), also known as The Empress of the Blues. Anne duCille, in her interesting analysis entitled “Blue Notes on Black Sexuality,” states that: “few icons represent the ‘truth’ of a moment at once the best of times and the worst of times as dramatically as the image of the black women blue artist who sang of sex and love, loss and longing . . . While blues women such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey perhaps sang most often on erotic encounters, their songs captured as well the material conditions of a society in flux” (66).

understand in depth the evolution of women's consciousness within the Black community requires a serious examination of the music which has influenced them — particularly that which they themselves have created” (217) —as it is the case with Shug’s *creation* of “Celie’s Blues”.

The film adaptation of *The Color Purple* (1985) clearly illustrates this point through this memorable scene.²¹ Shug's voice and the message she conveys turns it to be a motivating and hopeful song. Shug aims to elevate Celie's self-pride and appease her psychological scars through her lyrics when she sings: “I'm somethin' / I hope you think / that you're somethin' too”. By so doing, Shug opens up a space for confession where Celie is able to get rid of her weakness and begins to break the silence that has also kept her oppressed. In this regard, Collins alludes to such space or “sphere of freedom” by arguing that “taken together, Black women’s relationships with one another, the Black women’s blues tradition . . . offer safe spaces that nurture the everyday and specialized thought of African-American women” (103). And, once again, this is precisely what Shug’s “Celie’s Blues” does for Celie: to nurture her and to open up her eyes so that she might be able to regain her shattered self-esteem.

The creation of a sphere of freedom for confession is extremely important, as I have indicated, to establish a path towards Celie’s mental, emotional, and sexual liberation. As it has been indicated before, music plays a fundamental role in Celie’s processes of healing and self-love. However, not only music —together with all the fascinating group of accompaniment instruments— is capable of transmitting sonority. Words by themselves do have that power too. The sonority of her traumatic and harsh reality is revealed through her intimate conversations with Shug. It is by listening to these dialogues when readers witness Celie’s final break of her silence that will have a lasting

²¹ See Appendix 1, figure 4.

effect on her new life. In the following paragraphs, I refer to three key moments in the novel in which Celie confesses her story to Shug in private and intimate moments. In doing so, Celie definitely breaks a dominant silence.

According to Collins (2005) “some women do not perceive of themselves or those around them as victims” (187). The reason why this happen has been presented at the beginning of this section: as Celie, many women perceived violence as part and parcel of their daily routine. However, the presence of Shug and the fact that she observes how this woman is treated by Mr. ___ makes Celie understands that there are different ways of treating women. She, therefore, recognizes her “victim status.” In this vein, one of the most shocking moments is her confession of such state, because Celie does not hesitate to shed light on an issue that really worries her: the constant physical abuse she suffers from Mr. ___. Therefore, she opens her heart to Shug and tells her: “He beat me when you not here. . . For being me and not you” (66). Celie becomes more assertive: she knows she can *speak well*.²² Her voice is coming alive and her truth expands. Turning now to other significant moments, it is necessary to mention two confessions related to sexual issues. These are two conversations that are also fundamental to broaden Celie's limited knowledge—they touch pleasure and pain.

On the one hand, according to Shug's argument pleasure is related to virginity. To Shug's shock, Celie tells her that she never enjoys sexual intercourse with her husband, Mr. ___. She seems to be just “a semen deposit” for him (Harris, 158): “He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain't there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep” (68). Still in shock after Celie's explicit description of her

²² Talking about women's silence, Luce Irigaray wonders: “If you/I hesitate to speak, isn't it because we are afraid of not speaking well? But what is ‘well’ or ‘badly’? With what are we conforming if we speak ‘well’? What hierarchy, what subordination lurks here, waiting to break our resistance? . . . we have so many voices to invent in order to express all of us everywhere, even in our gaps, that all the time there is will not be enough” (87).

forced and unsatisfactory sexual intercourse Shug declares something that alters the conception of Celie's sexual experiences: "you still a virgin." Unlike Celie, Shug's sexual life could not be more pleasurable, uninhibited, and enjoyable. From her own experience she cannot complain about Albert's sexual prowess. On the contrary, there is no room for negative comments about their sexual relationship. In view of Celie's lack of a healthy sexual life, Shug offers her friend a 'sexual lesson,' which is specific and visual enough for Celie to discover the power she possesses within her body:

Listen, [Shug] say, right down there in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody. It git hotter and hotter and then it melt. That the good part. But other parts good too, she say. Lot of sucking go on, here and there, she say. Lot of finger and tongue work. (69)

Shug teaches her to comprehend her body as a source of life, beauty, and pleasure. Celie learns to be fully aware of the autonomy of her body and the authority that she can exert over it. Consequently, Shug gives visibility to a part of Celie's sexuality that has remained invisible, untouched and hidden. To sum up, Shug introduces Celie into the erotic and the autoerotic practice and pleasure of her own body. Through Shug's clear and explicit sexual information Celie receives, the latter becomes aware of the relevance of the message: the erotic should not remain absent from her sexuality since it is an essential and natural aspect in the life of any woman. In this thread of thought, Audre Lorde (2000) also vindicates the importance of the erotic in the following terms:

the erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or

unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives. (530)

Hence, Celie is able to reach out and welcome a new source of power that gives her knowledge about her body; moreover, she gains a deeper understanding of her sexual abilities. This means, therefore, a way of breaking her oppression and sexual ignorance. On the other hand, it was not only pleasure that was absent from Celie's sexual assaults, but pain was also a constant too. When discussing Celie's pain it is inevitable to mention the violations, as I have tried to comment on throughout this section. The constant violations, and the subsequent unwanted pregnancies cause Celie an unmitigated pain that results in a silence anchored in Celie's soul and heart which notwithstanding would not last forever. As I have already mentioned above, from the very beginning of the novel Celie is subjected to an obligation by her stepfather; therefore, Celie is brutally and literally silenced by her aggressor. In addition, rape is established as a recurrent episode: it becomes the norm that both conditions and restricts Celie's lack of sexual joy. She is unaware of the possibility of having consensual sexual relationships that were not against the will of the woman; she is not able to recognize such a reality since, for most young black girls of her time, such a reality was not the norm. Celie, as any other enslaved woman, has to assume her position; she has to apprehend it. Numerous studies have attempted to explain Celie's stubborn (silent) attitude. A relevant source about the topic is that of Collins (2004) who argues that "the sexual violence visited upon African American women has historically carried no public name . . . Black women were raped, yet their pain and suffering remained largely

invisible” (217), and unspeakable.²³ However, Celie puts an end to her imposed silence confesses the violations to Shug who can better understand that Celie’s life has been a brutal nightmare by being repeatedly abused since she was a little girl. Celie vividly but naïvely relates an instance of rape:

While I trim his [stepfather] hair he look at me funny. He a little nervous too, but I don’t know why, till he grab hold of me and cram me up tween his legs. *I lay there quiet*, listening to Shug breathe. It hurt me, you know, I say. I was just going on fourteen. I never even thought bout men having nothing down there so big. It scare me just to see it. And the way it poke itself and grow. (96)

Celie’s first contact with sex caused an outrageous trauma that took her voice away since she is ordered to “better shut up and git used to it” (9). Furthermore, sexual intercourse between a man and a woman was torture for her—in her marital bed, sex was not pleasurable at all. Thanks to Shug Avery, who is responsible for Celie’s sexual awakening, she learns about the joy of sex as well as she gets to know her own sexuality better. In the same vein, according to Frías,

Celie empowers her own sexuality—her clitoris—and displaces men’s—the phallus— from her sexual life. By so doing Walker allows Celie to enjoy her autoeroticism without the violence and the horror of an erect penis which Celie systematically associates with pain. (52)

Moreover, for Celie, it is essential to meet Shug because she makes her recognize

²³ Echoing Toni Morrison’s *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature* (1988).

the true magnitude of rape and sexual assault. Shug is able to open Celie's eyes through explicit examples that can be understood by ignorant Celie —and by any other woman who lacks sexual information. After Shug's lessons, Celie must cultivate her power, and she has to make herself be respected. Hence, one of the problems that involves a rape situation is when the victim cannot possibly recognize rape as a sexual assault; i.e., even today in rural areas or in Africa, Asia, or South America girls and young women do not report rape and keep silence about it because it has been normalized by a patriarchal culture. Thus, I wonder: how could Celie —or any other woman in the same situation— change anything for the better when she is not even able to recognize it as a problem? Addressing both the trope of rape and silence, Hammonds claims that, “the most enduring and problematic aspect of this ‘politics of silence’ is that in choosing silence, black women have also lost the ability to articulate any conception of their sexuality” (97). However, in Celie's case, thanks to the help she receives from Shug, she finally opens her eyes; sonority echoes because she breaks silence. After Celie's confession, the friendship between Celie and Shug moves to a different level or, rather, a lesbian *momento*: “She say I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul of and kiss me on the mouth . . . I kiss her back . . . Us kiss and kiss till us can't hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other” (97).²⁴

As I have argued, Shug Avery plays a fundamental role in increasing Celie's knowledge, which in this case is related to sexual experiences and the recognition of abuses as such. If it had not been for Shug, Celie would have kept silent about sexual abuse. This section has attempted to provide a discussion about Shug Avery's contributions to help Celie break the silence and initiate a path towards her mental, sentimental and sexual liberation. I have explored the importance of music and how

²⁴ See Appendix 1, Figure 5.

