Battered Women No More: The Power of Resilience and Sisterhood in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple*

Author: Cristina Carnota Aguión

Doctoral Thesis UDC / 2024

Director: Dr. David Mitchell Clark Mitchell

Tutor: Dr. David Mitchell Clark Mitchell

Programa Oficial de Doctorado en Estudios Ingleses Avanzados: Lingüística, Literatura y Cultura

UNIVERSIDADE DA CORUÑA

Abstract

Battered Women No More: The Power of Resilience and Sisterhood in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple*.

The aim of this Ph. Dissertation is to analyze marriage dynamics within African-American society. For this, the focus will be on Zora Neale Hurston's and Alice Walker's novels; *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple.* Moreover, Black Feminist thought is going to be object of study to provide a proper contextualization, along with the literary paths and activism of both Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston'.

It is my primary focus to analyze both female protagonists Janie Mae Crawford and Celie and to consider how their marriages have shaped their growth as independent women within a patriarchal society which prioritizes men. In the same sense, I will delve into how these women interact with both female and male characters. While women come together to support each other in their journey towards individuality, men rely on violence and oppression to exert power.

Both novels portray the silencing of black women through several layers of oppression. Both emotionally and physically they have endured violence and abuse while at the same time they have been regarded as objects for men to harm. Throughout these novels, both protagonists have attained individuality with the help of sisterhood and resilience.

Resumen

No más mujeres maltratadas: El poder de la resistencia y el vínculo de la mujer en "Their Eyes Were Watching God" y "The Color Purple"

El objetivo de esta tesis de doctorado es analizar la dinámica del matrimonio dentro de la sociedad afro-americana. Para ello, el foco se centrará en las novelas de Zora Neale Hurston y Alice Walker; "Their Eyes Were Watching God" y "The Color Purple". Así mimo, la crítica feminista negra será importante y proporcionará contextualización adecuada al tema, así como lo es la trayectoria literaria y activista de tanto de Alice Walker como de Zora Neale Hurston.

El objeto de estudio son las dos protagonistas femeninas, Janie Mae Crawford y Celie, y analizar sus matrimonios para ver cómo han influenciado en su cremiento personal hacia alcanzar la independencia en una sociedad patriarcal que prioriza a los hombres. De tal modo, profundizaré en cómo estas mujeres interactúan con personajes tanto femeninos como masculinos. Mientras que las mujeres se unen y apoyan entre sí, los hombres recurren a la violencia y la opresión para ejercer poder.

Ambas novelas muestran el silencio de las mujeres negras a varios niveles opresivos. Tanto emocionalmente como físicamente, han sufrido violencia y abuso al mismo tiempo que son vistas como objetos a lo que los hombres hacen daño. A lo largo de estas novelas, ambas protagonistas han alcanzado la individualidad con la ayuda de la hermandad y la resiliencia.

Resumo

Non máis mulleres maltradas: O poder da resistencia e o vínculo da muller en “Their Eyes Were Watching God” e “The Color Purple”

O obxectivo desta tese de doutoramento é analizar a dinámica do matrimonio dentro da sociedade afro-americana. Para iso, o foco centrarase nas novelas de Zora Neale Hurston e Alice Walker; "Their Eyes Were Watching God" e "The Color Purple". Do mesmo xeito, a crítica feminista negra será importante e proporcionará contextualización axeitada ao tema, así como o é a traxectoria literaria e activista tanto de Alice Walker como de Zora Neale Hurston.

O obxecto de estudo son as dúas protagonistas femininas, Janie Mae Crawford e Celie, e analizar os seus matrimonios para ver como influenciaron no seu crecemento persoal para alcanzar a independencia nunha sociedade patriarcal que prioriza aos homes. Desa maneira, profundarei en como estas mulleres interactúan con personaxes tanto femininos como masculinos. Mentras as mulleres se unen e apoian entre si, os homes recorren á violencia e á opresión para exercer poder.

Ambas novelas mostran o silencio das mulleres negras a varios niveis de opresión. Tanto emocionalmente como físicamente, sufriron violencia e abuso ao mesmo tempo que son vistas como obxectos aos que os homes fan dano. Ao longo destas novelas, ambas protagonistas alcanzaron a individualidade coa axuda da irmandade e da resiliencia.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction: Why the Tandem Hurston-Walker?

Why Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker's tandem? It was back in 2015 when I first fell in love both with Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker. I was completing my degree in English Studies and I felt compelled to extend my previous knowledge on these authors. It was Hurston's short story *Sweat* the one that introduced me to Miss Hurston in my (TFG). Hurston's style and evocative themes really left an imprint on my soul. Progressively, I opened my horizons and got to know Alice Walker and I was left speechless to discover the timeless bond that linked both authors. Their unbreakable sorority unity that transcended time and their portrayal of powerful female characters was what awaken in me a desire for research and analysis. Their unquenchable need to portray fearless African American women and how they manage to question and, at times, break free from the conventionalisms of a strict racist, capitalist, and patriarchal society seemed striking objects of study that made me focus on their most acclaimed *novels,* Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982).

Bearing in mind that both Hurston and Walker are have become two of the most significant and innovative writers in the field of African American literary history, and given my early interest in them, it is not surprise that I soon became curious and fascinated by how their lives and their respective works have become intertwined. Therefore, their invisible umbilical cords soon caught my attention. Author, anthropologist, and folklorist, Zora Neale Hurston played a crucial role in the Harlem Renaissance period of the 1920s and 1930s. Her most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is considered a masterpiece within African American literature. Here Hurston focuses on the everyday experiences and

cultural traditions of different African American communities, particularly those in the rural South at the same time that portraying the different stages in life that Janie Mae Crawford goes through. Hurston was also a key figure in the academic study of African American folklore and oral traditions to the extent that she managed to promote Black English to the category of Black Vernacular while she struggled to put an end to the common and denigrating association of Black English as “bad” English. Furthermore, it is through her anthropological research that Hurston helped to preserve and document these cultural practices within her fiction and essays. While *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is her literary masterpiece; her majestic literary production spreads with her vibrant memoir *Dust Tracks on a Road*, *Mules and Men* a rich collection of folklore full of cultural and oral traditions of African American communities or *Sweat*, a short story dealing with power dynamics and struggles of a African American woman in the household.

In a similar line of thought, Walker is a highly acclaimed and celebrated writer and activist who has made a remarkable impact on the African American literary sphere. In addition, her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purpl*e in 1983 is regarded as a classic of contemporary literature, and her other works, including *Meridian* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, explore issues of race, gender, and class in American society. In addition to her fiction, Walker is also known for her poetry, essays, and activism. She has been a vocal advocate for various social causes, including feminism, civil rights, female genital mutilation and environmentalism.

Both Hurston and Walker are essential figures within African American literary panorama due to their meaningful contributions and their ability to use

literature to address critical social and political issues. Their respective writing is rooted in the experiences and cultural traditions of African Americans, and they have used their work to challenge race and class stereotypes, advocate for social justice, and elevate the voices of marginalized communities. In addition, their influence extends beyond their individual works and have shaped the study of African American literature and culture for generations of writers, scholars, and readers.

The object of this dissertation is to delve into Hurston's and Walker's novels and analyze how their female protagonists have had the opportunity to break free in a society prone to undermine their personalities and essence. Throughout the following chapters, it is my solely purpose to analyze Janie and Celie's respective lives and how African American society has interfere with their hopes and dreams. In order to study their lives, I will be following Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory on "Intersectionality" as my objective is to discuss how patriarchy, racism and women's bodies intertwine and is part of my protagonists. Seeing how marriage and violence have taken a toll on both Janie and Celie is, in the end, why I started this dissertation.

For this, I am going to provide a thorough account and description of the chapters I hereby present. For the sake of portraying Janie and Celie's oppressive lives and how they have responded to violence have, I find it pertinent to include the following chapters.

Starting off with **Chapter Two, "Building Bridges, Building Consciousness: Black Feminism Criticism,**" I find it indispensable to travel back to slavery times and introduce some of the most important proto-feminist Black women—some of them were or have been slaves—and their different

views on the social position of and differences among Black and white women to try to prove that, in contrast with some white women's privileges, Black women further suffered from overlapping forms of discrimination such as gender, class, education, sexual option, motherhood, and work outside the home, among others. In this chapter, it is my objective to provide a chronology of Black women's voices who have spoken up and denounce the persistent marginalization of their Black sisters. Interestingly enough, although most of these courageous voices belong to the margins, they are not blind to identify that, contrary to white women, they are further oppressed by overlapping forms of oppression.

For the purpose of this dissertation, I will refer to a selection of some of the most relevant activists who were poor, illiterate, uneducated and marginalized, but who have become part and parcel of Black Feminist criticism to date. The relevance of Black Feminist Criticism lies in its importance to give voice to the experiences and perspectives of Black women at the same time that it helps to challenge mainstream cultural narratives. These authors highlight and praise the experiences of Black women as well as shed light on how race, gender and class intersect to shape their lives. Ironically, Black women from the eighteen and nineteenth centuries were in fact speaking about intersectionality long before Crenshaw herself had coined the term. In the end, feminist writers' works of this time offer a lens through which to examine issues of social justice and advocate for change.

Both our writers–Hurston and Walker–are two important figures in the blossoming of the Black Feminist Criticism and, both of them have used their writing to challenge this mainstream dominance by celebrating powerful Black women as well as poor, uneducated, silenced, and abused Black women.

It is my opinion that, in order to provide a common thread between Hurston and Walker, it would be necessary to address the event that has kept them related from the moment that Walker started her solo search for Hurston, found her and restored her works. Thus, in **Chapter 3 "Looking for a Model: Searching for Zora"** I attempt to justify the existing nexus that has bound these two Black Women writers. It goes without saying that Alice Walker's rediscovery of Hurston's has deeply shaped Walker's own writing and activist career.

To understand Hurston and Walker's novels, it is essential to go back in time and understand their lives and the historical period they inhabited. This is fully dealt with in **chapter 4 "Zora Neale Hurston in Context**" where I provide a condensed account of the period she lived on "The Harlem Renaissance" with some of most relevant writers and currents of the period, at the same time that giving an account of her life as woman, anthropologist, activist and writer. In a time when the negro "was in Vogue", Hurston defied every obstacle in life and wrote one the most important Black Feminist novels of the time *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Getting into my dissertation in depth, I decided to start my analysis chronologically so the body of my dissertation starts with "**Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" in chapter 5**. This extensive chapter has been divided into several points, starting off with how this novel has been perceived up to nowadays. Many authors have postulated in favor and against of *Their Eyes* and in this chapter, I attempt to introduce the most iconic and controversial reviews that were published. In this chapter, I start by discussing Janie Mae Crawford's character in depth; from her early childhood through her journey in marriage towards her self-discovery and independence.

Following the same structure, I opted for continuing in ***chapter 6*** with ***"Alice Walker in Context*** where I make a recollection of Alice Walker's trajectory; alluding to her most representative works and her activist and feminist journey. ***Chapter 7*** is dedicated to "***Walker's The Color Purple"***. This chapter is divided with the same structure as Their Eyes'; starting off with its critical reception towards an in-depth analysis of the female protagonist. Celie and the abusive patters that she is forced to endure is the first part of the analysis. I then move on and discuss the figure of the abuser as well as her position in marriage. Female friendships and the bond in sorority is the last section; clearly intertwined with her liberation from oppression.

After providing a thorough analysis of both stories and both women; I found it essential to end my dissertation with a chapter dedicated to them both. Chapter 8: "Their Eyes Were Watching Purple: Janie and Celie" is entitled following a pun. By using both titles I wanted to create an unbreakable bond between both women. Women who transcended time and have become an icon of hope for generations to come. In chapter 9 I make a summary of the most representative findings and in chapter 10 I provide an organized account of the sources used in this dissertation.

2. Building Bridges, Building Consciousness: Black Feminism Criticism

Mirror, mirror on the wall,
who is the greatest oppressor of them all?
(Gloria I. Joseph)

In a world where violent episodes of racism, sexism, homophobia, and/or transgenderism break the news day after day[1], I find it imperative to find out to what extent these derogatory terms have been part of African American culture—as well as the recurrent brutal killings of members of the Black community (whether unarmed or not) by the U.S police, based on their apparently "difference" and/or their "weakness". In most cases, the victims seem to be both young men and women who have been born and surrounded by the increasing crime atmosphere that plagues some American neighborhoods and ghettoes where masculinity (macho-oriented) follow the rules of the street (outside), while women either stay or resist to follow the tradition and confront and/or negotiate by fighting back and using their words as weapons.

As previously stated, the object of this Dissertation is to focus on both Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and Alice Walker's

---

[1]Jacob Williamson, an 18-year-old white transgender man, was tragically killed in Monroe, North Carolina, on June 30th. See full article in: https://www.hrc.org/news/hrc-grieves-loss-of-jacob-williamson-teenage-transgender-man-killed-in-south-carolina

Another story: Chanell Perez Ortiz, a 29-year-old Puerto Rican transwoman who was killed in Carolina, Puerto Rico on June 25th. See full article in: https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/remembering-chanell-perez-ortiz-puerto-rican-transgender-woman-killed-in-carolina-puerto-rico

The Color Purple (1982), to compare and contrast a selection of relevant female/male characters and main themes from both novels in view of the fact that Hurston's discourse and characterization have had an enormous impact on Walker's. In the same line of thought, both Hurston and Walker's life will be object of study as, like Elizabeth-Genovese recalls in her article "My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women", "[a]attentively read, she [Hurston] reminds that more often than not the autobiographies of Afro-American women have been written from within the cage" (177). This state of imprisonment has led them into shaping two female heroines–Janie and Celie–that transcend their oppressed society. My aim is to examine the extent to which Hurston's and Walker's narratives permeate with innovative if controversial [Black] feminist perspectives which question and rewrite traditional clichés on what it has meant to be a Black woman in the utterly racist South. Along the way, I will try to demonstrate that Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) legal and feminist "intersectionality" theories—which can be historically identified as part and parcel of Black women's consciousness irrespective of their level of education and social status—are quite apparent in both Hurston's and Walker's. In addition, given the fact that white feminist leaders in the US have historically refused to openly and/or fully embrace the particular social struggle of Black women, we find it imperative to start with and provide some theoretical framework about the different ways that Black Feminist thought has been perceived[2]. Thereby, in this

[2] *Black Feminist Thought* is the title of a work by Patricia Hill Collins (2008). I am borrowing from her work to loosely refer to general aspects, ideologies and critics/authors that are part and parcel of this particular branch of feminism. In Collins's words from "Defining Black Feminist Thought (1990)", "Black feminist thought consists of specialized knowledge created by African-American women

section, it is our intention to refer to and highlight instances where "intersectionality" has historically permeated the discourse of African American activists, leaders and scholars who have fought for and denounce black women's rights related to gender, class and race. To this end, we will provide an overall picture from the inception of this movement (led by the so-called "proto-feminists") to nowadays.

Though Patricia Hill-Collins labels Black feminist thought as a "social construction"[3] and, for the purpose of this dissertation, Black feminism(s) refers broadly speaking to the body of literary analysis and cultural representations produced by or about Black[4] women that surfaced as a specific critical tool during the 1960s and 1970s. However, as Black critics and scholars proudly agree, its roots date back from slavery times, and expand into the nineteenth century when

---

which clarifies a standpoint of and for Black Women. In other words, […] encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it" (381)

[3] See Patricia Hill Collins' "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought". In this article, Collins delves into the idea of Black women's standpoint as she argues: "Black women's everyday acts of resistance challenge two prevailing approaches to studying the consciousness of oppressed groups. One approach claims that subordinate groups identify with the powerful and have no valid independent interpretation of their own oppression. The second approach assumes that the oppressed are less human than their rules and, therefore, are less capable of articulating their own standpoint" (745-746). See in permanent link *https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174683*.

[4] In this text, the word "black," broadly considered a social construct, will be used throughout these pages to refer to women and works written by women who belong to the African Diaspora—as critics of African descendent do. See, for example, Patricia Hill Collins' article "The Social construction of Black Feminist Thought." *Signs* Volume 14, nº 4, Summer 1989 (745-773).

the Abolitionist Movement was at its peak in the United States. Therefore, it could be argued that Black Feminist criticism finds its foundations in the struggle for and the confrontation between two divergent social and political crusades: The Abolitionist Movement and The Suffragist movement of the nineteenth century. Both conflictive social movements clash and intersect at a time and place when the notion of race, gender and class are further jeopardized and the limits are tested.

The increasing growth of what today's critics label Black Feminist thought responds to and it is the result of a group of Black women's spontaneous actions and thoughtful reactions to denounce their lack of visibility and agency within a traditionally racist and patriarchal white society. While white women have been also the object of white patriarchal oppression, some Black Women soon realized that they were triply oppressed by gender (female), race (Black) and class (poor). This need to join the existing struggle against racial oppression and gender discrimination is underlined by Gloria I. Joseph when she declares that "Black women's voices claiming struggle for women's liberation cannot be divorced from the struggle for Black liberation, thereby creating a situation wherein Black women have to engage simultaneously in two struggles" (274). Besides, in the nineteen-forties, when the Harlem Renaissance was no longer in vogue, some Black Male and Female writers chose to join left-wing political parties blinded by the thought that the word "equality" included them, too, to later realize that it was otherwise. This is the case with novelist Richard Wright[5] who wrote "I Tried to Be

[5] Robert Wright (1908-1960). African American writer whose work revolves around the oppression that Black people has suffered in his country. He is the author of *Native Son* (1940) where he questions and fictionalizes the utopia of

a Communist" were he recounts the reasons why he was drawn to become a member of the Communist Party, to later show his disillusionment with socialism and the communist ideology. Besides, a case in point is Black Female writer Claudia Jones (also a communist) who refers to the triple oppression that Black women do suffer even under leftist political parties, and that she later denounces in her essay "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman" (1949)[6]. It is interesting to note here that Jones's literary and political leftist discourses will later find an echo in Angela Davis' seminal work *Women, Race and Class* (1981) where right from the title Davis's expands Jones's "triple jeopardy" as perceived by an equally black militant and communist scholar, at the same time that she shows that she is already aware of Black women's intersectionality.

As a result of this clear and apparent lack of representation of Black Women interests' together with the constant appearance of new means of oppression, Black Feminist theories flourished—whether intentionally or not—and some Black critics, writers and scholars chose to detach themselves from the White Feminist movement that had long discriminated and/or ignored them. Once they recognized the needed to find a voice of their own, Black women's

---

The Communist Party. He self-exiled in France where he published "I Chose Exile" in 1951. A similar story could be said of James Baldwin who also chose France as a way to avoid both whites' patriarchal society and the black community's rampant homophobia.

[6] Also quoted in Dennise Lynn's "Socialist Feminism and Triple Oppression: Claudia Jones and African American Women in American Communism" *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* vol. 8:2 Fall (2014) p.14

associations started to spread and develop to later give birth to a new critical school–Black Feminist Criticism.

If we move back to the nineteenth century, it could be argued that by the time the struggle for the Abolition of Slavery first started, the fight for the rights of Black women had been going on for about the same time. Slavery is one of the most controversial and brutal systems in the history of the United States. During this oppressive epoch, it was not only race and class that were detrimental to Black members of the community (both men and women), but also gender. Besides, as a capitalist system, Joseph writes that there was a clear "social and economic gap between Blacks and Whites" (2) whereby people of African descent would systematically occupy the lowest ranks in the social ladder. Working as field slaves in the cotton plantations "from sun up to sun down," or serving as house slaves in the master's mansion, Black women were systematically used and abused—physically, psychologically and sexually—by their masters and/or overseers while southern white women were carefully put on shaky pedestals. This forced predestined situation is argued by Hazel V. Carby in her book *The Reconstruction of Womanhood. The emergence of the African American Novel* (1987) as she states: "[m]arriage itself, however meant the belle had to be transformed into a chaste matron residing on a domestic pedestal" (27). However, as early as the mid and late nineteenth century, despite the inhuman treatment and the lack of opportunities black slave women were brutally separated from their infants. Quite commonly after being raped by their own masters; slaves were forbidden to learn how to read and write, and were severely punished when found). Some Black Women dared to use their voices and speak out loud to denounce the atrocious and heartbreaking situations that

they were forced to endure. Thus, in spite of the inhumane, brutalizing, and degrading living conditions, African American women have been proclaiming their desire for racial, sexual and gender equality through the pages of slave narratives, their sermons from a pulpit, through public speeches, and church associations. Among other brave women, Sojourner Truth (c. 1797-1863), an illiterate run-away slave, and Ida B. Wells (1862-1931), a journalist and activist, who are separated in time and geography, have dared to confront white supremacy each in their own way. They are both considered "proto-feminists" who anticipate some aspects of today's Black Feminist discourse. Furthermore, Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?" has become a key text in Black feminist thought, and, ironically, the uneducated author is still respected as an Black Feminist icon since her emotional and powerful speech was printed after her active and revolutionary participation at the Women's Rights Convention in 1851 (Akron, Ohio). As for the content, Truth uses her personal experiences as a field slave to establish a connection with her audience (mostly white, female, and religious), and elicit an emotional response with the purpose of highlighting Black Women's gender and race inequality in the United States while class difference is obviously taken for granted. Here is an excerpt from Truth's pathbreaking speech—delivered in front of an all-white audience, after she has been ironically denied permission to address the public by the same women, leaders, and activists who defend (white) women's rights:

> That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? 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? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?
>
> Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? a member of the audience whispers, "intellect"]. That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?[7]

Through her powerful speech, it becomes apparent that her anger and resentment increases as she intentionally addresses her white audience when she asserts time after time her compelling motto "Ain't I a Woman?"—that has become a recurrent, timeless and meaningful line for Black Feminists—irrespective of their ideologies.

---

[7] There is some controversy over different versions. The first version of "Ain't I a Woman," appeared written in Standard English and published by Marius Robinson in the *Anti Slavery Bugle* (Salem), on June 21, 1851 (p. 160) See Library of Congress.
https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83035487/1851-06-21/ed-1/seq-4/
The other version includes Truth's main ideas, and was published in Black Vernacular/Black English, by Frances Dana Gage in the *New York Independent*, on April 13, 1863. It is also understood that Truth's speech was transcribed by members of the different associations since she was illiterate. It is important to mention Carme Manuel's–from the University of Valencia–translation into Spanish.

Although she is frequently singled out, Sojourner Truth is not alone as a key early figure of feminist activism and abolitionism since there are other remarkable women who fought tooth and nail for gender equality. This is the case of Mary W. Stewart (1803-1879), a free-born Black African-American and a pioneering lecturer, abolitionist and woman's rights activist who was also the first Black Woman to give a public lecture to a mixed-gendered and mixed-raced audience on women's rights. One of her most-often quoted lectures, *"Why Sit Ye Here and Die,"* was delivered to the New England Anti-Slavery Society on September 21st, 1832 at Franklin Hall[8] in Boston where Stewart is bold enough to both denounce and demand equal rights for African-American women as she wonders about the perversity of race privileges: "Ah! why is this cruel and unfeeling distinction? Is it merely because God has made our complexion to vary? If it be, O shame to soft, relenting humanity!" (x). Stewart later addresses issues of class and gender inequalities that separate "fair"/white women from Black Women:

> Most of our color have dragged out a miserable existence of servitude from the cradle to the grave. And what literary acquirements can be made, or useful knowledge derived, from either maps, books or charm, by those who continually drudge from Monday morning until Sunday noon? O, ye fairer sisters, whose hands are never soiled, whose nerves and muscles are never strained, go learn by experience! Had we had the opportunity that you have had, to improve our moral and mental faculties, what would have hindered our intellects from being as bright, and our

[8] The full text appears in Marilyn Richardson's *Maria W. Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer* (Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1987), 45-49.

> manners from being as dignified as yours? Had it been our lot to have been nursed in the lap of affluence and ease, and to have basked beneath the smiles and sunshine of fortune, should we not have naturally supposed that we were never made to toil? And why are not our forms as delicate, and our constitutions as slender, as yours? Is not the workmanship as curious and complete? Have pity upon us, have pity upon us, O ye who have hearts to feel for others' woes.

While María Stewart or Ida B. Wells became educated Black women who could write powerful texts in defense of the rights of her Black brothers and sisters, Harriet Tubman (1820-1913), an illiterate former field slave and a runaway, took her fight as an abolitionist[9] personally and devoted her whole life to literally liberate dozens of enslaved people from the claws of slavery via *The*

---

99 Furthermore, it is relevant to mention that former men slaves did also embrace the Abolitionist cause at the same time Sojourner Truth or Maria Stewart did and joined efforts. After publishing his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass An American Slave* (1845), and due to his oratorical skills, Douglass soon became an inspiring addition to the cause. Also, as a defender of women's rights, he toured together with Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Caddy Stanton, or Lucretia Mott, among others, which speaks about his commitment to his sisters' struggles against gender and class causes.

Underground Railroad[10] just before the starting of the Civil War.[11] Known as the *Moses* of slaves, Tubman's heroic figure as a spy, a scout , and a nurse for the Union Army, has also called the attention of educators and social workers and it is interesting to note that numerous biographies have been published where Miss Tubman's empowering life provides young children, particularly young girls, with a unique and significant role model.[12]

In addition, Tubman's life has also been made into a biopic produced by African American actress and director Kasi Lemmons—a Black American artist. Based on the iconic freedom fighter and national heroine, the film *Harriet* (2019) has received mixed reviews—some critics show some misogynistic views and do

---

[10] The Underground Railroad was made of secret and clandestine routes from the Southern states to the North used by run-away slaves. They were helped along the routes by members of the community (black or white) who were in favor of the abolition of slavery. Among religious denominations, The Quakers also played a relevant role saving the lives of numerous fugitives. See, for example, Colson Whitehead's *The Under Ground Rail Road* (2016), a historical fiction novel and a Pulitzer Winner. See, also, TV series adaptation, under same title, directed by Berry Jenkis (2021) Other relevant films are *Django: Unchained* (2012) or *12 Years a Slave* (2013) both films portraying racism and slavery.

[11] Though Tubman is known for delivering numerous speeches at both women's rights conventions and anti-slavery platforms, they are difficult to trace because, for security reasons, she was introduced under a pseudonym. For example, at the *Washington bee,* she is addressed as "Mother" Moses when attending "The First Meeting of the National Federation of the Afro-American Women" as a Special Guest. See, *Washington bee*. July 25, 1896, page 4, image 4 (Library of Congress, Digital newspapers)
In permanent link: https://chronicllingamerica.loc.gov/lcnn/sn84025891.

[12] Among the most remarkable ones, we find Harriet Tubman's biography written by Catherine Clinton and entitled *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (2005).

not agree with Lemmon's vision; others, like Kate Erbland, clearly perceive some interracial hatred on the part of Black artists in the US. According to Erbland, she finds it quite telling that "some twitter users said that the choice to cast a non-American non-descendant of slavery was disrespectful to Black Americans." That is, their critique is based on the fact that the protagonist, Cynthia Erivo, was born in England of Nigerian parents[13].

While Tubman's crusade differs from those of Sojourner Truth, or Mary Stewart, Ida B. Wells. Wells[14] (1862-1913) can also be included among the Black proto-feminists. With an impressive formal education and a successful professional career in journalism—she also became the owner of her own newspaper *Memphis Free Speech and Headlight*." However, her first-hand experiences with racial violence, segregation and the Jim Crow laws[15] forced her to "exile" herself in the North, and she soon became a reticent and outspoken

---

[13] For more well-informed arguments, but controversial views, check Kate Erbland's "Cynthia Erivo Responds to Harriet Tubman Casting Blacklash: 'I Cannot Tell How Protective I Am of This Woman" in *Indie Wire* (September 18, 2018). See link: https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/cynthia-erivo-responds-harriet-tubman-casting-backlash-1202004874/

[14] African-American activist, Ida B. Wells was a civil Rights advocate, journalist and feminist. Born enslaved in Mississippi in 1862, she became involved in Freedman's Aid Society and helped start Rust College. Wells started to write about race and politics using the name "Iola" and was a vocal critic of the conditions of segregated schools in Memphis.

[15] Laws that enforced racial segregation in the American South between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the beginning of the civil rights movement in the 1950s (From *Britannica*)

critic against the brutality of lynching.[16] As well as Truth, Stewart and Tubman, Wells[17] became a dedicated and controversial activist for women's rights (both black and white), and set the sociological basis for the analysis of Black Women's oppression caused by gender, class, sexuality, and/or race.

In addition, Wells courageously used her position as a journalist to call for anti-lynching laws in the South throughout the Reconstruction Era. In Wells' incendiary speeches and meticulously researched essays, which include provocative titles such as "Lynching: Our National Crime" (1908), she openly denounces that some of the most vicious and violent attacks against Black men are caused by white women's crying rape as a way to hide an extramarital affair (with a white lover) from their respected husbands. As Wells sharply maintains, "the way to right wrongs (to lynch Black innocent men) is to cast the light of truth upon them (white women falsely crying rape and/or white men's animadversion to Black men's growing economic success)" (56). Besides, Wells herself emphasizes (after closely following and analyzing more than seven hundred episodes of lynching) that in most cases the Black man was either innocent or he was part of a consented relationship with a white woman. Furthermore, on some occasions, the Black man has been seduced by the white woman. Thus, the white authorities made innocent black men pay for the crimes committed by whites, irrespective of the Black males' innocence.

---

[16] Ida B. Wells started as a school teacher in Memphis to later find herself as a distinguished intellectual, black activist and an early leader in the civil rights movement.

[17] As a suffragist and civil rights activist, Ida B. Wells fought injustice and was a powerful advocate for the rights of African Americans in the face of systemic racism and violence.

In sharp contrast with countless Black Women activists who have historically fought against inequality, injustice, segregation, institutional violence and brutality, slavery, women's sexual abuse, class and gender difference, and/or the dehumanization of the Black community, but who remain unknown or ignored to this day, Ida B. Wells has been awarded innumerable distinctions that include, among others, a posthumous Pulitzer Prize, special citation (May 4, 2020), "for her outstanding and courageous reporting on the horrific and vicious violence against African American during the era of Lynching."

Wells defiantly fought to put an end to the Lynch Law which White Southerners exert on "the lie that negro men rape white women […] the same old racket—the new alarm about raping white women" […] when the truth is that the white criminals give their horror of rape as excuse for lawlessness"[18].

In the same thread of thought, Ida B. Wells's *Southern Horrors* becomes an expanded version of her fearless denunciatory speeches where Wells denounces and documents the existence of hundreds of cases where Black men are falsely accused for assault on white innocent/virtuous women—even children --and/or are brutally beaten, repeatedly shot, hung and burnt by [white] persons to the jury unknown (22). According to Wells, the lynching law works under the influence of questionable beliefs and long-live clichés such as the irrefutable virtuosity of white women versus the "unrestrained lust, brute passion, and bestial desires of the Negro" (16-17), plus the white man's burden of honor. All that justifies violence:

---

[18] Speech given at Boston Conference (February 13th 1893). Accessed on https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/09/lynch-law-in-all-its-phases-february-13-1893/

> The crime of rape is always horrible, but the Southern man there is nothing which so fills the soul with horror, loathing and fury as the outraging of a white woman by a Negro. It is the race question in the ugliest, vilest, most dangerous aspect. (17)

In her autobiography *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (1970)[19], Wells addresses the targeted audience and, as she argues, it is indented to be "for the young people who have so little of our race's history recorded that I [Wells] am for the first time in my life writing about myself" (4). While her account can be thought to be intended to shed light into African American history, Wells goes one step further and proclaims that she wants to "bring the audience to a like conversion or salvation […] to make the experience of personal history felt with revolutionary impact upon the present and future" (381)

Overall, it becomes clear that Well's life-long purpose has been to obsessively search for justice by denouncing the "unspeakable unspoken"[20] horrors of the culture of lynching as something she feels the need to be done: "I felt that I owed it to myself and my race to tell the whole truth" (*Crusade* 54). The dramatic account of Well's *Crusade* did have an impact in future generations. As Wells concludes in the final pages of her autobiography: "[E]ternal vigilance is the price of liberty, and it does seem to me that notwithstanding all these social

---

[19] Ida B. Wells' unfinished autobiography was completed by her daughter Alfreda M. Duster.