Shug Avery takes advantage of her voice to move Celie to love herself, and I have reviewed the three key moments that, from my point of view, are the most significant for these two women. To sum up, what I have tried to show is that Celie needed to find a space of safety and reliability in which she could be able to open up. As it has been proved, she found that space in the company of Shug, which allowed her, on the one hand, to talk about her heartbreaking sexual experiences. On the other hand, such personal space enabled Celie to alleviate the pain provoked by the rapes when Shug taught her about women's possibility to reach self-sexual satisfaction.

3.2. Nettie and Celie's Education: "Think: let your mind go, let yourself be free"

In the previous section I have dealt with the ways in which Shug Avery contributes to Celie's sexual liberation. To do so, I have mostly focused on aspects related to sexuality — whether normative (heterosexual) or same sex options. In the next paragraphs, I will introduce another female character from Walker's novel that also contributes to Celie's awakening and intellectual growth. She is Nettie, Celie's sister. Accordingly, I will discuss the ways Nettie helps her sister grow intellectually and, in this case, I will mostly focus on issues related to education as an umbrella term.

Even though Celie and Nettie have grown up in the same family environment, both women show different personalities. As it has been mentioned in the previous section, Celie's childhood is so traumatic —in countless aspects— that it seriously affect her development as a woman. On the contrary, Nettie's childhood is not as traumatic or painful as her older sister's, partly because Celie has protected her younger sister in numerous situations. For instance, Celie's intervention has been key to Nettie's safety, when she voluntarily offers herself to her stepfather: "I ast him to take me instead of Nettie while our new mammy sick"

(9).²⁵ There is also something that subtly differentiates them from the dominant male perspective: beauty. Both the stepfather and Mr. ____ consider that Nettie is prettier than Celie, which places her on a much lower level—to the extent that both men agree to compare Celie to an animal.²⁶ Furthermore, the controversy about beauty has raged unabated for over centuries. Regarding Celie’s beauty, Alice Walker herself explains—in response to Cynthia Erivo’s question²⁷— that

Celie and her “prettier” sister Nettie are practically identical. They might be twins. But Life has forced on Celie all the hardships Nettie mostly avoids: a hazy anxiety surrounding the lynching of her father when she was very small, repeated rape, a mother’s withheld love that morphed into distrust and disdain, her children, for all she knows, murdered by the rapist psychopath who claims to be her father. Endless labor that would demean and soon obliterate the observable loveliness of the most queenly slave. I wanted us to think about how superficial is our understanding of beauty; but, also, how beauty is destroyed.

The treatment the sisters receive from the male authorities—i.e., the stepfather—is so different that it causes Celie and Nettie to gain an unequal reputation and, as a consequence, each sister is forced to take two opposite paths in their respective lives, as the following lines reflect: “I [Celie’s stepfather] can’t let you [Mr. ____] have Nettie. She too young. Don’t know

²⁵ I consider it pertinent to mention a comparison that, from my point of view, is extremely relevant. However, it must be interpreted with caution. In one of her essays, Walker relates some of the circumstances she lived through with her sisters and brothers. One of the most striking aspect I found is the similarity between the author herself and Nettie, which is reflected in the following lines: “Sometimes, when I think of my childhood, it seems to me a particular hard one. But in reality, everything awful that happened to me didn’t seem to happen to *me* at all, but to my older sister [as it is the case with Celie’s]. Through some incredible power to negate my presence around people I did not like, which produced invisibility . . . I was spared the humiliation she was subjected to, though at the same time, I felt every bit of it. It was as if she suffered for my benefit, and I vowed early in my life that none of the things that made existence so miserable for her would happen to me” (“Brothers and Sisters” 327).

²⁶ Celie’s stepfather compares her to a cow since she was pregnant at the time Mr. ____ appears in their home.

²⁷ Cynthia Erivo played Celie in *The Color Purple*’s Broadway adaptation in 2006.

nothing but what you tell her. Sides, I want her to git some more schooling. Make a schoolteacher” (9). This is also evident when Mr. ___ appears at their home with the intention of taking Nettie, and the stepfather rejects Mr. ___ offer because, as both men agree, Nettie makes a more valuable person than Celie. Getting rid of Celie would not entail any pain or carry any negative consequences; on the contrary, it seems that the stepfather is more than willing to let her go:

I can let you have Celie . . . She ugly. He say. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. Fact is, he say, I got to git rid of her . . . She ugly. Don't even look like the kin to Nettie. But she'll make the better wife. She ain't smart either . . . But she can work like a man (10)²⁸

Celie is sold as a pseudo-slave, and she, therefore, enters her matrimonial life as a subservient domestic servant. However, before leaving home to embark on her new married life as the wife of Mr. ___, Celie and Nettie commit themselves to acquiring knowledge in case they might have the opportunity to escape together in the future, since both women are aware that knowledge means power and, as Collins (1991) states: “Knowledge is a vitally important part of the social relations of domination and resistance” (221). By teaching Celie to read, both sisters will become stronger and powerful enough to resist and/or fight back male domination whenever the situation arrives.²⁹

While the learning process is underway, Celie's first pregnancy interrupts her progress, which hinders her learning and to some extent moves her to the periphery of her home once again. The stepfather takes her out of school and, therefore, she is prohibited to have access to

²⁸ I find it inevitable to relate this statement with Sojourner Truth's speech: “Ain't I a Woman?” (1851), through which she gives voice to black women. In the same way, Sojourner claims that women can definitely be and act as men: “Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man —when I could get it— and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman?”

²⁹ See Appendix 1, Figure 6.

an education.³⁰ Contrary to Nettie's intellectual progress, Celie suffers the strongest oppressions since

suppressing the knowledge produced by any oppressed group [Celie, in this case] makes it easier for dominant groups [male characters] to rule because the seeming absence of an independent consciousness in the oppressed can be taken to mean that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization. (qtd. in Collins 1991)

Nevertheless, Nettie defends her sister by reaffirming the existence of her intelligence: she willingly brings —behind the men's back— the necessary tools for her to gain some basic school material since Celie has to start from her As, Bs, and Cs. Nettie's purpose is to pass knowledge onto Celie, as well as to instill in her self-awareness to better understand how the world goes. For example, Nettie's schooling is present when she tries to explain Celie that the Earth is round: These are Celie's naïve words: "She [Nettie] try to tell me something bout the ground not being flat. I just say, Yeah, like I know it. I never tell her how flat it look to me" (12).

Once Celie is forced to move to her new home with her new family, Nettie unexpectedly shows up at Celie's porch: "she run way from home . . . she had to git out" (17). Walker's short sentences and the silence they hide speak volumes about the way Nettie might be mistreated and abused at home. The appearance of Nettie at that precise moment is auspicious for Celie's own benefit. Once the sisters are back together, they take up the "lessons."³¹ Nettie takes advantage of her stay to increase her sister's knowledge, to favor her and open her mind towards education, since, as hooks states, "women are enriched when

³⁰ Michele Wallace (1982) relates a similar situation that points out the authoritative discourse present within society: "young Black female friends of mine were dropping out of school because their boyfriends had convinced them that it was 'not correct' and 'counterrevolutionary' to strive to do anything but have babies and clean house" (9).