[20] I am borrowing here from Toni Morrison's article "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature". See article in: https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_resources/documents/a-to-z/m/morrison90.pdf

agencies and activities there is not that vigilance which should be exercised in the preservation of our rights" (358).

Though Crenshaw's use of the term 'intersectionality' is a product of the late 1980´s, the significant contribution made by earlier black women like Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, Harriet Tubman, or Ida B. Wells—to name just a few—speaks volumes about institutionalized racism and sexism, and confirms black women's innate determination to confront systematic and multifarious intersectional abuses (physical, sexual and racist, among others) even when their lives were at stake. Though the words "Black Feminist" and "intersectionality" do not explicitly form part of their vocabulary, their works and worries do point towards the manifold axes that have become socially constructed categories which historically minimize and dismiss the Black community. We could conclude that the selection of African American pioneers mentioned above did to some extent pave the way for the Black Women activists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries since they did become powerful role models for the political, social and feminist activists that were to emerge during the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Liberation and the Black Panthers Movement of the Sixties and Seventies in the United States. More than anything, these Black "proto-feminists" were fast to identify intersecting oppressions and injustices, and had a say among the underprivileged, illiterate, ignorant, and abused Black Women within their Black communities.

Moving forward, Barbara Smith, a Black Feminist lesbian activist and a co-author of "The Combahee River Collective Statement "(1977)—thus named to celebrate her ancestor Harriet Tubman's unflinching fight for freedom—has become "a classic" feminist statement due to its lasting impact on Black

Feminisms and/or identity politics. Besides, it has coined terms such as "interlocking oppression" or "identity politics" that might be related to Crenshaw's "intersectionality," and today's Black Feminist discourse. Besides, The Combahee River Collective[21] makes it very clear that Black Women "reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind"—their aim is just "to be recognized as human" (*Home Girls* 275). In addition, they underline that their "major concern" is to publicly address the existing racism in the white women's movement" (281), thus, echoing Ida B. Wells' same concern (when she was forbidden to join and parade up front together with other white feminist), and, to some extent, to prepare for Crenshaw's intersectionality:

> We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black Women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression. (*Home Girls* 275)

It is interesting to note that while the Collective of Black Feminists have been meeting since 1974, before the Statement was published in 1977, some

[21] Anthology edited by Keenga-Yamahtta Taylor. This collection's name comes from the *Combahee River Collective*, a black feminist organization which was active from 1974-1980. This anthology played a crucial role in shaping intersectional feminism and discussing personal experiences of Black women.

forty-five years later, their politics seem quite contemporary. Note, for example, how their introduction to the Statement seems to dialogue with Crenshaw's:

> The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face. (272)

Once again, it is important to highlight that, given the history of Black women's sexual use and abuse by predominantly white men, the manifesto of the Combahee River Collective refers to and makes use of terms such as the existing "interlocking" and "manifold and simultaneous oppressions" that will become part and parcel of Crenshaw's feminist discourse on "intersectionality"—but that will take place some ten years later—as the following paragraph predicts:

> We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g. the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression. (275)

It should be added, too, that among other relevant aspects, and despite the recurrent homophobia existing within the Black community, the members of the Collective are not shy to introduce themselves as openly Lesbians. Furthermore, right from the Introduction of *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983), Smith clearly affirms that "many of the most committed and outspoken feminists of color have been and are Lesbians" (xxx). However, she sadly admits that she has been witness to "the wreckage of these sister-to sister rejections far too many times (xli)." Therefore, the Collective take pains to clarify their position as Black women feminists who happen to be Lesbians, both in relation to Black men and to white women:

> Although we are feminist and Lesbians, *we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand*. *Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors*. *We struggle with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism*. (my italics 275)

Following the chronology of the movement, Barbara Smith, an African American activist and a radical lesbian feminist is one of the first women to publicly address Black Feminist Criticism's lack of voice and representation and her literary trajectory vouches for her[22] with "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism"

---

[22] Amongst Barbara Smith's work as an editor, we find major collections about Black women writers including *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*: *Black Women Studies* (1982), and *Home Girls: A*

(1978)— a pioneer essay dealing with Black Feminism. Here, Smith makes it clear that she is writing about Black women writers from a Black Feminist perspective when she openly maintains that "these things have not been done. Not by white male critics, not by black male critics, not by white women critics […] And most crucially not by Black women critics" (7). This article is often quoted as the leading piece in setting the foundations for Black Women's literary field. Amongst them, Smith argues and exemplifies that the influence of slavery and its political, economic and social restrictions have squashed Black women's creativity (8). Besides, the lack of a political movement that would empower and provide a platform for those eager to analyze and delve into Black women's experience is just another reason for Smith to develop her Black feminist political theory. Furthermore, Smith maintains that white feminists and/or *white feminist theories are of no use when dealing with black women's writers and their works*. Therefore, according to Smith, "until a Black feminist criticism exists, we will not even know what these Black writers mean […] that without a Black feminist critical perspective not only are books by Black women misunderstood, they are destroyed in the process" (9).

Echoing Smith's accusatory words, Alice Walker—together with other Black Sisters—have had to respond more than once to this uncomfortable question: "Why do you think that the Black women writer has been so ignored in America?" Smith herself dialogues with Walker's in her article "Towards a Black Feminist

---

Black Anthology (1983). Regarding her most representative essay we would choose "Writings on Race, Gender and Freedom: The Truth That Never Hurts" (1998).

Criticism" (1978), makes her point stronger, and responds to the very same question in the following terms:

> There are two reasons. […] One is that [Walker] is a woman. Critics seem unusually ill-equipped to intelligently discuss and analyze the works of Black women. Generally, [critics] do not even make attempt; they prefer, rather, to talk about the lives of black women writers, not about what they write (12).

Thus, Smith's urge to use different tools that will set the principles and the foundation for the flourishing of Black Feminist critical theory. They will be immensely useful once the so-called "boom" of Black Women's writers enters the literary scene of white mainstream America during the seventies[23]. As it could not be otherwise, the Black literary female "boom" includes writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara, Gloria Naylor, Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks, to name just a few. In a similar thread of thought, in her article "New Lives and New Letters: Black Women Writers at the End of the Seventies,"[24] scholar, writer and editor Mary Helen Washington, also a member of this "boom," urges well known white critics such as Sandra M. Gilbert or Annette Kolodny to avoid "ignoring what she is not familiar with—Black

---

[23] Having gained her college education, Barbara Smith created new Departments such as Black Women's Studies or Black Studies, and a new generation of Black intellectual women who started to teach different syllabi were instrumental in the apparition of the so-called "boom" of Black Women writers and scholars. In contrast, Black male writers and scholars—such as Ishmael Reed—felt critics were biased and questioned these Black Women works. In particular, they were outraged by the way Black women writers recurrently portrayed black male characters as macho-men and sexist.

women critics, protagonists, writers, lost novels by Black Women, rediscovered one: in short, all the work we have done these past several centuries (1)." Hence, Washington is fully aware of Black Women's contribution to the literary scene of the Seventies, but takes pains to denounce the recurrent myopia shared by mostly white critics and writers alike to whom she recommends to use "new tools."

While it is widely accepted that Barbara Smith coined the term "identity politics" to refer to marginalized Black lesbian women like her, it is believed that Kimberlé Crenshaw apparently revisited Smith's term to later come up with her concept of "intersectionality." In contrast, Deborah McDowell's essay "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" (1980) works as a response to Smith's article where McDowell is not shy to denounce Smith "shortcomings." Thus, McDowell's essay questions Smith's lack of exploitation of the term 'Black Feminism' and complains about the frustrated attempt to formulate clear definitions of what Black Feminism really is. Not only does McDowell consider—like Smith does—that the term should refer to female critics who analyze the works of Black Female writers from a feminist perspective, but she also defends that the term should be applied to any criticism written by a Black Woman regardless of her perspective; a work by a male from a feminist perspective; or even any work by women (29). Following Smith's arguments, though, McDowell moves forward and analyses the impact Black male writings has made on Black Feminist criticism. In this line of thought, McDowell establishes a dialogic conversation with critic and scholar Mary Helen Washington when she refers to Washington's pioneer black women's anthology *Midnight Birds* (1980),[25] and her

[25] Washington's anthologies *Midnight Birds* (1980), and *Black-Eyed Susans* (1990) were praised by *The New York Times* as the first serious attempt to

often-quoted Introduction “In Pursuit of Our Own Story” where Washington debates the importance of providing Black women writers with their due and firmly defends that “Black women are searching for a specific language, specific symbols, specific images with which to record their lives, and, […] for purposes of liberation Black women writers will first insist on their own name, on their own space” (33). In that context, McDowell concurs with Washington and asserts the need for a more in-depth understanding of Black Women writers who have not received the same critical attention black male writers have had. In addition, McDowell concludes by reinforcing and debating whether Black Feminist Criticism should or should not be a separate “enterprise.” In McDowell’s article “New Directions” she concludes by articulating the importance of moving on from this duplicity for the sake of the movement itself:

> Black feminist critics ought to move from this issue to consider the specific language of Black women's literature, to describe the ways Black women writers employ literary devices in a distinct way, and to compare the way Black women writers create their own mythic structures. If they focus on these and other pertinent issues, Black feminist critics will have laid the cornerstone for a sound, thorough articulation of the Black feminist aesthetic. (158)

This dual approach would lead to an ongoing controversy whereby Black [male] critics write and complain about the systematic negative portrayal of black men by Black Female writers.

---

establish an academic syllabus about black women writers who will later become part of the African American cannon such as Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, Ntozake Shangé or Toni Morrison.

In response to the systematic complaints made by black male writers, Michele Wallace's controversial work *The Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979) rejects the recurrent idea that scholars have historically voiced about their black sisters' negative portrayal of black males. Wallace made the headlines and her portray appeared on the front page of *Ms. Magazine*[26] 1979's issue: *The Black Macho and The Myth of the Superwoman*, in Gloria Steinem's[27] words, was supposed to become "the book that will shape the 1980s." Overall, Wallace's book helps to redefine Black patriarchy at the same time she pauses to reflect on the importance of Black women within the Black Movement. As Wallace states, one of the main reasons that "the Black Movement did not work was that black men did not realize they could not wage struggle without the full involvement of women"[28]. Furthermore, she rejects the idea that Black Women occupy a passive position, demonstrates the role of women as hard-working, and defends the relevance of their fighting for their rights. Thus, according to Wallace:

---

[26] Feminist magazine that was co-funded by white journalist Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pitman Hughes in 1971. This periodical delves with a wide range of topics related to women's rights, gender equality and social injustices among others.

[27] Coinciding with the 50th anniversary of Ms. Magazine, it was published the issue "50 Years of Ms.: The Best of the Pathfinding Magazine That Ignited a Revolution". Both Steinem and Walker worked at Ms. Magazine at the same time that having a very cordial working relationship.

[28] From a Blog Post in *Verso Books*. "Michele Wallace on Black Macho and 'the dream world of Black Power" published October 16th 2015. See full post in https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/2289-michele-wallace-on-black-macho-and-the-dream-world-of-black-power

> Women are hard workers and they require little compensation. Women are sometimes willing to die much more quickly than men. Women vote, women march. Women perform tedious tasks. And women cannot be paid off for the death and the suffering of their children. Look at how important women have been to the liberation struggles in Africa. By negating the importance of their role, the efficiency of the Black Movement was obliterated (81).

Wallace's complaint about the way knowledgeable Black Women militants have been systematically relegated to a subservient position—they prepared coffee, took the leaders' shirts to the laundry, stayed behind the curtains when black leaders were on stage, or remained in the office to take phone calls. These are historical situations that caused much frustration to educated, informed, well educated, responsible and intelligent enough women who were forbidden to walk by their leaders. Instead, they were left behind, both physically and metaphorically. In this thread of thought, Toni Cade Bambara's novel *The Salt Eaters* explores the question of Black Women's oppression and lack of individuality. In her work, Bambara provides insight into how oppressive relationships can perpetuate systemic power inequalities and contribute to the oppression of subaltern groups.

Despite the internal fights and the contradictory premises argued, Black Feminist criticism could not have bloomed if it were not for women like Barbara Christian (1943-2000), also a pioneer feminist scholar and the first Black Woman to be granted tenure at Berkeley University in 1978 where she started to teach her syllabus on African American Literary Feminism. In her introduction to *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* Christian's teaching

and learning urges are explained as her daughter insightfully asks her mother for her interest on Black Feminist books: “why is it that you write mostly about black women’s books? You read lots of other books. Is it because you like what they say best?” (x). After a long interior debate, Christian resolves the question and proudly states that “African people are wise when they say ‘speech is knowledge” (xi). Throughout her career, it becomes clear Barbara Christian’s devotion for her African heritage and folklore, as she maintains that “[i]f black women don’t say who they are, other people will and say badly for them” (xii).

With regards to this issue, in Christian’s *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (1980), the author agrees with Barbara Smith when she complains that “very little work had been done on the black woman in literature and that she seldom appeared in focal positions in the black novel” (ix). Christian starts off with an overall portrayal of Black Women and discusses their value “for her reproductive capacity” since they are “seen as different from white women in her capacity to do man’s work.” She also argues that “black women [were] central to the continuation of the slave system as an essential part of the American economy” (7), thus, highlighting the fact that black women’s literary feminist productions date from slavery times—as we have been arguing throughout this chapter.

Christian’s *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985) procures a set of introductory essays that have been written between 1975 until 1984. Here, Christian includes a series of chapters dedicated to famous novels from feminist authors such as Toni Morrison’s, Alice Walker’s or Paule Marshall’s. She presents her anthology with an introduction “Black

Feminist Process: In the Midst of…" where she prefaces the structure of her collection to later offer a personal critic on the literary contributions chosen.

It should be noted that her last book, posthumously published in 2007, *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985-2000,* maintains the dialogue with her previous publications. In this collection of essays, we are introduced to a first section where she defines Black Feminist Criticism through some of her previous mayor essays, in an almost chronological order, and revisits Toni Morrison's, Alice Walker's and Zora Neale Hurston's canonized texts.[29]

Despite Christian's productive life, it is perhaps her seminal and poignant essay "The Race for Theory" (1987) where she most effectively highlights the importance of diverse perspectives and the need for a change in the understanding of literary criticism. This is certainly an important contribution to the development of intersectional approaches as Christian opts for the inclusivity of marginalized voices within African American texts. As she states, "I [Christian] think we need to read the works of our writers in our various ways and remain open to the intricacies of the intersection of language, class, race and gender in literature" (53). Besides, for Christian, one central question is: "For whom are we doing what we are doing when we do literary criticism?." She responds that

[29] Amongst her essays–note the author's divulgative style– "But What Do We Think We're Doing Anyway: The State of Black Feminist Criticism(s) or My Version of a Little Bit of History" (1989), where Christian rememorates her encounter with *Black World*–as she says the most widely read publication of Afro-American literature, cultural and political thought at that time– and more specifically, with its cover where a practically unknown writer–Zora Neale Hurston–was positioned. Other relevant essays are "What Celie Knows that You Should Know" (1990) or "The Race for Theory (1987)".

instead of prioritizing “the incomprehensible critic jargon,” attention should be paid to the intention of the author and the specific usage of language (77). This is clearly related to her thoughts about the many ways black writing has been ignored in America. In Christian’s own words, “since we, as Toni Morrison has put it, are seen as discredited people, it is no surprise, then, that our creations are also discredited” (55). In the same thread of thought, Christian claims that literary criticism has the innate power to regulate what is worthy, what is valuable: “[p]erhaps because those who have affected the takeover have the power (although they deny it) first of all to be published, and thereby to determine the ideas that are deemed valuable” (68). Also, the question of cannon and multiculturalism are also dealt with as she argues its “complexity” and how intertwined are with the notion of racism. She exemplifies this by arguing that “in acknowledging, exploring, and valuing the complexity of this country […] we might be able to difference as a creative charge rather than a threatening reality” (186).