³¹ See Appendix 1, Figure 7.

[they] bond with one another” (45). Celie responds with heartfelt gratitude to Nettie’s constant schooling when she states:

[Nettie is] helping me with spelling and everything else she thinks I need to know. No matter what happen, Nettie steady try to teach me what go on in the world. And she a good teacher too . . . All day she read, she study, she practice her handwriting, and try to git us to think. Most days I feel too tired to think. But Patient her middle name. (17)

Following hooks, “solidarity strengthens resistance struggle” (44). For Walker, knowledge is a key factor to be alert and confront the injustices of life as well as a weapon to fight against immorality.³² On her part, Collins (1991) defends the need to highlight the importance of education and knowledge within black women spheres, as she states:

Black feminist thought demonstrates Black women’s emerging power as agents of knowledge. By portraying African-American women as self-defined, self-reliant individuals confronting race, gender, and class oppression, Afrocentric³³ feminist thought speaks to the importance that knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people. (221)

A reasonable explanation for Nettie’s lessons is to motivate Celie and empower her as a woman —mainly at home— since Nettie knows she is subjected to constant enslavement and mistreatment by Mr .___ and his children. Nettie wants Celie to learn to fight, and she

³² Walker (1967) emphasizes the importance of “knowing,” which “has meant everything for [her]” and “has pushed [her] out into the world, into college, into places, into people” (125).

³³ It seems necessary to define this term. According to Stephen Howe, “Afrocentrism may, in its looser sense or more moderate forms, mean little more than an emphasis on shared African origins among all ‘black’ people, taking pride in those origins and an interest in African history and culture—or those aspects of New World cultures seen as representing African ‘survivals’ . . . ‘strong’ Afrocentrism is accompanied by a mass of invented traditions, by a mythical vision of the past” (1-2). Moreover, in order to go further on this definition, I find it interesting to mention once again Patricia Hill Collins. She explains that black women have been ostracized by different oppressions regarding race—as the consequences of colonialism, imperialism, slavery, and apartheid, among others— and also related to gender—through patriarchal oppression. By taking together these two aspects, she claims that “an Afrocentric feminist epistemology reflects elements of epistemologies used by Blacks as a group and women as a group, it also paradoxically demonstrates features that may be unique to Black women” (228).

offers her *knowledge* —in order to raise her self-awareness— as her best weapon: “Don’t let them run over you, Nettie say . . . You got to fight. You got to fight” (17). Therefore, Nettie tries to pass on her revolutionary spirit by urging Celie to stop having a passive attitude and beginning to take action in the face of adversities.³⁴ The previous enunciation —*You got to fight*— that Nettie emphatically repeats twice, echoes the famous rhetorical question that gives the title to Maria W. Stewart’s speech (1832): “Why Sit Ye Here and Die?.”. As the author makes it clear from the title, throughout her powerful speech, Stewart, encourages black women to do *something* with their lives, to get up, to fight —as Nettie teaches Celie to do. Nevertheless, and despite Nettie’s encouragement, Celie’s brief but meaningful response is rather controversial. It is rather sad, too: “I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is *stay alive*” (17, my emphasis). Celie’s words reflect that she is aware of her marginal position as a black abused woman who nevertheless *stays alive*.

However, the fact of *staying alive* proves beneficial and hopeful for her life. When Nettie leaves, hope is tied to religion, another means that helps Celie gather her strength and energy to continue on the path she has to walk in life. As Celie puts it: “long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along” (18).³⁵ Nettie disappears for a long period of time, although she claims that she will be present through writing, and swears that “nothing but death can keep [her] from it” (18). Due to the fact that there is not one single letter from Nettie for years, Celie assumes that her sister is dead. Everything changes when she discovers that Mr . ___ has been keeping Nettie’s letters away from Celie. In view of Celie’s solitude, Nettie’s concealment means the denial of her existence, which boosted Celie’s conviction that she had no escape —since, when being together, they were more intrepid and disposed to run away.

³⁴ See Appendix 1, figure 8.

³⁵ The relevance of God in Celie’s life needs to be emphasized, since He is the one that motivates Celie to keep writing to her sister. She resorts to God throughout her life in order to comfort and relieve her pain and loneliness when she feels the need to do it. However, Nettie writes in one of her letters that Celie’s life made her feel “so ashamed [she] couldn’t even talk about it to God, [she] had to write it, bad as [she] thought [her] writing was” (110). But Celie does not stop writing. It serves her as a rest; it mitigates her pain, and even helps as some sort of consolation.

However, by discovering that her sister is alive, her hope becomes stronger than ever, as she states: “Now I know Nettie alive I begin to strut a little bit. Think, when she come home us leave here” (126). Readers discover, then, that neither geographical distance nor physical absence have prevented Nettie to convey her desire for Celie’s life education; she wants her sister to keep rebelling against Mr. ____: “You’ve got to fight and get away from Albert. He ain’t no good” (107).

Besides, when Celie starts reading Nettie’s letter chronologically, Nettie’s educational purposes are still there since these letters serve as a substitute for those home lessons that they exchanged together. Moreover, it should not be ignored the fact that, as Collins (1991) claims, “knowledge [in most cases] comes from experience” and, hence, “the best way of understanding another person’s ideas was to try to share the experiences that led the person to form those ideas” (231). Nettie, by being aware that Celie cannot escape Mr. ____ —and, consequently, that she cannot *experience* the real world— takes the opportunity to tell her sister her experiences as a missionary in Africa. The journey to Africa —together with her stay in this continent— makes Nettie aware of how big the world is and how little people know about it.³⁶ However, by being aware of everything she knows and, above all, of what she does not know yet, she never loses the desire to learn more and to continue trying to satisfy her desire to reach more knowledge in order to better understand life as a whole. Thus, she enthusiastically writes to her sister:

I hadn’t realized I was so *ignorant*, Celie. The little I knew about my own self wouldn’t have filled a thimble! And to think Miss Beasley [their teacher] always said I was the smartest child she ever taught! But one thing I do thank her for, *for teaching me to learn for myself, by reading*

³⁶ Collins (1998) points out that “Black women’s migration experiences between two different communities and as workers within those communities generated a distinctive collective perspective on race, class, and gender relations that formed the basis for Black feminist standpoint” (6).

and studying and writing a clear hand. And for keeping alive in me somehow the desire to know. (111-112, my emphasis)

As far as education is concerned, Nettie has had the support of her teacher. The role of a motivating and encouraging person is important—as it is the case with Nettie—so that women become aware of the relevance of having an education at the same time they are able to depend just on themselves to develop their own thoughts, and ideas, in order to know how to think and reflect. To expand oneself it is essential to feed the mind; mentally, psychologically, or geographically. In the same way, Nettie performs that role too and, therefore, she tries to make Celie think, so she can let her mind go, and let herself be free.

Through written words, Nettie describes everything that she experiences on her journey—it is her life adventure.³⁷ She describes cautiously everything that amazes her, while Nettie shows Celie a different world—despite the fact that Celie far from achieving her sister's freedom. The letters seem to open up new ways of life: the life in the North, that is in US, and life in the African continent. On the one hand, it is striking the way Nettie relates her experiences before embarking to Africa, when she is in the North of the United States. These experiences do not resemble at all the life black people experience in the South: the North means freedom. Nettie explains that in New York City, black people even have a neighborhood for them, Harlem, where they can live in peace and have at their disposal some privileges related to education, food and even health. Henceforward, Nettie indirectly reflects on the possibility of reaching an alternative to the enslaved life of the South. Furthermore, she

³⁷ Nettie follows in the footsteps of the past slaves who decades earlier had undertaken on their journey to liberation from the South to the North, by risking their lives in case they might run away with the help of the Underground Railroad and the Quakers, former slaves and white abolitionists.

emphasizes the collective responsibility of black people since, as she asserts they “will be working for a common goal: the uplift of black people everywhere” (115).³⁸

Another significant contribution to Celie’s knowledge is the historical approach that Nettie relates when she is in England, on her way to the African continent. She includes in her letters a critical narrative of colonialism, and she tells her sister that the position black people occupy in the United States is the cause of the egregious actions of the white people from the European continent. As she wants Celie to have it very clear,

Africans once had a better civilization than the European (though of course even the English do not say this: I get this from reading a man named J.A. Rogers)³⁹ for several centuries they have fallen on hard times. “Hard times” is a phrase the English love to use when speaking of Africa. And it is easy to forget that Africa’s “hard times” were made by them. Millions and millions of Africans were captured and sold into slavery — you and me, Celie! And whole cities were destroyed by slave catching wars. Today the people of Africa —having murdered or sold into slavery their strongest folks— are riddled by disease and sunk in spiritual and physical confusion. They believe in the devil and worship the dead. Nor can they read or write. (117)

³⁸ Frederick Douglass (1818—1895) is well-known, among other things, for supporting such responsibility. He claims that “We [black people] are one with you under the ban of prejudice and proscription —one with you under the slander of inferiority— one with you in social and political disfranchisement. What you suffer, we suffer; what you endure, we endure. We are indissolubly united, and must fall or flourish together” (qtd. in Shelby 231).