Barbara Christian also dedicates part of her criticism to shed light into Walker’s *The Color Purple* as she argues that it “focuses on intersections on race, class and gender so evident in much of Afro-American women’s literature” and “explores the relations within a family from the perspective of a black girl-woman even as it demonstrates how racism, sexism as class values are modes of oppression that intersects” (22). All in all, Barbara Christian has had an unquestionable importance in the field of Black Feminist criticism; by emphasizing the importance of recognizing different voices and narratives; she challenged the canon and gave a voice and recognition to Black female voices.

At the end of the second wave of the feminist movement that took place in USA during the nineteen-sixties and seventies, white women's groups had not yet agreed to embrace the specific agenda of black women feminists and vice versa. As a result of these ongoing confrontations—that were also inherent in black feminist agendas—some black activists seemed to defend a more radical discourse that was openly related to black women's sexual options. While Barbara Smith has clearly set the record straight by positioning herself as an activist black lesbian woman who writes about and defends the rights of other black lesbian women at a time when the LGBT movement was prosecuted and criminalized in USA, Audre Lorde, a black lesbian feminist writer, a radical militant, and a mother who was born and raised in Harlem, New York, confronted the traditionally homophobic black community by storm. A prolific writer, Lorde was a contributor to the landmark anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) with her two essays "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," and "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," both of them resurfacing in her *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984). Lorde's poignant letter to Mary Daly—a white feminist theologist and radical lesbian feminist, as she describes herself, and the author of *Gyn/Ecology* (1990)—bluntly questions Daly's real knowledge of black women's historical circumstances and socio-economic struggles in the following terms:

> So the question arises in my mind, Mary, do you ever really read the work of black women? Did you ever read my words, or did you merely finger through them for quotations which you thought valuably support an already-conceived idea concerning some old

> and distorted connection between us? This is not a rhetorical question (68).

Instead, it is a recurrent question that was to appear in her work *Sister Outsider*[30] which is considered a path-breaking study concerning the emergence of contemporary feminist theories where, drawing from her own experiences, Lorde explores the intersections between the complexities of her marginal self and cross-identities that constantly intersect with sexual oppression, homophobia, heterosexism, single motherhood, lesbianism, class difference, cancer fighting, or old age, to name just some.

As mentioned throughout these pages, within the features of Black Feminist Theory, it seems apparent that the concept of *intersectionality* has been unconsciously invoked since slavery times by black women who send a straightforward but meaningful message to her [black] sisters and, as I am trying to prove, it has permeated black women's critical theories to these days. Therefore, Audre Lorde's critical approach is not an exception, but an addition—whether consciously or unconsciously. In this vein, we could also argue that scholar Angela Davis (1944-) does also address the fact that an analysis of the experience of African American women within a historically white patriarchal and

---

[30] Lorde's *Sister Outsider* (1987) is a collection of fifteen speeches written between 1976 and 1984. Intensely provocative and brilliantly poignant, Lorde's discourse does not leave her readers indifferent because her existential anger is to some extent peppered with hope. As Cheryl A. Wall (also a critic and a poet) asserts, "Lorde keeps her reader—as she does herself—unsettled" (167). *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory and Writing by Black Women* (1987).

repressive system needs to be framed within the intersection of multiple paradigms.

While Lorde's complex identity—as a black mother, a lesbian, a feminist, a writer, and a social and political activist—helps her to address the intersections that make her the type of woman she became, Angela Davis's multifarious and strong personality together with her solid legal and philosophical educational background, as well as her active involvement in race and gender discriminations, offers her own critique of whites' "interlocking systems of oppression" (echoing bell hooks' mantra) that intersect the lives of the black community in USA.

Davis grew up during the Civil Rights movement and she has devoted her life to fulfill the quest to both denounce and palliate blacks' social injustice. A revolutionary militant, she has become involved in political activism and joined groups for the Black liberation movement. Thus, in Davis' iconic book *Women, Race and Class* (1981), she also approaches issues of intersectionality. To do so, Davis travels back in time and demonstrates that within the black community feminist consciousness, attitudes, speeches and texts start in slavery times, as we have already mentioned. Therefore, Davis's *Women, Race and Class* is a Marxist study that examines the struggle to overcome white-supremacist's oppression at the same time that she explores the role of gender, sexism and classism within a divided society. As it is made clear from the first chapter, and starting in slavery, Davis's goal is to portray the multifarious role that social oppression plays in the lives of black women's bodies and minds. In addition, Davis takes pains to defend their active resistance when she states that "[black

slave women] resisted the sexual assaults of white men, defended their families and participated in work stoppages and revolts" (19).

In her solid and well documented study about the women's movement in the US, Davis outlines the ways in which race, class and gender intersections help to shape the pervasive inequality by discussing the role black women play in the US Black liberation movements. Black women, Davis writes, were regarded as faulty and anomalies:

> Judged by the evolving nineteenth-century ideology of femininity, which emphasized women's roles as nurturing mothers and gentle companions and housekeepers for their husbands, Black women were practically *anomalies"* (5).

Regardless, Davis[31] emphasizes that "[black] women resisted and advocated challenges to slavery at every turn" (21).

Besides Davis's study on intersectionality, it is Kimberlé Crenshaw's[32] "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Politics and Violence Against Women of Color" (1991) who first coined the concept of intersectionality *per se*. Crenshaw, an African American lawyer, saw the necessity to make evident and public the

---

[31] American activist, scholar and writer who gained special recognition for her fight for social justice during 1960s and 1970s. Celebrated for her activism and involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and her association with the Black Panther Party–organization active in the US to combat racial injustice and systemic oppression-.

[32] American scholar, lawyer and civil rights advocate and known for her contributions to the critical race theory and intersectionality. Earned her Juris Doctor from Harvard Law School and her Master of Arts in African American Studies from UCLA.

legal invisibility of the multiple dimensions of oppression experienced by black women workers. In her study, Crenshaw supports the legal theory that upholds the necessity of considering the intersections of class, gender and race in shaping black women's inequality and oppression. When asked about the origins of the concept of intersectionality, Crenshaw (2004) asserts the necessity to create a new term that embodies all kinds of discrimination:

Besides Davis's study on intersectionality, it is Kimberlé Crenshaw's[33] "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Politics and Violence Against Women of Color" (1991) who first coined the concept of intersectionality *per se*. Crenshaw, an African American lawyer, saw the necessity to make evident and public the legal invisibility of the multiple dimensions of oppression experienced by black women workers. In her study, Crenshaw supports the legal theory that upholds the necessity of considering the intersections of class, gender and race in shaping black women's inequality and oppression. When asked about the origins of the concept of intersectionality, Crenshaw (2004) justifies the necessity of creating a new term that embodies all kinds of discrimination—starting with the American legal system that tends to ignore the many overlapping vectors that tend to coincide and increase the number of black women on the bench—.

> It grew out of 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

[33] Prominent American scholar, professor and social theorist, Kimberlé Crenshaw is broadly known by her work in race theory, civil rights and intersectionality. Her work has had an incredible impact on feminist theory as well as a way of combating discriminatory attitudes in society.

> 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 (2).

According to Crenshaw, this is precisely the "subordinated position of the Black woman in the jurisdictional system, and it is also reflected in feminist theory and anti-racist politics" (1). The concept of intersectionality appears in her previous article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989) where she provides an extended argumentation that justifies the necessity of an intersectional analysis of black women's lives and personal experiences:

> Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. (28)

Race, gender and class, as Davis's own title, are the main elements of experience to be analyzed to shape the experiences of Black women—experiences that have been truncated due to detrimental factors such as oppression and racism (poverty, teen-agers pregnancy, poor education, unhealthy diets, ….) This line of analysis will be also discussed by other Feminist theorists such as bell hooks. As far as bell hooks is concerned, following Crenshaw's theories, the issues of race, gender and class are inseparable when writing about black women's bodies. As Lorde points out in her article "There Is Not Hierarchy of Oppressions" (1983): "I simply do not believe that one aspect of myself can profit form the oppression of any other part of my identity" (9). Thus,

the necessity for overlapping identities of race, class, or sex, when addressing black women's stories.

Perhaps this is the reason why hooks borrows Sojourner Truth's rhetoric question in her work *Ain't I a Woman?, Black Women and Feminism* (1981). Here, hooks addresses in an unapologetic and powerful discourse how sexism and racism have made an impact on black women's lives from the early stages of slavery until nowadays. In her work, hooks refuses to accept the preconceived idea of women using the term feminism to their own advantage. She challenges the notion of the term "feminism" being solely used for personal gain at the same time that calling for a more inclusive approach to challenge oppressive politics. Feminism is for everybody and she goes beyond to assert that "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression"[34]. Instead, hooks offers a new vision and re-appropriates the term *feminism*. For hooks, feminism "is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination and oppression" (195).

With the passing of time, though, there has been a clear necessity for white and black female critics to unify forces towards a common class struggle and reconcile their differences—a need that is related to the concept of *sisterhood*. It is hooks who pays particular attention to this term in her *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), when she states: "[t]he emphasis on Sisterhood was often seen as the emotional appeal masking the opportunism of manipulative bourgeois white women. It was seen as a cover-up hiding the fact that many

[34] From "Feminism is for Everybody" by bell hooks. Published online on *Pluto Press*. Read full post on: https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/feminism-is-for-everybody-bell-hooks/

women exploit and oppress other women" (44). As hook adds, "this concept of bonding [sisterhood] directly reflects male supremacist thinking. Sexist ideology teaches women that to be female is to be a victim" (45). Thus, hooks attempts to shed some light into the fact that, within the idea of "sisterhood" and promoting support and recognition among women, some black women can be wrongly labelled and portrayed only by what oppresses and victimizes them. Instead, hooks encourages women to define themselves beyond what makes them the oppressed and overcome that label towards liberation and empowerment.

Just to name some examples, Patricia Bell Scott, in her highly acclaimed book *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982), considers and classifies the entire body of African American women as Black Feminists. On her part, Cheryl Clarke (1983)[35] disagrees categorically: "I criticized Scott [Hill Collins]. Some of the brave women she cited as 'black feminists' were clearly not feminist at the time they wrote their books and still are not to this day" (94).

Whether to include men within Black Feminist Criticism or not has also been broadly discussed by Cheryl Clarke. A similar problem arises when the notion of feminism appears in connection with lesbianism. This has also been a contested argument amongst renowned scholars and critics. Some African American scholars—whether heterosexual, lesbian or bisexual—have openly questioned bell hooks' rather superficial analysis of lesbian feminism in her book *Ain't I a Woman.* Among them, Cheryl Clark's essay "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community" [in *Home Girls*] offers her discontent when she highlights that

[35] Included in Patricia Hill Collins "Defining Black Feminist Thought" (1997).

> The most resounding shortcoming of this work of modern feminism [*Ain't I a Woman?*] is its omission of any discussion of lesbian feminism. […] hooks does not even mention the word lesbian in her book. This is unbearable. Ain't lesbians women too?" (198).

With this open discussion, Clarke fires back at hooks' previous statement where she had stated that "attacking heterosexuality does little to strengthen the self-concept of the masses of women who desire to be with men" (191).

hooks' response to Cheryl Clarke attempts to clarify Clarke's apparent misunderstanding of hook's work and, in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, hooks argues:

> Clearly Clarke misunderstands and misinterprets my point. I made no reference to heterosexism and it is the equation of heterosexual practice with heterosexism that makes it appear that Clarke is attacking the practice itself and not only heterosexism. My point is that feminism will never appeal to a mass-based group of women in our society who are heterosexual if they think that they will be looked down upon or seen as doing something wrong. My comment was not intended to reflect in any way on lesbians because they are not the only group of feminists who criticize and, in some cases, condemn all heterosexual practice (153).

hooks' approach to the notion of lesbianism within the Black Feminist Criticism is no other that inclusive--and she proves it when she states that a "feminist movement to eradicate heterosexism-compulsory heterosexuality-is central to efforts to end sexual oppression (150).

Leaving apart the controversy between hooks and Clarke, there are other contemporary women writers who have come together with the purpose of defining what Black Feminist thought entitles and which are its core features. Among them, we should mention Patricia Hill Collins whose discourse on intersectionality runs parallel to Crenshaw's. As a whole, Collins pays attention to main contemporary feminist theories when she suggests that Black feminist thought "consists of specialized knowledge created by African-American women which clarifies a standpoint of and for Black women." In other words, for Hill-Collins, Black Feminist thought "encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it" (*Black Feminist Thought* 22).

In the same vein, for Hill-Collins, the intersection of gender and race is part and parcel of her critical discourse when she asserts that "while race and gender are both socially constructed categories, constructions of gender rest on clearer biological criteria than do constructions of race" (27). Therefore, what is it like to be a woman? What is for an African American woman to be a feminist? For Hill-Collins, African American women would be labelled as feminists if they also embrace intersectionality and its principles. Not only gender inequalities are needed to be considered, but also race, access to education, unemployment and the labor market, the health system discriminatory practices, aging and physical and/or mental disabilities and class oppressions need to be addressed, just to name a few.

In response to some of these controversial questions, Alice Walker[36] has become a true inspiration and has challenged the traditional denominations. In doing so, Walker has come to play a critical and revolutionary role in the Black Feminist movement by questioning conventional meanings of feminism and coining a new term: *womanism*.

At a critical point when great attention was paid to what Black Feminism retitled, Alice Walker comes up with a revolutionary definition, "womanism." It appears in her short story "Coming Apart" (1979) from her book *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*. In this short story[37], Walker uses "womanist" as a way to redefine what a "black feminist" means.

As Layly Phillips argue in her introduction to *The Womanist Reader* (2006), this act of joining the terms "woman" and "common" at the border of "feminist" squarely within the realm of the "everyday," thereby defying both academic and ideological claims on the definition, labeling, and elaboration of women's resistance activity under the exclusive and limited label "feminist." In two simple yet pregnant sentences, Walker had opened up a new way of talking about the relationship between women, social change, the struggle against oppression, and the quest for full humanity. not feminist" situated a particular mode of women's resistance activity. (xix)

---

[36] Walker is a renowned African-American writer, Women's Right and Civil Rights activist who was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her acclaimed work of fiction *The Color Purple* in 1983.

[37] In this story, Walker herself is heard as she states "Walker is a womanist". The protagonist in the story is unaware of being a "feminist" although she sees herself as a "womanist: "a womanist is a feminist, only more common" (48).

Later on, Walker publishes her collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) where she first uses the term "*womanism"* rather than "feminism." According to Walker, "womanism is to feminist, as purple is to lavender" (xii), thus, intertwining the concepts of *womanism* and *feminism*. The existing dichotomy between the terms *womanist* and *feminist,* on the one hand, and between *purple* and *lavender,* on the other, implies some sort of poetic binaries/connections. While the color *purple* is stronger and more vivid than lavender, Alice Walker's *womanism* is positioned as a stronger version of feminism.

In other words, for Alice Walker, a *womanist* is "a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. And she adds, "that is, a *womanist* "appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength. [A *womanist* is […] committed to survival and wholeness of entire people male *and* female." In addition, Walker makes it clear that a *womanist* "loves music. Loves dance, Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle, Loves the Folk." To conclude that [a *womanis*t] "loves herself. Regardless" (xi). Clearly, Walker redefines the term "feminism," a rather exclusive one where men are not supposed to have a say and, chooses instead "womanism" as a way of embracing roots and redefining both women's and men's position in society, at the same time that she includes women of color, lesbians and homosexuals as well as those who feel they have been previously banned from traditional feminist thought. The apparent amplitude and inclusiveness of Walker's "womanism" and/or "womanist" has appealed to different communities, irrespective of their critical schools. This positive reception is exemplified by Amira Benrioua's essay "Black Feminist Voices and Space in

The Color Purple" (2017) where she proclaims that "Black womanism came to celebrate several aspects found in African Culture such as blackness, spirituality and unity" (33).

In addition, Walker's "womanism" both addresses and appraises Black women's psychological strength in times of sorrow and misfortune. Besides, it is in Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" where she pays tribute to and celebrates the innumerable times that Black women's creativity has been crucial to overcome life situations whenever they have suffered from oppression or marginalization. They might be sick and tired of being sick and tired, but, as Walker puts it: "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, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day" (239).

It is interesting to note that, for Walker, creativity and domestic life are two highly interconnected ideas. Walker gracefully merges them and associate them with a certain state of accomplishment and self-satisfaction for Black women. Furthermore, taking her own mother as role model, the author questions herself: "[…] did my overworked mother have time to know or care about feeding the creating spirit?" (239). She recalls that due to her mother's labored life in the fields, "there was never a moment for her [mother] to sit down, undisturbed, to unravel her own private thoughts," and yet it is in awe of her mother that she herself "went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant and creative spirit that the black woman inherited" (238). Walker quickly answers the question as, for her, "[t]he answer is so simple that many of us have spent years discovering it. We have constantly looked high, when we should have looked high–and low" (239). In the end, as Walker

suggests,[38] people will find their creative spirit in what is in front of them. Amira Benrioua (2017) also seems to respond to Walker's question when she argues that "Walker's mother succeeded in finding places in her domestic life that allowed her to nourish and develop her creativity: gardening, singing, sewing, and telling stories-" Interestingly enough, all these so-called domestic jobs and experiences would later become interesting subjects for Walker's own discussions (34).

Hence, the term *Womanism* has been widely discussed among critics and authors, and Walker herself has defended her own views. In an interview for the *New York Times Magazine* published in 1984, Alice Walker candidly comments on some of her reasons to come up with the word *womanism* and how she feels about it:

> I don't choose womanism because it is "better" than feminism […] I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it; because I cherish the spirit of the women (like Sojourner) the word calls to mind, and because I share the old Ethnic-American habit of offering society a new word when the old word it is using fails to describe behaviour and change that only a new word can help it more fully see.[39]

---

[38] From "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens", an influential essay written by Alice Walker and published in 1974. It is included in her collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*.

[39] Alice Walker, "The Black Women's Story," *New York Times* Sunday Magazine, February 12, 1984, 94.

Among the multitude who has embraced Walker's controversial term, I would like to mention African writers Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, and Clenora Hudson-Weems who use it in their own respective ways.

In 1985, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi,[40] a Nigerian Womanist literary critic, published "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English" where she demonstrates her personal and academic relationship with the term Walker had already coined: "I arrived at the term 'womanism' independently and was pleasantly surprised to discover that my notion of its meaning overlaps with Alice Walker's" (72). Later, on Ogunyemi adds: "She [Walker] employs it to denote the metamorphosis that occurs in an adolescent girl, such as Ruth [From *The Life of Grange Copeland*[41]] or Celie, when she comes to a sense of herself as a woman." Ogunyemi concludes by asserting that "the young girl inherits *womanism* after a traumatic event such as menarche or after an epiphany or as a result of the experience of racism, rape, death in the family, or sudden responsibility" (72).

Interestingly enough, Ogunyemi also delves into what being a womanist entitle, and she finds a sort of invisible bridge that connects the past in slavery with the present African diaspora when she argues that "[womanists] explore past and present connections between black America and black Africa" (242). Furthermore, placing African tradition—such as polygamy–in the forefront,

---

[40] Nigerian-born feminist literary critic and writer who taught and helped establish Africana Studies at Sarah Lawrence College–Alice Walker's alma mater in New York–. Author of *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (1996),

[41] Novel written by Alice Walker and published in 1970. Ruth is one of the main characters of the story. The novel explores themes of racism, family dynamics, violence and the quest of personal identity.

Ogunyemi highlights womanists' existing empathy because "like amiable co-wives with invisible husbands, they work together for the good of their people" (74). Besides, Ogunyemi shares with Walker her passion for Hurston's most famous character when she refers to "Hurston's indomitable Janie Crawford," the strong determined female protagonist of one of the novels which form the main subject of this dissertation: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

Interestingly enough, Ogunyemi's theory does not differ much from that of Clenora Hudson-Weems*'* new term: *Africana Womanism.* Hudson-Weems's term appears for the first time as the title of her book: *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (1993). However, according to Hudson-Weems's, her term "is not to be confused with Alice Walker's 'womanist'," since she argues that "clearly the interest here [Walker's womanist] is almost exclusively in the woman, her sexuality and her culture" (23). In Hudson Weems' opinion "here's a clear lack of difference in color as she points out that "the Africana womanist is slightly different form the mainstream feminist," at the same time she claims the need "to separate and distinct identity for the Africana woman and her movement" (24). Finally, Hudson-Weems makes it clear that "Africana womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture and, therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women" (154-5).

This new term "Africana Womanism" comes up in Susan Arndt's interview and published under the title "African Gender Trouble and African Womanism: An Interview with Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Wanjira Muthoni." In this interview, Ogunyemi is asked about "the genesis and basic ideas of womanism" to what

she answers: “You mean African Womanism?” (714). As Chikwenye Ogunyemi criticizes white Western feminism for being centered, when she thinks about womanism she was “thinking about those areas that are relevant for Africans but not for blacks in America–issues like extreme poverty and in-laws’ problems, older women oppressing younger women, women oppressing their co-wives, or men oppressing their wives.” (714)

As Lalyli Phillips states in her introduction “Womanism: On Its Own” to *The Womanist Reader*, “none of these authors [Ogunyemi and Hudson-Weems] created something new, rather, each named something that had been in existence for some time” (xx). Here, although both terms–Clenora Hudson-Weems’ “Africa Womanism” and Alice Walker's “African American womanist”–places an emphasis on the experiences and struggles of Black women, a distinction between these two terms needs to be made. On the one hand, “African Womanism” delves into the experiences and struggles of Black African women within the African diaspora and culture. As for Walker’s understanding of “African American Womanism,” she accentuates intersectionality and refers to the experiences and struggles of African American women within the context of both African diaspora and the US.

Apart from Alice Walker, feminist critics such as Patricia Hill Collins or bell hooks, and Toni Cade Bambara[42] have also discussed ‘Black Womanism’ in the revolutionary and much praised anthology *The Black Woman* (2005). In this

[42] African American writer, educator and social activist. Toni Cade Bambara discusses race, gender and social justice. Bambara was deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement advocating for racial and gender equality. Published in 1980, the novel *The Salt Eaters focuses* on intersectionality and African Cultural heritage.

collection of essays, Bambara rooted for key texts that promoted Black Power, and it contains essays that deal with intersectionality between gender, politics and culture from the perspective of powerful black female writers such as Paule Marshall or Alice Walker. Bambara's introduction offers a description of what a Black Woman is—an eclectic and inclusive description like no other where women from all stages of life are named and celebrated:

> She is a college graduate. A drop-out. A student. A wife. A divorcee. A mother. A lover, A child of the ghetto. A product of the bourgeoisie. A professional writer. A person. A person who never dreamed of publication. A solidarity individual. A member of the Movement. A gentle humanist. A violent revolutionary. She is angry and tender, loving and hating. She is all these things–and more. (xvii-xviii)

For Bambara, a Black Woman encompasses all types of societies, a strong female figure whose starting point in life and even her profession does not matter, a member of the community who deserves equality, respect and value. In the same vein, Paule Marshall's autobiographical essay "From the Poets in the Kitchen" (1977) portrays her 1930s' childhood in detail and shows how race, class, and gender discrimination played an important part in shaping individual girls like her—whose parents have emigrated from Barbados, worked really hard, and lived in a brownstone house when racism was rampant in USA:

> I started asking the reference librarian, who was white, for books by Negro writers, although I must admit I did so at first with a feeling of shame–the shame I and many other used to experience in those days whenever the word 'Negro' or 'colored' came up" (632).

Against all odds, poverty, emigration, poor school facilities, and an absent father, Marshall was able to stand up: “By the time I was 8 o 9, I graduated from the corner of the kitchen to the neighborhood library, and thus form the spoken to the written word” (631).

Marshall’s essay sheds light to a time when black women worked outside—mostly as nurses or in the kitchens of white people--and were also expected to adopt submissive and servant-like attitudes towards their husbands as they were part of a male-centered and dominating culture. As a matter of fact, as Marshall highlights in her biographical essay, these women’s domestic responsibilities and submission do not end in the kitchens of the white houses since they also have to tend to the needs of their own households: “They [black women] made their way back to our neighborhood, where they would sometimes stop off to have a cup of tea or cocoa together before going home to cook dinner for their husbands and children” (628). To some extent, Marshall reflects the idea of coming together that is closely connected with the idea of sorority and women bonding through female friendships.

Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, bell hooks, Barbara Christian, Barbara Smith, Patricia Hill Collins or Sojourner Truth, to name a few, are only some of the most representative literary critics that have contributed to shape contemporary Black women feminists’ goals such as the fight for fair treatment and a decent school, gender and sexual equality and the cessation of race discrimination. Starting with Maria Stewart or Sojourner Truth, and from the nineteenth-century on, these women have created a legacy that has been passed on from one generation to the next. Only recently, Nigerian Chimamanda Ngozi

Adichie has become one of those African writers who unceasingly preach the importance of becoming feminists.

We Should All Be Feminists gathers one of her most outstanding and outspoken speeches,[43] later published under the same title. Using personal episodes that take place in her Nigerian hometown, Adichie interrogates once again the notion of what it means to be a "feminist" at the same time she tries to dismantle race and gender stereotypes that have been ingrained in African people's minds. As Adichie argues, not being aware of what being "feminist" entitles, does not make you less of a feminist, in the end, as Maya Angelou says in her poem "Phenomenal Women"[44]: "Just why my head's not bowed./ I don't shout or jump about /Or have to talk real loud. /When you see me passing, It ought to make you proud. […] Cause I'm a woman / Phenomenally." (4) Adichie clearly exemplifies that her great-grandmother's life was that of a phenomenal woman and a feminist at that when she argues:

> My great-grandmother from stories I've heard, was a feminist. She ran away from the house of the man she did not want to marry and married the man of her choice. She refused, protested, spoke up when she felt she was being deprived of land and access because she was female. She did not know that word feminist. But it doesn't mean she wasn't one. (47)

---

[43] Speech delivered at a TED talk in Euston in 2012. See in link: https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_we_should_all_be_feminists

[44] Poem included in her book *Phenomenal Women: Four Poems Celebrating Women* (1994)

As time changes so does what being a feminist entitles. For Adichie, identifying as a feminist does not prevent her from relating to men on equal terms. On the contrary, it is a state of mind that should be accepted an interiorized. A way of living, a set of values that is imperative to infuse to future generations. As Adichie concludes:

> More of us should reclaim that Word [feminist]. My own definition of a feminist is a man or a woman who says, yes, there's a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix it, we must do better. All of us, women and men, must do better" (48).

On a more contemporary note, black feminist has and still is object of criticism and public revindication and, as CNN headlines in his article "Intersectionality has become a hot-button topic in recent years." In this article [45], Leah Asmelash provides some useful background for the term "intersectionality," comments how its definition has been twisted into political agendas, and makes use of really aggravating comments, and concludes that *intersectionality* "has become a form of identity politics in which the value of your opinion depends on how many victim groups you belong to."

Also recently, we are witness to a different way of revindication through the media and famous artists and personalities. An example of this emerging new feminist movement can be drawn from publicity and the music industry. Thus, *Ms. Magazine*[46] shed some light into Beyoncé show where the headlines run

---

[45] Article published digitally on *CNN US* on April 19th 2023. Read full article https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/19/us/intersectionality-feminism-explainer-cec/index.html

[46] Article published by Anita Little in *Ms. Magazine* on August 25th 2014 "Beyonce at the VMAs: Feminist and Flawless" Retrieved from:

“Feminist” had a front row seat,” to later add, “If you missed the MTV Video Music Awards last night–broadcasted on August 24th 2014–, there was only one image you really needed to see: Beyoncé literally putting the spotlight on feminism”. As the article dwells on, “[t]his wasn’t certainly the first time that any Black artist has put herself in the spotlight but it undoubtedly stood up by doing it in in the middle of the MTV Awards”. Then Anita Little exteriorizes what many people felt at the time, “[…] seeing the word FEMINIST emblazoned on a huge screen behind the singer was a galvanizing sight to behold.” This modern wave of feminism targets an audience that may or may not have been interested in literary criticism of the previous decades but, intrinsically, they are reflecting the same ideals. Anita Little continues with her opinion on academic feminism:

> Beyonce has shown, as bell hooks expressed in her epochal 2000 text, that “feminism is for everybody. By lifting verses from Adichie’s TED talk on gender equality and using it to inspire her own music, Beyoncé is bridging the gap between academic feminism and everyday feminism. If young women attendees at *her On the Run Tour* can scream out the lyrics to “Flawless” and mean every word, who says they can’t eventually read Audre Lorde?

Whittington and Jordan (2014) with their publication “Bey Feminism vs. Black Feminism” extend Beyoncé’s importance of a new era on feminist critique at the same time that coining a new term “Bey Feminism”: “Beyoncé had done what no artist has ever done. She released an album […] without a record label

---

https://msmagazine.com/2014/08/25/beyonce-at-the-vmas-feminist-and-flawless/

and without any of the public knowing. […] This was not the only surprise about her album. For many, this was Beyoncé's debut as a self-proclaimed feminist." (156)

Whether Beyoncé defines herself–or is seen–as a feminist or not was object of study with even Adichie herself giving some insight into the artist's underlying intentions, as Liza Blake recalls in her article on *Billboard*[47], "Adichie has praised Beyoncé for promoting the well-being and independence of women and of herself, but according to Adichie, the pop star might put too much weight on the necessity of men." Miss Adichie's words exemplify a current tendency where men are often the focus of women's conversations:

> I think men are lovely, but I don't think that women should relate everything they do to men*: Did he hurt me, do I forgive him, did he put a ring on my finger?* We women are so conditioned to relate everything to men. Put a group of women together and the conversation will eventually be about men. Put a group of men together and they will not talk about women at all, they will just talk about their own stuff.

Lately, new influential generations of Black female artists such as Beyoncé are redefining what Feminism and Black Feminism in particular embody. For example, in her article "The Vibe Was Silver: Beyoncé Brings Afrofuturistic

[47] Article published online on *Billboard* by Liza Blake entitled "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Speaks Out on Being Featured on Beyoncé's "****Flawless". Retrieved from: https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-beyonce-flawless-interview-7534428/

Feminism to the World Stage" (2023), Sally Anderson Boström refers to her latest World Tour "Renaissance 2023", and argues that Beyoncé has achieved to rediscover a new African aesthetic by introducing "Afroturism."[48] Intrinsically speaking, too, the bodies of women of color also become the target of analysis in relation to the *male gaze*. This is referred in detail in Janell Hobson's article "Too Sexy to be the 'Perfect Feminist?" [49]" where Hobson refers to and analyzes contradictory opinions about Beyonce's validity to be a feminist regarding the way she uses her body. According to Hobson:

> While many have praised Beyoncé for her bold stance, there are still others who just can't wrap their minds around Beyoncé identifying as a "feminist." It's that sexy brand of hers. She's "too sexy," "too heteronormative," "too male-gaze-driven" in her sexualized spectacle.