³⁹ Joel Augustus Rogers (1880-1966) is known for being one of the most famous contributors from the early 20th Century to the history of Africa and its diaspora. As he elucidates in one of his most significant works, entitled *World's Great Men of Color*, “It is too often forgotten that when the Europeans emerged and began to extend themselves into the broader world of Africa and Asia during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they went on to colonize most of mankind. Later they would colonize world scholarship, mainly the writing of history. History was then written or rewritten to show or imply that Europeans were the only creators of what could be called a civilization. In order to accomplish this, the Europeans had to forget, or pretend to forget, all they previously knew about Africa.”

Nettie presents a reflection that explores issues of race beyond what she had previously known, providing a critical view to her sister. She shares a deep meditation about the roots of the power relationship between whites and blacks which emphasizes her understanding that color results in marginalization. Furthermore, as I have stated, Nettie transmits a critical perspective of colonialism when she highlights Africans's superiority and Europeans stealing her fittest men and women as well as their natural resources. In a study investigating, among other things, Europeans' position of authority (based on the superiority of whites versus the innate inferiority of other "races"), McLeod (2010) reports that

all constructions of racial difference are based upon human invention and not biological fact. There exist no objective criteria by which human beings can be neatly grouped into separate 'races,' each fundamentally different from the other. Racial differences are best thought of as political constructions which serve the interest of certain groups of people.
(131)

Through a few simple lines, Nettie questions the reasons why black history is the way it is: "Why did they sell us? How could they have done it?" (117). She approaches, to some extent, the base that seems to explain —although it does not provide coherent or reasonable justification— the motivation for the actions that were/are really harmful for black people's history. Such explanation suggests an evocation to the word racism; a word that must be used with caution, and whose meaning is capable of provoking perfunctory controversies. According to McLeod, "Racism is the ideology that upholds the discrimination against certain people on the grounds of perceived racial difference and claims these constructions of racial identity are true or natural" (132).

It is in Europe, specifically in London, where these reflections arise. However, once Nettie arrives in Africa, her questions and reflections about race regarding white people

remain on the periphery, leaving room for a veneration of the African land and an exploration of its people. In this regard, Nettie conveys, at first, a feeling of arriving *home* instead of being far from it. The fact of having a new opportunity to start over is also present since, according to McLeod —although he specifically refers to India— any place “can seem to the migrants a refugee from their miserable conditions, a fiction of a happy homeland where the ills of the present may be relinquished” (241). It is the awareness and recognition of having the opportunity to cure those ills, what creates, as McLeod declares, an illusion. Therefore, Nettie’s excitement when she visits Africa for the first time is understandable, as she describes it to Celie,

Did I mention my first sight of the African coast? Something struck in me, in my soul, Celie, like a large bell, and I just vibrated.⁴⁰ Corrine and Samuel felt the same. And we kneeled down right on deck and gave thanks to God for letting us see the land for which our mothers and fathers cried —and lived and died— to see again. Oh, Celie! Will I ever be able to tell you all? (121)

As a matter of fact, through her letters, Nettie has already managed to *tell* Celie everything she experiences. Consequently, Nettie is able to bring Africa closer to Celie; she opens her mind through reading, and shows her a new world, a totally different one. She describes the bush —i.e., the jungle— the customs of the Olinka⁴¹ community, and she portrays the way in which women in such a society are treated. It is then when we observe again that Nettie considers education as something extremely important for anybody, as this is

⁴⁰ This may evoke the iconic symbol of American Independence, the Liberty Bell.

⁴¹ Olinka is a nation invented by Walker. However, as Kuhne declares, Olinka “is much more than a village or a tribe. Olinka is a West African nation with an Atlantic coast and considerable territory . . . Like actual African nations, Olinka has suffered from colonialism, and like many contemporary African nations, Olinka is ruled by a corrupt leader who has little regard for his people” (69). Moreover, it is extremely important the way in which Walker presents, through Nettie, the life in Africa. Following Kuhne, “*The Color Purple* also introduces readers to such African customs as ritual scarification and female genital mutilation. . . The use of African culture and ritual to dramatize the universality of the oppression of women is the most significant manifestation of African settings in *The Color Purple*” (71).

also one of the reasons she is a missionary. With this, with the emphasis on education, Nettie seems to normalize the idea that women should have the same opportunities and the same rights to be educated as men are. She denounces, to some extent, the fact that Olinkas do not allow women to access education since they are not allowed to go to school:

They are all boys. Olivia [who is Celie's daughter] the only girl. The Olinka do not believe girls should be educated. When I asked a mother why she thought this, she said: A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something. What can she become? I asked. Why, she said, the mother of his children. (132)

As for the Olinkas, Olivia mentions that “they’re like white people at home who don’t want colored people to learn” (133). To some extent, this comparison seems to be a critic towards this community; Olivia is judging the Olinkas and placing them at the same level as the European colonizers for the image of women that they convey. Later, Nettie affirms, in order to empower not only herself but every woman: “The world is changing . . . It is no longer a world just for boys and men” (136). Education and, therefore, knowledge are the medium through which women can make their voices be heard, give themselves value and fight. These are some of the ways women can find a decent place in society and make the world a place of their own. According to Nettie’s teaching, perseverance is the key to success in the conviction that women all over the world must have the right to an education. Moreover, it is thanks to the perseverance of the African American people and their profound commitment that a massive struggle for black people has made an impact in history through the struggle recognized as the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties that achieved certain changes, among them, some relevant related to education. It could be stated that Nettie is instrumental in causing a similar *Movement* in Celie, by encouraging her to join in the *fight*, and by transmitting certain educational values regarding not only learning in itself —since

Celie learns how to read and write— but also related to knowledge about different parts of the world, and, most important, knowledge about herself. Therefore, Nettie makes Celie be aware of the qualities that she possesses and to manage the ability to withstand adversities. In a similar thread of thought, Walker highlights the importance of the Civil Right Movements, by claiming that

Part of what existence means to me is knowing the difference between what I am now and what I was then. It is being capable of looking after myself intellectually as well as financially. It is being able to tell when I am being wronged and by whom. It means being awake to protect myself and the ones I love. It means being a part of the world community, and being alert to which part it is that I have joined, and knowing how to change to another part if that part does not suit me. To know is to exist: to exist is to be involved, to move about, to see the world with my own eyes. This is, at least, what the Movement has given me. (125-126)

Furthermore, these contributions by Nettie could also be understood as a way of acknowledging and rendering thanks to Celie for the wrongs she chose to carry instead of letting Nettie suffer since they were kids —although, in a way, Celie had no choice. To some extent, Nettie tries to compensate Celie’s pernicious past through what she knows how to do best in the present: *teaching*. In this section, it has been explained some of the ways through which Nettie helps Celie to expand herself as a woman. Moreover, I have discussed the significance of having access to an education in order to demonstrate that knowledge is fundamental for black women’s well-being and survival.

3.3.Sofia’s Attitude: “Helping Celie to Find out What R-E-S-P-E-C-T Means”

As it has been analyzed and discussed in the previous sections, Celie becomes literate and learns about her own sexuality thanks to Nettie and Shug Avery, respectively. Thanks to these

women Celie breaks her silence which is revealing for her identity and growth as a black woman. This section analyzes the third and last character of my selection: Sofia Butler.⁴² Throughout the following pages, I will discuss the role of this character and her influence on Celie in order to demonstrate that she is also highly relevant because, as I try to show, Sofia's performativity⁴³ is instrumental in the deconstruction of black women's stereotypes and, as a consequence, the creation of a new image that shows an assertive black woman who both knows and fiercely demands her rights.

The first information that the reader receives about Sofia comes through Harpo's words (the son of Mr. ___ and Sofia's husband to-be). He confesses to Celie the love he feels for this woman, and he describes her in the following way: "She pretty, he tell me. Bright. Smart? [Celie asks] Naw. Bright skin. She smart too though, I think" (29). The adjectives that qualify Sofia —pretty, bright and smart— work only as a hint of her personality. Her unique personality is shown when Sofia enters the scene and, through little insignificant details, she irrefutably exposes her strong character. This can be briefly illustrated when Sofia visits Mr. ___'s house for the first time, and introduces herself as Harpo's partner and the mother of his child. It is Celie who observes them: "They be just marching, hand in hand, like going to war. She *in front a little*" (29, my italics). The fact that Sofia walks "in front a little" means a great deal: this observation gives us a clue about how the relationship between Sofia and Harpo works. As readers soon find out, this new couple totally differs from that of Mr. ___ and Celie's. The latter, though, in some way mirrors the submissive role many women play at home.

⁴² Oprah Winfrey performs Sofia in *The Color Purple* movie (1985). See Appendix 1, Figure 9.

⁴³ The meaning of this term has been a matter of ongoing discussion among scholars. Such is the case with Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who have elaborated an interesting recompilation of essays dealing with performativity and performance: *Performativity and Performance* (1995). As they state in the introduction, "one of the most fecund, as well as the most under-articulated, of such crossings has been the oblique intersection between performativity and the loose cluster of theatrical practices, relations, and traditions known as performance . . . A term whose specifically Austinian balances have been renewed in the work of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, performativity has enabled a powerful appreciation of the ways that identities are constructed iteratively through complex citational processes" (1-2).

Once inside the house, Sofia seems to be indifferent to the presence of Mr.____, when the expected would be to maintain a courteous behavior in the presence of Harpo's father who, to make things worse, does not approve their relationship. In shock, Celie adds new adjectives to Sofia's previous description: "She stand up, big, strong, healthy girl" (30), which allows readers to obtain a clearer image of Harpo's fiancée. The fact that Sofia shows such an impassive attitude —not only in Harpo's presence, but especially in his father's— is quite provocative because in some way she is challenging male authority and, hence, the status quo. Therefore, from the moment that she appears in the narrative we note that Sofia unashamedly deconstructs the traditional role that a decent black woman is supposed to play in the family sphere. In so doing, she gradually moves away from the portrait of the enslaved and submissive woman that Celie first embodies. Consequently, it could be argued that Sofia performs what Cixous labels as *the very possibility of change*, i.e., Sofia enforces "the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (879).

As presented in the theoretical framework section, black women were usually placed in a lower position than men. They were expected to perform, for instance, the household chores, to take care of the children and to stay away from male activities. In addition, women had to apprehend their (supposed) subaltern and marginal position with respect to men —and whites, both male and female— that is so deeply anchored in the context of *The Color Purple* —that is, the southern society of the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, Sofia shows up as the complete opposite of what a stereotyped female model is expected. For example, in that first meeting and before leaving Mr.____'s house, she once again emphasizes her position in the relationship with Harpo. When he starts to follow her, she replicates: "Naw, Harpo, you stay here. When you free, me and the baby be waiting. He sort of hang there between them a while, then *he sit down again*" (30, my italics). Looking closely at this unusual relationship, we find two really curious and interesting characters to

discuss. Thus, Harpo and Sofia represent an image opposed to that of the gender roles they supposedly represent, at same time that they are responsible for introducing a reconstruction of masculinity and femininity. Harpo would be one of those men that bell hooks writes about in the chapter entitled “Reconstructing Masculinity” (from *Black Looks* 1992), in which she states that some men “were caring and giving. They were black men who chose alternative lifestyles, who questioned the status quo, who shunned a ready made patriarchal identity and invented themselves” (88). Perhaps Harpo does not intentionally chose such lifestyle but it is certainly true that he comes up with a new male identity of his own. It is true, hence, that Harpo does not symbolize male authority in that regard; i.e., he does not exercise power over his partner as a man is expected to do.⁴⁴ Furthermore, for this study it is Sofia (more than Harpo) who deserves special attention due to her outlandish behavior. It is Sofia who is also responsible for hindering Harpo’s dominant performance by incorporating and transmitting her strong attitude.

The evidence of such attitude can be again clearly seen in the following passage, when Sofia is already married to Harpo and they are arranging a shed to live in next to Mr. ___’s house. Through Celie’s eyes, readers can observe the way she moves around at the same time that Walker provides a more insightful description of Sofia’s unheard of assertiveness:

Sofia look half her size [after giving birth to the baby]. But she still a big strong girl. Arms got muscle. Legs, too. She swing that baby about like nothing. She got a little pot on her now and give you the feeling she all there. Solid. Like if she down on something, it be mash. *She tell Harpo, Hold the baby*, while she come back in the house with me to git some

⁴⁴ Harpo can be perceived as a subject that performs an identity decode by showing certain characteristics which are not usually considered related to masculinity—following the patriarchal status quo: (unlike his father) “he [Harpo] loves that part of housekeeping a heap more’en me [more than Sofia]. I rather be out in the fields or fooling with the animals. Even chopping wood. But he love cooking and cleaning and doing little things round the house” (54).

thread. . . Mr. ___ blow smoke, look down at him and say, Yeah, I see
now *she going to switch the traces on you.* (32, my italics)

It is indisputable that Sofia sets in motion a change of traditional gender roles the moment she orders Harpo to take care of the baby.⁴⁵ The fact of being forced by his own wife, and that this obligation is related to the care of the child implies that “switching of traces’s” but, as I have mentioned, she is the cause, to some extent, of blocking Harpo's masculinity building process—as the patriarchal tradition fosters. As a consequence, Sofia owns a sense of agency that allows her to *speak*; she does not even have the need to break the silence since she is the one who owns the *voice* in the relationship, unlike Celie’s. This is shown when Harpo has a conversation with Celie and complains about his wife Sofia: “He say, I tell her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. *Always backtalk*” (34, my italics), and he angrily adds,

I tell her she can’t be all the time going to visit her sister. Us married
now, I tell her. Your place is here with the children. She say, I’ll take the
children with me. I say, Your place is with me. She say, You want to
come? (34)

Sofia is resistant to Harpo’s attempt of dominating her. Sofia's way of acting with her husband may be partially responsible for Celie's vision of Sofia, since each action she takes or any word she says about Sofia collides Celie’s reality. It is clear that Celie cannot possibly understand Sofia’s mischievous behavior. Both women are ostensibly different, and one of the most representative difference is, as I mentioned above, having the ability—the power—to speak. Regarding the last conversation with Harpo, Celie continues: “I like Sofia, but she

⁴⁵ Similarly, such change of roles can be also appreciated in Spielberg’s film adaptation. Sofia and Celie are working in the field when Harpo appears. He wants to give the impression that he is “the boss” and he asks his wife to cook food for him. However, Sofia's temperament and her really hard character can be observed the moment she confronts her husband and she orders him to work. See Appendix 1, Figure 10.

don't act like me at all. If she talking when Harpo and Mr. ___ come in the room, she keep right on. If they ast her where something at, she say she don't know. *Keep talking*" (34, my italics). Therefore, Sofia *always talkback*, she *keeps talking* and, in addition, we can get closer to the personality of Sofia, as it reflects the portrayal of a completely fearless, free and independent woman. Sofia's unheard of independence is claimed by numerous scholars, as it is the case with Collins (1991) who quotes from former slave and proto-feminist Maria Stewart when she highlights the importance of black women's self-reliance and independence, as she demands: "Posses the spirit of independence. The Americans do, and why should not you? Posses the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted: Sue for your rights and privileges . . .". As a continuation of Stewart's powerful speech, Collins argues that

Whether by choice of circumstance, African-American women have "possessed the spirit of independence," have been self-reliant, and have encouraged one another to value this vision of womanhood that clearly challenges prevailing notions of femininity (Steady 1987). *These beliefs apparently find wide support among African-American women.* (109, my italics)