Following this thread of thought, Little (2014) reflects on Miss Hobson's words in relation to black women bodies and how they are perceived. She concludes by stating the following:

> What certain feminists clearly want is to regulate the bodies of women of color in order to eradicate difference. Since when did feminism reinforce dress codes instead of women's autonomy and

---

[48] As Boström defines in her article published in *Ms. Magazine*, "Afrofuturism is a trending movement in literature, music and the visual arts, seen as a way of understanding the African diaspora, not by looking back, but by looking forward." Article retrieved from: *https://msmagazine.com/2023/06/14/beyonce-renaissance-afrofuturism-feminism-black-women/*

[49] Article published in *Ms. Magazine* on September 3rd 2014. Retrieved from: https://msmagazine.com/2014/09/03/too-sexy-to-be-the-perfect-feminist/

> solidarity with other women, in which we support all of our choices while also recognizing how those choices are sometimes limited by intersectional oppression?

It becomes clear, then, that Beyoncé–as any other black woman with a platform to speak up– has become part of what Amanda Franklin calls "Celebrity Feminism."[50] In her thesis, Franklin refers to the fact that "various critiques of celebrity feminism denounced its tendency to deliver messages of gender equality in a shiny package, while avoiding the actual work of feminism and ignoring intersectionality" (6). There is no reason to deny that Walker's way of activism differs from today's movements and Roxane Gay's (2014)[51] words exemplify the case:

> When a pretty young woman has something to say about feminism, all of a sudden, that broad ignorance disappears or is set aside because, at last, we have a more tolerable voice proclaiming the very messages feminism has been trying to impart for so damn long.

New currents in Black Feminist thought are necessary as society itself has evolved. New figures are emerging as platforms are shifting. Nowadays, for

---

[50] From Amanda Franklin's Thesis: "Celebrity Feminism: Exploring the Influence of a Famous Feminist" (Oklahoma, 2016). Retrieved from: https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/215229085.pdf

[51] Professor of English at Purdue University. Has made significant contributions to African American studies within Intersectional Feminism dealing with the multiple dimensions of oppression and privilege. She is the author of *Bad Feminis*t (2014), a collection of essays where Gay is not shy to deal with provocative and controversial issues on Black feminism.

example, visual art is allowing people from outside the “criticism areas” to divulge new ideals. These new ideals are part and parcel of Black female predecessor’s activism, from bell hooks to Audre Lorde, Walker or Barbara Smith all of them have been part of a whole—that of a Black Feminist thought.

Black Feminist thought has been broadly discussed over the past decades. *Intersectionality*, *Womanism*, *Black Feminism*, *Africana Womanism*, *Feminist*, all these terms are the product of the same roots: the fight for equality and the radical denounce of discriminatory and denigratory attitudes on the grounds of gender, race, politics or class. Throughout this Dissertation, I will follow this belief to distinguish the common but also distinctive features in which Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Walker’s *The Color Purple* succeed in portraying strong female black women. Janie’s and Celie’s relationships are the focus of this study as we pause to analyze how they have outlived their respective oppressive marriages as well as reflecting on how Black men’s violence affect them. In the same line of thought, Janie’s and Celie’s relationships with other women and the so-called “women’s bond” is an undeniable part of my analysis. In addition, to comprehend Janie’s and Celie’s respective life journeys, it is necessary to shed light on their sisterhood. Overall, it is my purpose to analyze the extent to which Hurston and Walker have created strong Black Women that have transcended their time and, eventually, build bridges and build consciousness for generations to come.

3. Looking for a Role Model: "In Search of Zora"

"We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. If they do, it is our duty as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children. If necessary, bone by bone"

Alice Walker *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1979)*

A timeless sisterhood linked through time, and an unbreakable bond. There are many ways to describe how intertwined Hurston's and Walker's lives and literary careers have been–and still are. Both Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker have brought to life two of the most important literary pieces within African-American literature–*Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and *The Color Purple* (1982), respectively, where both works vindicate female empowerment and their female protagonists dare to raise their voices for equal rights in male-centered societies. Coming from different social backgrounds, living at different times and places, and having different educational and life opportunities, Walker manages to bring Zora back from the shadows and offers her a much-deserved place in black literary history for readers to celebrate.

Walker starts her article "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and A Partisan View" as follows: "I became aware of my need of Zora Neale Hurston's work some time before I knew her work existed" (83). While auditing a black-literature class taught by the acclaimed writer Margaret Walker, a member of the

Chicago Black Renaissance,[52] Walker heard about Zora Neale Hurston for the first time when she was pursuing some research on authentic Southern black witchcraft and voodoo practices. There she was. A misunderstood and underrated author whose pathbreaking writings were clouded by an all-black male literate community.[53] Having found 'that Zora'—the folklorist, novelist, anthropologist and the one who had first collected authentic black folklore--Walker became completely hypnotized by the writer who became her artistic and intellectual model of inspiration for her future works.

---

[52] Margaret Walker (1915-1958) is considered a "visionary." Her reputation rests on her first work of fiction, *Jubilee* (1966) that is considered "the first truly historical black American novel," and her collection of poetry "For My people" (1942). A Southerner (born in Alabama), she also shares with Hurston and Walker her passion for the richness of her black culture and the heritage of the black oral tradition. This is an excerpt from *My People* (Interestingly enough, one might hear echoes of Walker's poem in Hurston's essay under a similar title, "My People! My People! For the cramped bewildered years we went to school to learn/ to know the reasons why and the answers to and the people who and the places where and the days when, in memory of the bitter hours when we discovered we were black and poor and small and different and nobody cared and nobody wondered and nobody understood" Source: Poetry Foundation https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/21850/for-my-people

[53] Here, it is important to refer to the "one at a time mentality" by which Huston's mainstream America would feel "threatened" by more than one black author on the literary scene, as June Jordan argues in her essay "On Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston: Notes Towards a Balancing of Love and Hatred," included in her book *Civil Wars* (1995). Here June explores the relation between destructive nature and hatred and how it would perpetuate oppression when left unchecked.

Walker's first encounter with Hurston's works was *Mules and Men* (1935). She was so delighted by Hurston's astonishing use and transcription of real black oral tradition that she introduced it to her family and Zora's writing "gave them [Walker's family] back all the stories they had forgotten or of which they had grown ashamed" (*In Search* 85). More than anything, Walker became fascinated by the richness of Hurston's stories because they were filled with "a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings" (85), together with her interest in racial diversity and her familiarity with an all-black community in Eatonville, Florida.

This instant "crush" led Walker to considering both *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* key texts for her own research and literary career. Later on, Walker's urge to get to know Zora led her to look into the author's critical reception—a mistake that she would later admit. As Walker herself recalls, after reading "the misleading, deliberately belittling, inaccurate, and generally irresponsible attacks on her work and her life," Walker became for a time paralyzed with confusion and fear (*In Search* 86). Ironically, it was the work of a white male and a pioneering African American Literature scholar who called Walker's attention. Since then, Robert Hemenway–author of *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (1977)[54]–is considered the first critic to pay attention to

[54] When Walker started her quest for Hurston's, the only reliable/existing sources were Hemenway's biography—the first one to be published—and Lillie P. Howard's scholarly article published in *CLA Journal* (1977). Walker's personal journey first appeared published by *Ms. Magazine* under the title "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," on March 1976. Within the Spanish academia, there exist the following: (Fraile, U Salamanca, and María Frías, UDC, *Marriage Does Not Make Love: El discurso del matrimonio en la obra de Zora Neale Hurston*, Italian

Hurston[55], and to openly denounce that "[Hurston] lived in a country that fails to honor its black artists" (Hemenway 7).

It was precisely Hurston's lack of recognition that led Walker to visit Fort Piece, Florida, in an attempt to rediscover Zora. Along with her companion, the literary scholar Charlotte Hunt, and pretending to be Miss Hurston (Zora's distant niece), Walker sets on a quest to find the long-lost artist. Once Walker found Hurston's whereabouts, she bought a grave stone and paid tribute to her. In addition, Walker's journey–both physical and emotional–compelled her to travel

---

Paola Boi ("Towards a Feminine Auto-Aesthetics: Writing as a Subversive Dance in 'Drenched in Light' by Zora Neale Hurston," 1998, pp. 107-43) or Orquídea Moreira Ribeiro's "Racial Complexities in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston" (2007) as part of "Revista de Letras".

[55] Apart from Hemenway's biography on Hurston, it is important to refer to Valery Body's critically acclaimed most recent biography *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (2003). As with Walker's, Boyd's instant and long-lived devotion for Hurston pushed her to revisit Hurston's life and works. Here, Boyd summarizes her never-ending attachment to Hurston: "I felt a really strong connection with Zora Neale Hurston when I first read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in 1981, during my freshman year of college. I was just amazed that a book published in 1937 could speak to me so clearly and so resonantly through the decades. After that, I read everything I could find by Hurston and everything I could find about her, including Robert Hemenway's 1977 biography of her. By 1990, when the first Zora Neale Hurston Festival was held in her hometown of Eatonville, I had become a full-fledged Zora enthusiast. So, I attended that festival with a group of friends. We had such a good time that we decided to make it an annual pilgrimage." "An Interview with Valerie Boyd and Evelyn C. White": Retrieved from: https://inmotionmagazine.com/ac05/f_pride1.html

to Eatonville, “the city of the five lakes” and Zora’s birthplace[56]. When Mathilda Moseley met Walker, she admitted: “I don’t think most people [in Eatonville] know anything about Zora Neale Hurston, or know about any of the great things she did” (95). First introduced by Hurston in *Mules and Men*, Mrs. Moseley is the protagonist of “Why Women Always Take Advantage of Men,” a folktale where the balance between men’s and women’s power becomes altered by God against the Devil’s doing. According to Mrs. Moseley narration, in the past “de women was just as strong as de man and both of ‘em did de same things” (31). In the tale, men could not comply with being inferior to women and they reached God to ask him to swing the balance in their favor, granting them more strength than that of women. As the woman angrily asks God to restore the balance, God refuses to concur, leaving her to reach the Devil for help and, as Cheryl A. Wall (1989) reflects “she [woman] gains the keys to the kitchen, the bedroom and the cradle; with these she can counter man’s greater power” (*Mules and Men and Women* 667). Thus, Walker refers to Mrs. Mosely as “the woman who tells that ‘woman-is-smarter-than-man.” And this is one of the reasons why Walker definitely chose to bring Hurston back to life.

In addition, since Hurston’s arrival in New York, she was soon noted by the young black male writers of the “Harlem Renaissance.” Among them, Hurston’s counterpart black folklore-lover Langston Hughes describes Hurston in his autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940), as follows:

---

[56] As it appears in *Zora Neale Huston: Digital Archives* webpage, it has been recently found out that Hurston’s birthplace was Notasulga (Alabama). Her family moved to Eatonville after her birth. She often changed the date and place of her birth. Retrieved from: https://chdr.cah.ucf.edu/hurstonarchive/?p=hurstons-life

> She was full of sidesplitting anecdotes, humorous tales, and tragicomic stories […] she could make you laugh one minute, and cry the next. To many of her white friends she was the perfect '*darkie'*–a naïve, childlike, humorous and highly colored Negro. (239)

One could wonder then that if she was considered so brilliant and talented, why had Hurston–and her works–been forced into total obscurity for decades?

In view of the injustice committed, it became a priority for Walker to trace back Hurston's whereabouts from her childhood to her more mature years; to unveil her works; and to reach out for people who might remember. However, the old lady had a faint memory and she informed that Hurston should be buried somewhere nearby. Notwithstanding, Walker manages to locate Hurston's burial site in the Garden of the Heavenly Rest, with nothing at sight but bushes and weeds as tall as Walker's waist. There was no tombstone; no evidence of a genius; an artist lying underneath; no memorial to visit, honor or just pay respect to. Hurston's estrangement from her family and her lack of economic resources left her with nothing but a nameless spot in a long-forgotten cemetery.

However, Walker brings Hurston back to life and places an engraved tombstone that reads: "Zora a Genius of the South – Novelist, Folklorist – Anthropologist 1901-1960." Knowing that when Hurston parted this world, she was poor, lonely, and sick, Walker not only placed a landmark for people to visit and worship her, but, through Walker's genuine commitment and admiration, she also managed to bring to life an iconic literary figure for generations of African Americans to come. As Shanna Greene Benjamin and Nellie McKay (2015) gracefully point out, "Alice Walker formed connections and built trust among

those who knew, knew of, or lived near Zora Neale Hurston to rescue the Barnard-educated folklorist from obscurity" (17). It remains absolutely true that if it had not been for Walker's journey—both physical and literary—Zora's literary and artistic contributions would have been confined to oblivion.

4. Zora Neale Hurston in Context

4.1. The Harlem Renaissance: "*When the Negro Was in Vogue"*

"*Zora was a woman who wrote and spoke her mind*

–as far as one could tell, practically always.[57] "

Hemenway, Foreword. *Literary Biography* (xiv)

The *Roaring Twenties* (also known as *The Jazz Age*)[58] is a period that has been broadly discussed and which numerous historians and *litteratti* have tried to define. When referring to this age, numerous authors–both Black and White–and works need to be mentioned such is the case of Langston Hughes' *The Big Sea*, Houston Baker's *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), Gloria I. Hull's *Color, Sex and Poetry: Three Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), D. L. Lewis's *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1997), Alain Locke's *The New Negro* (1925) or Mar Gallego's *Passing Novels in the Harlem Renaissance: Identity, Politics and Textual Strategies* (2003), among others. In addition, among the black community, the Jazz Age provided a platform for Black artists and musicians to

---

[57] From Hemenway's *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (29).

[58] *The Jazz Age* is a widely disputed term and it is generally attributed to F. Scott Fitzgerald as most of his characters embrace the post-war "carpe diem" mentality of the time. The phrase became used after the publication of Fitzgerald's collection of short stories *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922). However, in 1919, an editorial titled "The Age of Jazz" appeared in a newspaper from Indiana—and the arguments have continued for long when trying to prove whether Fitzgerald "invented" the term or just "popularized" it due to his literary recognition.

thrive and gain recognition, due in part to the support of White high-class patrons and sponsors. Carl Van Vechten–a white writer and photographer– needs to be named as he became known for using his connections to support Black writers and artists. In the same line of thought, A'Lelia Walker was a prominent figure in uniting White high-class socialite and the Black Community. Daughter of Madam C. Walker, she was a businesswoman whose lavish parties in Harlem attracted influential personalities from both Black and White communities. This age was also known as The Prohibition which restricted the consumption and acquisition of alcohol in the US and made prominent the creation of underground bars where people from different backgrounds gathered and socialized.

Also known as *The Harlem Renaissance*, this period meant a great deal in the life of Zora Neale Hurston because it was precisely at this time when Afro-American culture started to become more widely known and recognized due to the blossoming of different artistic manifestations such as jazz, painting, dance and literature. To this it can be added that Hurston herself soon became considered "the Queen of the Black Harlem Renaissance" in New York. She became an iconic figure, an example and a role model to follow–both personally and professionally–for generations of Black women writers to come.

In her article *Dust Tracks on a Road:* Zora Neale Hurston and the Form of Black Autobiography," Ann L. Rayson, one of the earliest specialists in the field, describes Hurston as "a flamboyant individualist," and this is just one of her character traits (2). Apart from Walker's, Hurston's artistic and literary works have influenced a great number of black writers—preferably women—and, with the passing of time, she has become a Black American icon and an advocate for gender equality. Before briefly adventuring into the life of Miss Hurston, I find it

imperative to first discuss the intellectual time she inhabited, then called "The Harlem Renaissance" or "The New Negro Renaissance." This was a period for the discovery and appreciation of Black arts, the enrichment of African American culture and the variety of artistic manifestations. According to Darryl Dickson-Carr (2005), *The Harlem Renaissance* produced "one of the most prolific and artistically sound collections of literature by and about African Americans" (6).