One of those African-American women who *possess the spirit of independence* is Sofia who serves as a support for Celie by transmitting her life attitude, in order to make her understand that she —Celie—is wrong. An eloquent moment in which the teaching of this attitude occurs after Celie suggests Harpo to beat Sofia. However, before discussing this instance, I consider it pertinent to illustrate the passage in which Celie observes how Harpo and Sofia are arguing and fighting. Once again, in this scene it is possible to appreciate who is in control

They [Sofia and Harpo] fighting like two mens . . . They fight. He try to slap her . . . He punch her in the stomach, she double over groaning but come up with both hands lock right under his privates. He roll on the floor. He grab her dress tail and pull. She stand there in her slip. She never blink a eye. He jump up to put a hammer lock under her chin, she throw him over her back, He *fall* bam up gainst the stove. (36, my italics)

Harpo falls and Sofia is still standing. She resists, literally, as a woman once again. Sofia has already hit Harpo and hurt him badly. However as a way to defend his ego, Harpo excuses himself in front of Mr . ___ and blames the mule for the bruises instead of recognizing that his wife is stronger than him. In Harpo's words: "Oh, me and that mule. She fractious, you know. She went crazy in the field the other day" (35). The perhaps unconscious comparison between Sofia and a mule should not go unnoticed since historically black women have been labeled "the mules of the world." According to Collins (1991), "one core theme in Black feminist thought consists of analyzing Black women's work, specially Black women's labor market victimization as 'mules' (43). Similarly, Walker points out such black women's 'reputation' in her work "In Search of Our Mother's Garden" when she explains that "Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one's status in society, 'the *mule* of the world,' because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else—*everyone* else—refused to carry" (237).⁴⁶

Harpo's blows might bother Sofia but it is Celie's betrayal that hurt her —and hurt her badly. As usual, Sofia chooses to confront Celie who cannot but defend herself in the following way:

⁴⁶ Several authors use the simile of the mules in order to reflect and criticize history. A pertinent instance is that of Zora Neale Hurston, who also refers to the folk tale that makes black women to be considered "the mules of the world" (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1937).

I say it cause I'm a fool. I say. 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. She stand there a long time . . . She mad before, sad now. She say. All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl ain't safe in a family of men. But i never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me (38)

This could be considered one of the most meaningful moments between Sofia and Celie. Celie finally recognizes that she envies Sofia because she is brave, and she has the stronghold to fight which is really hard for Celie although she is committed to try at it as her sister Nettie has asked her to do so —as I have stated in the previous section. Sofia shows Celie that things have to change, and that women are responsible for such a change to happen. This change implies the revision of the dominant roles within the family and the couple's relationships. Sofia had moved away from a completely detrimental atmosphere and now she tries conscientiously that the actions to which she has been subjected since childhood would not be repeated in her current relationship with Harpo. In so doing, she reflects a self-awareness and empowerment that gives her the necessary strength to fight any adversity, to the point of being able to kill her husband if necessary. Sofia brings closer to Celie something she could never have imagined possessing: Sofia's attitude finally helps Celie to find out what respect means.

From my point of view, it is extremely important —as well as extremely necessary— that the construction of any relationship should be based on mutual respect since this will lead to the establishment of more egalitarian relationships and the rupture of oppressions.

Similarly, Collins argues that “the significance of self-valuation is illustrated through the emphasis that Black feminist thinkers place on respect” (107), and she adds:

The rights to be Black and female and respected pervades everyday conversations among African-American women . . . Respect from others—specially from Black men—is a recurring theme in Black women’s writing. In describing the things a woman wants out of life, middle-class Marita Bonner⁴⁷ lists ‘a career as fixed and as calmly brilliant as the North Star. The one real thing that money buys. Time . . . And of course, *a husband you can look up without looking down on yourself.*’ (108, my italics)

Sofia does not suppress her words of complaining about her relationship with Harpo; on the contrary, she makes sure her words are clearly heard and understood. Furthermore, she seems to retaliate of her past—when, as Celie, she was also raped—and she looks at her present with a new perspective, that of a respected black woman. In doing so, she makes Celie comprehend that there exists the possibility to rebel against fatalities; whether they are rapes, psychological abuses or slavery. In view of their newborn friendship, Celie dares to confess Sofia that “sometime Mr.____ git on me pretty hard . . . But he my husband. I shrug my shoulder. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways” (39). Nothing could enervate Sofia more than a victimized black woman who suffers domestic violence—whether physical or psychological. Therefore, Sofia would like Celie to go on with her life but without forgetting about her lessons, about Sofia’s courageous attitude. Besides, she encourages Celie to put an end to her passive behavior, and she says it loud and clear: “You ought to bash Mr.____ head open, she [Sofia] say. Think bout heaven later. Not much funny to me. That

⁴⁷ Marita Odette Bonner (1899-1971) “was an African American writer, essayist, and playwright associated with the Harlem Renaissance”. More biographical information available at <http://www.blackpast.org/aah/bonner-marita-odette-1899-1971>.

funny. I laugh. She laugh. Then us laugh so hard us flop down on the step. Let's make quilt pieces out of these messed up curtains, she say" (39).

In some way, Sofia is urging Celie to seek strategies in order to combat patriarchy and gain respect as a woman. It could be also affirmed that Sofia confers a promulgation of resistance and activism throughout the dialogues both women maintain. Moreover, as it has been demonstrated in Shug's and Nettie's respective sections, conversations among women are valuable, necessary and transcendental in order to share experiences and, hence, raise awareness about the urgency to fight for their rights. Supporting this view, hooks, quoted by Collins, remarks that "dialogues implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of subject and object. It is a humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination," and Collins assertively adds and that "For Black women new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community" (212), such as it is the case of Celie and Sofia —together with Shug and Nettie.

As far as respect is concerned within Harpo's and Sofia's, married relationship, it is clear that Harpo does not want to either consent or accept —or even try to understand— Sofia's position, as he complains to Celie: "I want her [Sofia] to do what I say, like you do for Pa (. . .) She do what she want, don't pay me no mind at all. I try to beat her, she black my eyes" (56). Celie, thanks to Sofia's belief that women should project a respectable and dignified image, responds: "Some womens can't be beat, I say. Sofia one of them" (57). Nevertheless, he refuses to be relegated to an inferior position within the relationship—or, rather, he rejects the option of not exerting violence on Sofia, such as Mr. ___ was used to do with Celie after Shug's intervention—and, therefore, Harpo will not abstain from imposing his power over his wife's.

Harpo's consecutive attempts to beat Sofia result in an (expected) aggravation of their relationship. From that moment on, Sofia feels really dissatisfied with Harpo's behavior, as she confesses to Celie:

I'm gittin tired of Harpo, she say. All he think about since us married is how to make me mind. He don't want a wife, he want a dog . . . *You know the worst part? she say. The worst part is I don't think he notice.* He git up there and enjoy himself just the same. *No matter what I'm thinking. No matter what I feel. It just him.* (58-59, my italics)

Furthermore, then and there, Sofia openly manifests her discontentment towards her husband. It can thus be suggested that this confession translates into the following: Sofia reveals to Celie that a woman has the right to be angry with her husband, and she has the right to recriminate everything she does not consider fair. This is totally unheard of for Celie, since she has learned to accept to remain silent and, hence, she has internalized that women have nothing to reproach men. Moreover, Sofia is sending another important message to Celie. That is, in a relationship men have not only to respect women, but they should take care of them and show interest in their thoughts, feelings and emotions, as that is the base for a healthy relationship. To some extent, Sofia is approaching the idea of how a love relationship should be constructed.

In view of all that has been mentioned so far, one may infer that Sofia is, in the line with Nettie, *teaching* Celie. Whereas Celie's sister directly brings her sister closer to an education, i.e., she is helping Celie to grow intellectually, Sofia is indirectly raising awareness of the values women must apprehend. It seems necessary to emphasize the importance of the moments that both women share throughout the novel: the ones I have commented on in this section as well as one of the quotes I added above, when they start making a quilt should not be ignored. The fact of making quilts has long been a question of great interest regarding

African and African-American studies from different approaches. As American historian and scholar Cuesta Benberry (2001) sustains, “African Americans have made quilts for approximately two centuries . . . Interest in the topic grew steadily, and today individuals working in a number of fields—quilt historians, art historians, folklorists, anthropologist, literature professors, feminist authors and independent scholars—are producing articles, essays...” (291). And novels, we should add, as it is the case of Walker’s *The Color Purple*, among many others.⁴⁸ The act of quilting reveals, according to Olga Idriss Davis (1998), “a continuum of African-American women’s experience and creative expression” (67). Moreover, it is a way of creating a space in which women can *be themselves* and, therefore, they might be able to forget about the patriarchal norms that constantly create a plethora of oppressive burdens.