There exist several historical, economic and socio-cultural factors that decisively influenced the development of this cultural movement together with its birth and expansion in the district of Harlem (New York), an originally well-to-do Jewish and all-white neighbourhood. Due to the Great Migration,[59] Harlem–"a city within a city" or "the city of refuge"–would expand into a black neighbourhood by the beginning of the 1920s. It is little by little when we observe a progressive migratory movement of blacks who move to the North running away from the racist and discriminatory Southern States while, at the same time, whites—whether Jews, Irish, or Dutch—leave exclusive Harlem for the security of [white] suburbs.

In addition, the blooming of The Harlem Renaissance was partially due to a selective group of very talented and highly educated black people who

[59] The Great Migration encompasses the movement of thousands of African-Americans who escape from the horrors of the rural South (such as bad crops, poverty, institutionalized racism, discrimination and lynching) to the urban North at the beginning of IWW. In USA, large numbers of European immigrants were fighting for their countries, and there were vacant jobs that were offered to the Southern blacks. They leave because they have nothing to lose, and, thus, Harlem becomes a sort of "Promised Land" or "The Land of Milk and Honey."

participated in what has been considered the literary uprising that drastically changed the nature of Black literacy.

The dialectical development of political–and therefore social–critical thinking through this turn of the century was one of the main foundations on which the Harlem Renaissance was laid. In this thread of though, in his autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940), Langston Hughes proudly starts his chapter "When the Negro Was in Vogue" as follows: "The 1920s were the years of Manhattan's black Renaissance. White people began to come to Harlem in droves" (223). In the same proud tone, Henry Louis Gates Jr., (1997), observes that the newly gathered black community worked "not only with a new sense of confidence and purpose but also with a sense of achievement never before experienced by so many black artists in the long, troubled history of the peoples of African descent in North America" ("Harlem Renaissance Essay" 929).

Hence, as Hemenway comes to notice, its appeal was also due to the fact that The Harlem Renaissance was considered one of the most carefree historical and social periods in modern American society (27). Harlem's burning appetite was also satisfied by waves of Caucasians in search of a new kind of excitement, a sort of "aphrodisiac" that enabled white people to free their "primitive selves" and satiate their hidden thirst for black bodies, all-night exclusive black clubs, black music and all sort of forbidden liquors.

However, despite the ovation that black artistic creations received, the Harlem Renaissance was not free from racism. Furthermore, not all black artists would agree on a specific agenda. Take, for example, Hughes and his often-quoted essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (2000) where, tongue in cheek, he openly rejects an apparent assimilation and racial uplifting: "O, be

respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are, say the Negroes. Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you, say the whites" (29). Hughes' ironic words highlight the existence of a generation gap not only between the old and the new black generations of new artists, but he also refers to whites' hypocrisy. Thus, there does not exist just one specific ideology in the Harlem Renaissance, but a community of writers and artists who freely try to express themselves in opposite and controversial ways.

Different critics and writers have argued about the chronology of the "Harlem Renaissance." While Nathan Huggins[60] states that this movement applies to a decade of change, between World War I and the beginning of the Great Depression, Hemenway–Hurston's biographer–believes that "the Harlem Renaissance was more a spirit than a cultural movement" (35).

As for the African-American community, the Harlem Renaissance encompasses the artistic and cultural movement that develops in the period between the race riots of 1919 and the Great Depression of 1929. It is a time when a real creative explosion of black culture occurs or, in other words, there occurs a cultural "flowering" and Black culture awakening. Overall, it was a brilliant and outstanding moment in the history of African-Americans.[61]

---

[60] American historian and educator, leading scholar in African-American studies and the author of *Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (1976).

[61] At the time of the Harlem Renaissance the derogatory word "nigger" was associated with slavery times; "coloured people" became fashionable after Abolition until the term "New Negro" becomes part of this new and controversial artistic movement. If it is true that "black" became accepted and welcome in the

Notwithstanding, racism was still rampant in the North, as James Weldon Johnson clearly denounces in his essay "Harlem: The Culture Capital" (1925), where he is not shy to denounce the white community's rampant xenophobia once they become aware that the population of *their* Harlem is "darkening:"

> Then the whole movement, in the eyes of the whites, took on the aspect of an "invasion; they became panic-stricken and began fleeing as from a plague. The presence of a coloured family in a block, no matter how well-bred and orderly, was sufficient and precipitate to flight. (304)

Whether white supremacists and racist Americans liked it or not, it could be argued that the Harlem neighborhood was also made up of an interesting group of "well-bred and orderly" black people. I am referring to a crowd of intellectuals who emerge under the leadership of W.E.B. DuBois,[62] an untiring advocate of The Racial Uplift Agenda, where distinguished voices such as Alain Locke's were strong. For Locke[63], Harlem becomes a centre of cultural intersection, not only because it contains "the largest Negro community in the

---

Sixties with the "Black is Beautiful" ideology, the term in use is now "African American."

[62] W.E.B Dubois (1868-1963) was the first African-American to hold a PhD in Philosophy from Harvard University. For Dubois, college education should be provided only to those intellectually capable among the black elite or, as he puts it, "the talented-tenth." A prolific writer, scholar, and Pan Africanist, his seminal work, *The Soul of Black Folks* (1903), rings true even today when he states that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line"—and not only in the United States.

[63] Alain Locke (1885-1954) was a black intellectual, philosopher, university professor and mentor of writers such as Hughes and Hurston herself.

world, but the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life" (6).

With the publication of *The New Negro* (1925), an anthology of African-American art and literature edited and compiled by Locke, definitions abound to define what the so-called New Negro[64] is about. More recently, in Valerie Boyd's *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (2003)[65] the author delved into this new generation of artists included in the anthology:

> They constitute a new generation not because of their young age, but because of a new aesthetic and new philosophy of life," the term "New Negro" was largely synonymous with youth. [...] Although apparently no male writer felt compelled to invent a later birth date, several women did, Zora Neale Hurston among them. (110)

Hurston's role in the Harlem Renaissance is quite relevant and artists of the time such as Hughes argue that out of the "niggerati"–Harlem Literatti–, she was "certainly the most amusing" and "a perfect book of entertainment." In Hughes's words, Miss Hurston was clever, full of side-splitting anecdotes, sweet, humorous and a highly colored Negro (238-9). In the same thread, Hemenway states that Hurston "was both a social and intellectual force in the group" to later add that "probably the quickest wit in a very witty lot, she proclaimed herself

[64] In "Enter the New Negro" (1925) Alain Locke defines the term *New Negro*: "the New Negro is keenly responsive as an augury of a new democracy in American culture. He is contributing his share to the new social understanding. But the desire to be understood would never in itself have been sufficient to have opened so completely the protectively closed portals of the thinking Negro's mind."

'Queen of the Niggerati'" always entertaining with remarkable stories about Eatonville (44).

More than any other female artist of the time, Zora[66] became a real contributor to the essence of Harlem. Zora was really concerned about the preservation of her African heritage, something that really outstands in her writings. Far from being an object of denigration or a sign of illiteracy or ignorance, Walker also showed a deep appreciation and respect for Hurston's use of Black Vernacular English and, in particular, the way Hurston provided black characters with highly poetic vernacular speech. Furthermore, celebrated writers such as Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor or Alice Walker herself refer to Hurston as their "literary mother" and a role model to follow.

Moreover, Zora was to found, along with Hughes and Wallace Stevens, the revolutionary magazine *Fire!*, but, ironically, only one issue was saved from an *impromtu* fire. The editors and contributors to *Fire!* were quite active in the summer of 1926. They had also agreed to create a magazine totally unconcerned with sociological problems and propaganda. *Fire!* was set to create a literary product interested in the widespread of art itself. With only one published issued, Hurston's play *Color Struck* was awarded a second prize in the drama division of the 1925 *Opportunity* contest. It deals with topics of interracial and color awareness that used to plague the black bourgeoisie as well as "the color

---

[66] From now on, I will refer to Zora Neale Hurston either by her first name Zora, Hurston or by her full name Zora Neale Hurston. Curiously enough, and as Alice Walker claims, feminist critics and writers have embraced the writer and address her by her first name as if she were part of their families. Moreover, the annual festival held in Eatonville (Florida) in honor of the writer goes by the name of ZORA. See www.zorafestival.org.

problem" or how black people's envy towards white people both biologically or intellectually may affect members of both communities. In addition, Hurston's short story "Sweat" (1926) was considered her best fiction during the period. This tragic story revolves around the life of Delia, a hardworking washerwoman and her insecure and unemployed husband Sykes. With this story, Hurston dares to voice domestic violence and instances of adultery, thus, presenting stories of abuse and toxic marital relationships that make the headlines in today's society. Hurston's literary production, that started within The Harlem Renaissance, has led her to be regarded as a major female figure of her time. In short, as Hemenway states, "Zora Neale Hurston represented a known but largely unexperienced segment of black life in America" (61). Besides, as we will see in the following pages, Hurston is now considered the first black woman feminist *par excellence*—a label that she might question—not only due to her literary production, but also because her life style might be representative of today's feminist ideals.

4.2. A Genius of the South: Zora Neale Hurston: Woman, Writer and Anthropologist

"I have the nerve to walk my own way, however hard, in my search for reality, rather than climb upon the rattling wagon of wishful illusions."

Zora Neale Hurston[67]

Zora Neale Hurston is considered a genius of the south, and a black female pioneer artist in Harlem who dares to shine by herself. However, despite her flamboyant personality, Hurston's life has been far from easy. As Deborah G. Plant argues in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography of the Spirit* (2007), "she had a basket in the sunshine and she had shivered in the shadows of hell's kitchen" (8). Many have described Zora Neale Hurston as a key model of resilience and a vocational artist and writer. However, it would be more appropriate to consider her an epitome of freedom. As Plant herself professes in her introduction, "Zora Neale Hurston is a beacon for those of us who, in this potent era, aspire to freedom" (5). For Hughes, Hurston was also "a very gay and lively girl" (*The Big Sea*, 320).

Anthropologist, storyteller, American folklorist, these are only some of her achievements, but, which aspects of her life made her a true advocate for Black

[67] This is an excerpt from a letter written by Zora Neale Hurston to Countee Cullen–her friend and fellow writer– in 1943 where she opens up about lynching, segregation and touches her inner feelings about white liberals. To see full letter: http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/zora-neale-hurston-jump-at-the-sun/93/

Feminist Criticism. It can be argued that Hurston's personal life as well as her working experiences have shaped her into the woman she has become and the kind of writer she turned out to be.

In *The Inside Light: New Critical Essays on Hurston* (2010), Deborah G. Plant offers a wide range of insightful critical analysis of Hurston's work to date. For Plant, who starts her book by offering a raw "Paint of a Woman Black and Female at the Turn of the 20th Century"[68]

> Zora Neale Hurston is one of the primary black woman writers of the 20th century, rescued from oblivion and her books rescued from out-print status more than 30 years ago, to receive recognition as an important voice in American literary history. (3)

On January 7th 1891 a beautiful girl was born in Notasulga (Alabama), and her family soon moved to Eatonville—an all-black town. Eatonville is also the location chosen by Hurston for many of her works, as she states in her autobiography *Dust Tracks in a Road* (1942):

> Eatonville, Florida, is, and was at the time of [Hurston's] birth, a pure negro town–charter, mayor, council, town marshal and all. It was not the first Negro community in America, but it was the first to be incorporated, the first attempt at organized self-government on the part of Negroes in America. (1)

[68] This quotation refers to Deborah G. Plant title of her first chapter in *The Inside Light* (2010).

Eatonville, Florida[69], a town in central Orange County which, as Hemenway puts it in his essay "Zora Neale Hurston and the Eatonville Anthropology," is claimed to have been the first incorporated and totally self-governed black city in USA, a fact that undoubtedly contributed to Hurston's strong sense of self-esteem. According to Hemenway, "growing up in Eatonville meant that Zora Hurston could reach the age of ten before she would realize that she had been labelled a 'Negro' and restricted from certain social possibilities by chance of race" (316-7). It goes without saying that her origin is empowering for Zora, but also her conception of race. She is proud of her blackness and what it truly entitles. To prove it, in her controversial and often-quoted essay "How it Feels to Be Colored Me," Hurston openly asserts that she does not pay much attention to those who discriminate her:

> I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. […] No, I do not weep at the world–I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife. (53).

Zora is proud to be black and, as Hemenway highlights, she was "a woman who rejoiced in print about the beauty of being black," to later add that "she avoided confrontation by announcing that she didn't look at a person's color, only one's worth" (6-7). Her long-life celebration of her blackness along with her personal and professional experiences in life have helped–for better or worse–to

[69] Recent archive research proves that Hurston was born in Notasulga (Alabama), but her parents moved to Eatonville when she was still a baby (Boyd 25). Thus, the author lies throughout her whole life about her hometown and embraces, instead, Eatonville—a recurrent setting in her works.

create a unique and complex identity that is reflected in the crafting of her characters.

The seventh out of eight children–the second daughter– to John Hurston and Lucy Ann Potts, Zora would soon realize that she was not her father's favourite: "plenty more sons, but no more girl babies" (*Dust* 19). Moreover, Hurston confesses that "[her father] threatened to cut his throat when he got the news [about Zora's birth] (19). However, while her father's reluctance towards Zora is evident, her mother keeps Zora sane and loved throughout her childhood.

Lucy Ann Potts and John Hurston's marriage was highly questioned, but neither of them was willing to sacrifice their love because of race and class prejudices since Lucy was light-skinned and a teacher. As Plat explains:

> Whereas John Hurston might have been congratulated for 'picking from a higher bush,' Lucy Ann Potts was condemned for lowering her standards. Being from the right of the creek, meant something to Lucy's folks, especially her mother, who could only conceive of John as 'dat yaller bastard' from 'over de creek'. (9)

Both Lucy and John's roles in the household follow the tradition. While John was the provider of the family, Lucy had to take care of their children. As Plant states, "while the children were mindful of their mother, they were in awe of their father" (13). From the start, John Hurston was considered–both at home and in Eatonville–the resemblance of God. In *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing…and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean & Impressive (*1979), edited by Alice Walker and Mary Helen Washington, Zora proudly argues that "no man in the village could put my father's shoulders to the ground" (46), thus embracing his "invincibility." Lucy, on her part, remains the most important

influence in her children's lives as she provides the necessary wisdom that would eventually enhance their children's development. In a similar vein, Hemenway asserts that "Lucy was highly intelligent with a commitment to education that was transferred to her [Lucy's] five sons and three daughters" (15). Both an education and a spiritual growth were clear goals Lucy taught her children, while John kept crushing their spirits for years.

With the passing of time, the differences between her parents grew and Hurston's belligerence and free spirit kept disagreeing with her dictatorial father. According to Hemenway, while Hurston's mother exhorted her children to "jump at de sun," arguing that "we might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground," her father was far more realistic and not so hopeful. Besides, in his biography for children, A. P. Porter recalls that "Zora was everything John thought a girl child should not be" (16). That is, "Zora was outspoken and always wanting to "wear de big hat" (*Dust* 29), while John tried to crush her daughter's lively spirit as he himself believed that "it did not do for Negroes to have too much spirit." Hurston would complain that "[her father] was always threatening to break [her] or kill [her] in the attempt" because "white folks won't stand for it. I was going to be hung before I got grown" (*Dust* 13 and 21). In sharp contrast, Hurston worshipped her mother, and portrays Lucy as an admirable and vital woman and a role model who will deeply influence both her life and her future self because, as she puts it: "[Lucy] did not want to 'squinch' Zora's spirit and turn her child into a mealy-mouthed rag doll" (*Dust* 40).