Comparably, Walker stresses the relevance of quilts and quiltmaking in another of her well-known works: “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens”. Walker claims that her mother was continually working, and only in little space-times she was able to find a moment for *herself*. As she relates:

During “working” day, she labored beside —not behind— my father in the fields. Her day began before sunup, and did not end until late at night. There was never a moment for her to sit down, undisturbed, to unravel her own private thoughts; never a time free from interruption. And yet, it is to my mother —and all our mothers who were not famous— that I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited .

⁴⁸ “African-American literary Works have been inspired by quilt-making (Benberry 79), and [also] several African-American women authors of children’s literature have embraced this notion of reading the world by employing the quilt tradition in their stories [such as] Deborah Hopkinson’s *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*, Faith Ringgold’s *Aunt Harriet’s Undergorund Railroad*, Valerie Flourney’s *The Parchwork Quilt*, Patricia McKissack’s *Mirandy and Brother Wind*, and Bettye Stroud’s *Down Home at Miss Dessa’s* (67).

. . . But when, you will ask, did my overworked mother have time to know
or care about feeding the creative spirit? (238-239)

Sofia and Celie, being some examples of such black women who were ‘not famous,’ also found some time to gather together. It was only then when they could expand and feed their creative spirits. Moreover, this action is determinant to establish a closer relationship among these women after Celie’s betrayal of saying to Harpo to beat his wife. After Celie recognizes her erroneous action, the quilting works as a metaphor for peace-keeping to later liberate these black women’s battered souls and heal the pain.

Returning to Sofia’s relationship, it can be stated that she finds an alternative way to heal the pain through resistance. That resistance, as mentioned above, claims through the constant discussions and fights with Harpo, in which Sofia always ended up throwing down her husband. However, Sofia’s best act of resistance is performed the moment she is fed up with Harpo’s oppression and chooses to abandon him. Sofia shows herself once again as a free woman and an independent mother, when she leaves the home with her children. Sofia’s determination shows Celie that there is an *open* door to escape, to leave adversity behind and, most important, to free herself. As a result of Sofia’s abandonment of Harpo, Sofia is again hindering patriarchy. While she escapes from it, she avoids it. Likewise, she makes evident that the emancipation of the black woman is possible. As a character, Sofia may be considered a shadow of that revolutionary woman that Anna Julia Cooper was asking for, as Carby states: “Cooper called for a revolution in the attitudes and practices of women who would be leaders of reform, but the biggest stumbling block she conceived to be the Southern woman who was totally preoccupied with protecting herself from being forced to accept her ex-slaves as social equals” (105). Sofia conveys leadership by positioning herself far above from the image of the slave woman.

Sofia's strong and unheard of personality marks Celie in such a deep way that she — Celie— admits the existence of an alternative model for a woman like herself and different from the old-fashioned submissive mule of the world. Indeed, Sofia deconstructs the rule of the status quo through her resistance and her claim for respect. Overall, she is able to affirm her dignity with the purpose of occupying an honest position away from any male manipulation. In this section, Sofia's personality has been discussed and readers get a better picture of her through Celie's descriptions. By exploring such a view, I have observed that Sofia is more than "pretty, bright and smart." She is the perfect example of the feisty and powerful woman. Furthermore, through her performativity, Sofia expresses the potentiality of her agency. This is transcendental in order to raise Celie's awareness about the importance of struggling really hard to achieve people's respect and to put an end to the subjection of black men, which prevents black women from creating their own individual selves. Finally, Celie is able to open her eyes to the new reality and acknowledge the possibility of a change of attitude: one that helps Celie learn about her own potential and her ability to empower herself.

4. Celie's Blues and Empowerment

"You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise"

"Still I Rise", by Maya Angelou

Having discussed how Shug, Nettie and Sofia help to deconstruct the primal identity of the protagonist, this last section addresses Celie's long and painful journey to achieve a new identity and get her self-esteem back—as she appears at the end of the novel. Thanks to Shug, Nettie and Sofia, respectively, and at different stages in her life, Celie experiences a process of growth and evolution as a woman. As I analyze through the previous discussion,

Celie progressively ascends from quasi slavery and oppression—that she suffers both during her childhood and, later, in her forced marriage with Mr. ___— to reach a remarkable change of role by reconfiguring her identity.

After having been witness to different situations in which those fearless women play a non-conformist, indomitable and rebellious role, Celie finally understands that submission is the cause of the self-imprisonment of her identity. It can be argued that the process of Celie's observation of such female figures goes hand in hand with the *tuning of her voice* in preparation for the right time to *speak*.⁴⁹ In other words, Celie builds her agency thanks to three women's help. The following scene illustrates this perfectly. The change of Celie's personality is clearly visible near the end of the novel, when Shug decides to return to Memphis, and she intends to take Celie with her. At that moment, Mr. ___ returns to exercise his systematic oppressive role and tries to keep Celie from leaving. This is Celie's brief but powerful response: "It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your body just the welcome mat I need . . . Sofia so surprise to hear me *speak up*" (170, my italics). The effectiveness of the transmission of Sofia's strong attitude and Nettie's urgency to fight is faultlessly perceptible at this moment.

Nevertheless, once they are in Memphis, Mr. ___ tries again to sink Celie, by denying the possibility that she can be *someone*, and by abusing her psychologically in order to discourage her. The undervaluation of Mr. ___ is extremely strong and profound, as he ridicules her by comparing Celie with Shug:

⁴⁹ A number of studies have postulated a convergence between *silence* and women's experiences, as a reflection and criticism of the traditional patriarchal perspective that limits and oppresses the identity of women. Silence is understood as an ostracism that affects different groups of people that, as a result, are considered marginal. Apart from black women's experiences—as I am focusing on this thesis—,there are a lot of pertinent instances that also reflect upon this issue. Such is the case of Gloria Anzaldúa, who mainly focuses on Chicano women. Anzaldúa, Chicana, lesbian, activist and writer, points out the importance of raising one's voice in order to express identity, in her prominent work *Borderlands*. She poetically affirms: "*Ahogadas, escupimos el oscuro/ Peleamos con nuestra propia sombra/ el silencio nos sepulta*" (76).

Nothing up North for nobody like you. Shug got talent, he say.
She can sing. She got spunk, he say, She can talk to anybody.
Shug got looks, he say. She can stand up and be notice. But what
you got? You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny. You too
scared to open your mouth to people. All you fit to do in
Memphis is be Shug's maid. (175)

However, Celie definitely opens her mouth and curses him in public which is one of the most powerful scenes regarding their relationship: "Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble" (176). Mr. ___ insists on belittling her by attacking her physical appearance. He reminds Celie she is "black" and "ugly" and, in addition, he further stigmatizes her social position because she is "pore" and "woman."⁵⁰ Despite her husband's cruelty and his intention to hurt her, Celie seems deaf to Mr ___'s psychological violence. She has already constructed her resilience after overcoming all kinds of those adversities she has experienced throughout her life. She acknowledges her survival and, hence, she talks back unashamedly:

Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about
will fail . . . Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice . . . The
jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot . . . I'm pore,
I'm black. I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to
everything listening. But I'm here. (176)

Conclusively, Celie finds out her voice, and she demonstrates it in this strong and energetic passage. The fact that she is finally able to express herself has required a profound

⁵⁰ Turning to the previous section in which I discussed Nettie's role; I consider it appropriate to expand one of the quotes by Walker regarding Celie's beauty. Such quote follows: "how, to bear our own disgrace these hundreds of years we've taught ourselves to laugh at anyone as abused and diminished as we feel. It is then Celie's designation as "nigger of the universe" by the heartless sufferers around her that makes her "ugly" to them; they who cannot see, until Love of Herself lights the dreariness of Celie's existence, that *the beauty of her resilient spirit has become one with the enchanting loveliness of her face*" (my italics).

meditation about everything she has left behind —as well as everything she carries within her. That is, the help and influence of Shug’s, Nettie’s and Sofia’s sisterhood advice and support are responsible for the growth and empowerment of Celie, so that she can rebel against Mr. ___ and become an unexpected heroine.⁵¹ Furthermore, she not only manages to *fight* against the status quo, but she also liberates herself and performs the role she wants, i.e., she finally pleases herself and, therefore, builds her own identity whether as a lesbian or as a heterosexual black woman.⁵²

5. Conclusions

This study has shown the ways in which three female characters help to elevate the status of Celie, the main protagonist in Walker’s *The Color Purple*. It has been possible to observe a clear process of growth through which different sublime messages about the identity politics of African-American women have been propagated. Such messages are related to different aspects of women's lives, which —as I have justified in the theoretical framework— in the case of black women are immensely harmed by the long history of oppression they have suffered, starting in the slavery period. Therefore, the evidence from this study suggests that Celie is able finally to possess a mind of her own and speak the unspeakable out loud whether at home or while sitting at her brand new sewing machine— and she does so thanks to Shug, Nettie and Sofia.

The tragic situation and Celie’s subjugation that readers find at the beginning of the novel is transformed into Celie’s respectful and independent way of life by the end of

⁵¹ As Michael Paulson reports for *The New York Times* in his article about Erivo’s role in *The Color Purple* musical, “The assumption is that maybe she’ll come onstage and she’ll feel sorry for herself and ask you to feel sorry for her,” Ms. Erivo said. “But my idea is not to do that at all. I think *she is the ultimate survivor*” (my italics).

⁵² See Appendix 1, figure 11.

Walker's work. As I have proved, Celie's transformation regarding sexuality is achieved thanks to Shug Avery who demonstrates her a new way of exploring her sexuality and enjoying it. Moreover, Shug is a key character in raising awareness about the severity that concerns sexual abuses and gender violence. The second character discussed, her sister Nettie, is responsible for transmitting to Celie the importance of education and knowledge, as it is only then when women can perceive the world from different and brighter perspectives. Furthermore, I have also pointed out that Netty fully supports Celie to make her apprehend knowledge as a fundamental weapon to fight any adversities. Lastly, Sofia emerges as reliable support for the transformation of Celie's passive and voiceless attitude, as she externalizes new and assertive ways for women's behavior with respect to men. She is presented as a relentless fighter who insists on claiming for her rights as a woman, making Celie fully aware of such possibility.

The results of this research support the idea that women's solidarity and sisterhood are vital and indispensable to help other women gain control of their own lives. Celie has experienced a transformation from being an abused and enslaved girl to a free woman, with a profession and financially independent thanks to Shug's, Nettie's and Sofia's influence. In conclusion, I consider it extremely important to pay attention to relations among women, since they are the main basis of their (our) progress. For this reason, I believe that the fact of having *someone to talk to*, someone who teaches you and loves you —as in the case of these characters with respect to Celie— is why it is worth it not to give up, and like a mature Celie happily claims: *here we are*.

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Appendix

Figure 1. Alice Walker Reading from *The Color Purple*.



Figure 2. *The Color Purple*'s family tree.

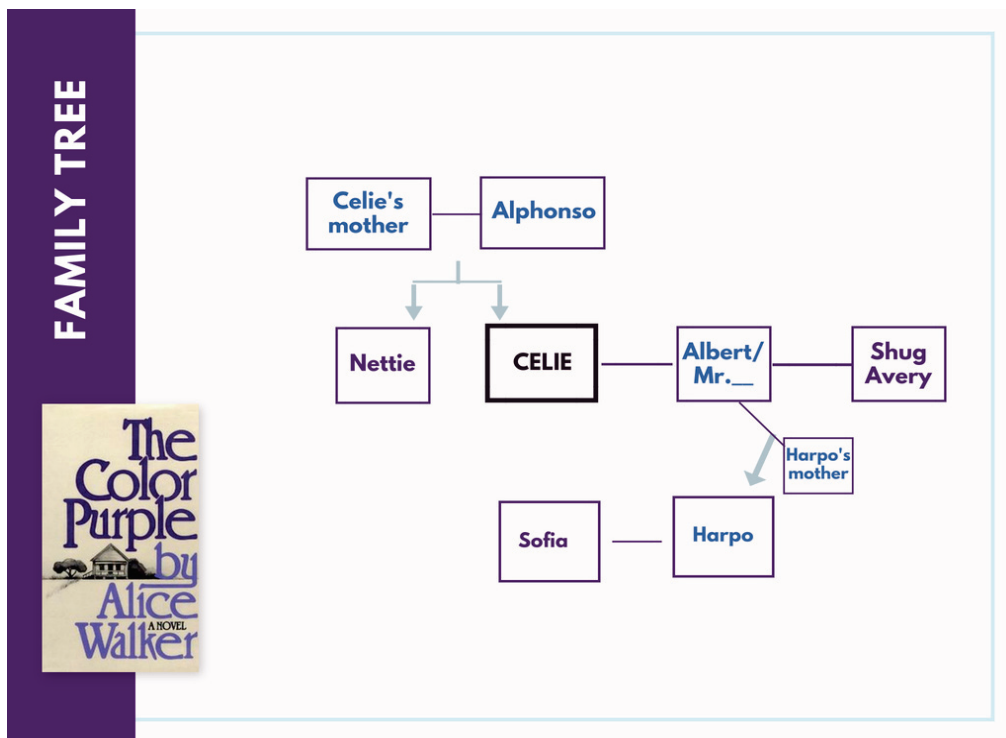


Figure 3. Lyrics from Quincy Jones's "Miss Celie's Blues", from the movie *The Color Purple*, directed by Steven Spielberg and written by Menno Meyjes (1985).

Woh woh
Uhm uhm
Uhm uhm

Sister,
you've been on my mind
Sister, we're two of a kind
So sister,
I'm keepin' my eyes on you
I betcha think
I don't know nothin'
But singin' the blues
Oh sister, have I got news for you
I'm somethin'
I hope you think
that you're somethin' too

Oh, Scufflin',
I been up that lonesome road
And I seen a lot of suns goin' down
Oh, but trust me
No low life's gonna run me around

So let me tell you somethin' sister
Remember your name
No twister,
gonna steal your stuff away
My sister
Sho' ain't got a whole lot of time
So shake your shimmy,
Sister
'Cause honey this 'shug
is feelin' fine

Figure 4. Margaret Avery performing Shug Avery in the film adaptation of Spielberg's *The Color Purple* (1985).



Figure 5. Shug Avery singing “Miss Celie’s Blues” (1985).



Figure 6. Shug and Celie, *The Color Purple* (1985).



Figure 7. Nettie teaching Celie how to read.



Figure 8. Nettie and Celie go to school.



Figure 9. Oprah Winfrey performing Sofia Butler.



Figure 10. Set of photos from a key scene in *The Color Purple Movie* (1985). Confrontation between Sofia and Harpo, and Celie observing it. “Switching roles”: Sofia orders Harpo to work.



Figure 11. Shot of Celie’s moment of rebellion against Mr. ____, *The Color Purple* (1985).



Figure 12. Lyrics to “I’m Here”, from *The Color Purple* Broadway Musical (2015).

I don't need you to love me
I don't need you to love

I've got—
I've got—

I've got my sister, I can feel her now
She may not be here, but she's still mine
I know—
I know she still love me

Got my children, I can't hold them now
They may not be here, but they still mine
I hope
They know I still love them

Got my house, it still keep the cold out
Got my chair when my body can't hold out
Got my hands doing good like they s'posed to
Showing my heart to the folks that I'm close to

Got my eyes though they don't see as far now
They see more 'bout how things really are now

I'm gonna take a deep breath
Gonna hold my head up
Gonna put my shoulders back
And look you straight in the eye

I'm gonna flirt with somebody
When they walk by
I'm gonna sing out
Sing out

I believe I have inside of me
Everything that I need to live a bountiful life
And all the love alive in me
I'll stand as tall as the tallest tree

And I'm thankful for every day that I'm given
Both the easy and hard ones I'm livin'
But most of all, I'm thankful for
Lovin' who I really am

I'm beautiful

Yes, I'm beautiful
And I'm here