Hence, Hurston's childhood and adolescence were far from ideal. Interestingly enough, being trapped in a rather oppressive–at times even loveless–marriage is a recurrent topic in both her books and Hurston's personal

life. Besides, she is not shy to openly write in her autobiography about her parents' far from ideal marriage. As she puts it: "Of weakness, he [Hurston's father] had his share, and I know that my mother was very unhappy at times, but neither of them ever made any move to call the thing off" (*Dust* 16). No wonder then that in Hurston's works recurrent marital conflicts abound.

In this thread of thought, Hemenway claims that although Lucy was trapped in an unsatisfactory marriage, she was nevertheless the one who stood up to her husband: "small in stature, large in spirit, Lucy Hurston possessed the steely toughness she needed to deal with a philandering husband" (15).

On September 19, 1904, Zora's mother ceased to exist. A fourteen-year-old Zora is left emotionally alone to suffer from a terrible lost, but the example of her mother's spirit will definitely shape her future steps in life. The scenery that surrounds Zora is portrayed as one of desolation, hostility and despair. The mother-daughter's tragic separation is one of the most important turning points in Zora's life, and, as Hemenway puts it, "[Hurston] felt that her mother's death was the end of a phase in her life" (17). For Boyd, Zora's mother was "her anchor, her protector, her confidante," however, "Lucy died precisely the time when Zora needed a mama to teach her how to be a woman" (46-47). Needless to say, for Zora, her mother's absence broke her heart in two

> It seemed as she [Lucy] died that the sun went down on purpose to flee away from me [Zora]. That hour began my wanderings. Not so much in geography, but in time. Then not so much in time as in spirit. Mama died at sundown and changed a world. That is, the world which had been built out of her body and heart. (*Dust* 89)

Contrary to Zora's heart-breaking grief, Hurston's father remarries in no less than three months—the unwelcomed stepmother is only a few years older than Zora. It is no wonder then that neither Zora nor her stepmother might feel at ease in each other's company. Thus, her father sent Zora off to a boarding school, one he would eventually stop paying for. By the age of fourteen, Zora Neale Huston was left–both physically and psychologically–on her own.

It was at this crossroad when a lonely Zora left her hometown and "walks to the horizon." She would try to earn a living with the help of temporary and ill-paid jobs, and spending periods of time with close relatives would form a substantial part of her stolen childhood. Hurston's life was therefore characterized by her numerous and varied wanderings.

As far as her schooling is concerned, the young Zora followed her mother's advice before she actually started wearing her "travelling shoes." Hurston tried to balance her studies, her writing and her necessary temporary jobs. It would be in 1915 when she started to work as an assistant for an opera singer from the Gilbert and Sullivan Theatre Company. This turned out to be a great learning experience on Hurston's rocky path, as Hemenway puts it, because "Hurston found the theatrical troupe, the major experience of her youth liberating her from the provincialism she had known all her life" (17).

After the theatre company dissolved in Baltimore, Hurston's "burning desire to attend a high school and go to college" became a major obsession (Hemenway 17). Unfortunately, she was short of money, a constant factor in her life, and had to work part-time jobs as a maid and a waitress. By the time she put together the money she needed for tuition, she was finally able to enroll in a

school in Baltimore in September 1917. As on many other occasions, Hurston lied about her age in order to register, and alleged to be ten years younger.

In due course, she attended Morgan College in Baltimore–at that time known as the high school division of Morgan State University–a reputable black college in Baltimore. She enrolled with the purpose of obtaining her high-school diploma during the academic year 1918-1919 while working simultaneously for the wife of Dr. Baldwin's, the college administrator. As María Frías argues, Hurston was aware that she was begging for her education, but that is something she did not feel embarrassed about (52).

Hurston's lower social status together with her financial shortcomings did not prevent her from trying to socialize with younger students from a higher social level. According to Hemenway, "when she [Hurston] entered classes in fall she owned only one dress, a change of underwear, a pair of tan oxfords, but her raw intelligence glittered" (17). For Hurston, her priorities awee perfectly in place: she wanted "books and school" and couldn't care less about her belongings or her physical appearance (*Dust* 124). Though said to be feminine and coquettish, Hurston valued intelligence over other frivolous matters because, as she herself highlights, "the books gave [her] more pleasure than the clothes" (*Dust* 53).

In her more adult years, and despite the economic problems she systematically encountered as a result of her nomadic life-style, Hurston manages to gain a reputation as a well-known novelist and anthropologist. As a black writer who was part of a selected group of black artists of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston was fortunate enough to receive some much-needed

financial aid through “white patrons” and “sponsors.” These patrons included personalities such as Carl Van Vechten[70] or Charlotte Osgood Mason[71].

After her high-school graduation in 1919, Hurston started at Howard University in Washington, one among the few all-black universities, but the most prestigious as the writer herself proudly proclaims: “Washington was to the Negro what Harvard is to the whites” (*Dust* 156). In order to finance her studies, she managed to work as a senator’s manicurist, as a waitress for a very exclusive club, and as a librarian, a job that brought her close to books. It also gave her the opportunity to collaborate with the University newspaper *The Stylus* where she publishes her first short story “John Redding Goes to Sea” (1921), and in *Opportunity*, and was able to meet Dr. Alain Locke, a true inspiration and an intellectual reference. The publishing of “John Redding Goes to Sea” did not go unnoticed. It attracted the attention of Charles S. Johnson, the editor and founder of the prestigious black literary magazine *Opportunity.* At Johnson’s request, a flabbergasted Zora kept sending Johnson new short stories and soon “Spunk” and “Sweat” woukd see the light, also in *Opportunity*. With “Sweat” (1926), as Boyd claims, “she reveals to be a writer of stunning capabilities when she committed herself to the craft” (138). She then decided to move to New York where, without much hesitation but short of money, she headed for a writing

[70] White writer, photographer and prominent critic in the Harlem Renaissance. He played an essential role as a patron, supporter and advocate for Black artists and writers during the period. He is the author of *Nigger Heaven* (1926), a novel that attempted to celebrate Black Harlem. Its offensive title, though, caused quite a stir among the Black community.

[71] Wealthy white woman and influential patron that became interested in African American culture after attending a lecture by anthropologist Franz Boas.

career, as Hurston herself admits: “So the first week of January, 1925, found me in New York with $1.50, no job, no friends, and a lot of hope” (*Dust* 168). In a short period of time, she became a key figure of the Harlem Renaissance. While in Harlem, Hurston chose the short story as a way to bring to life her unique and complex female characters. Both Zora’s life and her personal relationships explain her way of portraying her black women protagonists. Hurston’s first novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* saw the light in 1934. It depicts the story of a respected Baptist minister and a powerful preacher who engages in extramarital relations. Less than a year later, *Mules and Men* is published in 1935. This text is a superb collection of southern Black folklore, the result of Hurston’s field studies and academic preparation by Dr. Franz Boas,[72] and her unique skills at making people feel at home. However, Magill notes and criticizes Hurston’s preference for black vernacular themes given the existing racial tensions:

> Although Hurston was pressured to adapt her novels to a prescribed theme about struggles against racism, she believed that such a theme would be a limitation. She preferred to concentrate on those indigenous elements of black community life that survived racism intact (1788).

It was not until 1937 that her best female character, Janie Mae Crawford, was born i, when Hurston published what can be considered her greatest novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston’s novel explores the life of a young Southern woman, Janie, and follows her through three unfulfilled marriages.

---

[72] Dr. Franz Boas (1858-1942) was a pioneer anthropologist known as the “Father of American Anthropology”. Boaz was born in Germany and immigrated to the US in the late 19th century. Boaz introduced the concept of “Cultural Relativism”.

Despite Janie's frustrations and epiphanies, Hurston allows her protagonist to become a fully independent woman who is not in need of a husband.

Although there are echoes of Hurston's biography, particularly in *Their Eyes*, Hurston's private life has remained a mystery. In 1927, shortly after she returned to Eatonville from Harlem, she married Herbert Sheen. He was a jazz musician and a medical student from Illinois. They had met back in 1920. This marriage would eventually come to an end in 1931. As with other men who formed a part of Hurston's life—albeit temporarily—this marriage remained secret. Before her marriage to Sheen she already felt it was not destined to last as Zora bore "second thoughts." However, Hurston herself was not embarrassed about confessing her anxiety about her wedding: "It was not my happiest day. I was assailed by doubts" (Boyd 149).

While this marriage came to an end, Zora was not left broken hearted, since shortly after her divorce she wrote to a friend: "I hear that my husband has divorced me, so that's that […] Don't think I am upset […] for your lil Zora is playing on her harp like David. […] He was one of the obstacles that worried me" (Boyd 224). For Zora, a writer fully committed to her job, her husbands and lovers were perceived as obstacles who might interfere with her literary career and, therefore, with both her personal and professional growth. In the face of a dilemma, she would choose to go on writing even if that means a painful and heart-breaking separation from her current lover or husband-to-be.

Her second marriage was also short-lived. In 1939[73] Hurston married Albert Price III, a member of the Jacksonville Church, who was twenty-five years younger than the writer. Despite the obvious age difference, this was apparently a more passionate affair, but it also ended in divorce. As with her first husband, Hurston knew she had also made a mistake. As I will discuss later, Hurston's complex love affairs are transferred to her female characters. As with her personal life, Hurston's narratives portray free and independent women rather than married but frustrated and unsatisfied female characters. It goes without saying, therefore, that her personal experiences have shaped her empowering female characters and, quite frequently, set them free and ready to reclaim their very own horizon.

Zora Neale Hurston died on January 28, 1960, after having suffered from a stroke a year before. Despite her personal and professional achievements, she died penniless. There was no one to take care of her or her burial.

After decades of obscurity, African American writer Alice Walker[74] went "in search of Zora" and found her. Hurston's literary legacy and memory remained lost for a time, just as her burial site went unnoticed. Years later, Hurston comes back to life after Walker places a tombstone that honors our writer's existence:

---

[73] Hurston publishes *Moses, Man of the Mountain* in 1939. Here Hurston rewrites the story of the Book of Exodus of Moses and the Israelites from an Afro-American perspective.

[74] Alice Walker is the author of *The Color Purple* (1982), a text that called the attention of director Steven Spielberg. Walker has created the term "Womanism" as a substitute for "Western Feminism." We can easily apply this term to Zora Neale Hurston's female characters. Maybe it will be a good idea to include some reviews on film's reception.

Zora Neale Hurston

A Genius of the South

1901 - - - 1960

Novelist, Folklorist and Anthropologist.

5. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)

"There is no book more important to me

than this one"

Alice Walker (1977, xiii)

5.1. Critical Reception: Past and Present

Hurston's first and most celebrated novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), was surrounded by controversy at the time it was written, and later rescued from a long period of literary oblivion.[75] Hurston herself declares her frustrations after having completed *Their Eyes*. In her own words voiced in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*, she offers some insightful opinions and critiques her own work:

> I [Hurston]wish that I could write it [*Their Eyes*] again. In fact, I regret all of my books, It is one of the tragedies of life that one cannot have all the wisdom one is ever to possess in the beginning. Perhaps, it is just as well to be rash and foolish for a while. If writers were too wise, perhaps no books would be written at all" (220).

Echoing Hurston's thoughts, Daryl C. Dance (1983) argues that "Hurston produced a remarkable number of books, and she therefore had more to "regret" than any other Black woman of her day" (322). As a matter of fact, Hurston has been considered one of the most prolific Black female writers in the Harlem

[75] From now on, I would be referring to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as *Their Eyes.*

Renaissance. and her eager to excel and improve becomes evident in *Their Eyes.* Hurston's most celebrated novel.

The story revolves around Janie Mae Crawford, an African American woman who throughout her three consecutive marriages attempts to achieve her personal growth and fight for her own identity. Dealing with controversial themes such as the pursuit of love, marital relationships, women's empowerment and friendship, adultery, interracial hatred, types of masculinities and relations of power, and physical and psychological violence, among others, Huston creates a captivating and mesmerizing work of art.

Despite today's international recognition—it is considered one of the greatest novels of the 20th century—Hurston's novel failed to gain the favor of some of her contemporary black male writers. As Lester (1999) observes in his thorough analysis of *Their Eyes*, "some of Hurston's critics regarded her work as performing aesthetically and personally for white patrons at the expense of presenting African American cultural authenticity" (3). The readers' opinions at the time were varied and, while White people did not criticize the novel so harshly, black writers were concerned about the way Hurston portrayed how Black people were diminished and ill-treated by Whites. On his part, in Sterling A. Brow's "Luck is a Fortune," the author argues that Hurston "does not dwell upon the 'ugly people from ignorance and broken from being poor' who swarm upon the 'muck' for short time jobs" (409-10). Intrinsically related it is Mary Helen Washington's "The Black Woman's Search for Identity"[76] where she asserts that the Black writer "may fail to show that Black people are more than simply reactors, that, among

[76] Mary Helen Washington's "The Black Woman's Search for Identity. *Black World*, 21 (August, 1972): pp. 68-75.

ourselves, we have laughter, tears, and loving that are far removed from the white horror out there" (68).

Notwithstanding the mixed reviews, it was Richard Wright—the single most popular Black writer—whose bitter critique of Hurston's *Their Eyes* is still questioned nowadays. In his review "Between Laughter and Tears" published in *New Masses* on October 5, 1937–Wright insists on Hurston's "inaccurate" portrayal of black people when he argues that "her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy." Furthermore, he is repulsed by Hurston's treatment of ignorant and subservient "happy-lucky negroes" and asserts that Hurston seems to feel quite comfortable when exploiting the phase of Negro life which is 'quaint,"—that is, the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the 'superior' race" (17).

In this thread of thought, it could be argued that Wright's harsh and hostile criticism triggered a bitter confrontation between black male and black female writers, and Wright's incisive words are remembered as one of the cruelest readings of Hurston's novel. In addition to this, in his review Wright describes Hurston as "the perfect darkie," a naïve, complacent, and humorous Negro who mostly writes to please white audiences. Referring to her writing style, Wright finds Hurston's literacy "cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley,[77]" to later add that "her dialogue

[77] Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753 West Africa-1784 Boston) was captured as a slave and brought to Boston where she was bought at a very early age. A precocious child, she soon learnt how to read and write and became the first African American poet. She is the author *of Poems of Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. A converted Christian, some of Wheatley's poems express her gratitude to her benefactors—thus, Wright's incisive comment on Hurston's.

manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that's as far it goes." Furthermore, Wright compares *Their Eyes* with Waters Turpin's *These Low Grounds* (1937)[78], and cruelly confesses that it is difficult to evaluate them since "neither of the two novels has a basic idea or theme that lends itself to significant interpretation.[79]" In addition, Wright concludes by saying that "Miss Hurston seems to have no desire whatever to move in the direction of serious fiction." As if his hostile approach to *Their Eyes* were not enough, Wright also attacks Hurston's lack of literary skills and her poor characterization of black characters:

> Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the "white folks" laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in the safe and narrow orbit in which America like to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears. (17)

---

[78] Waters Edward Turpin (1910-1968), also a member of the Harlem Renaissance, was a multitask person (college teacher, drama director, sports coach, and writer) who starts the African American family saga tradition as a way to revise and celebrate the history of his black community and the lives of black citizens in USA. His second novel *O Canaan!* (1939) deals with the farmers' migration from the South to Chicago during The Great Depression (1929-1939), and his third novel *The Rootless* (1957) goes back in time to the eighteenth century and slavery.

[79] For a contemporary review of Wright's *Native Son*, and Turpin's *O Canaan!*, see Robert E. Fleming's comparative essay "Overshadowed by Richard Wright: Three Black Chicago Novelists." *Negro American Literary Forum*. Vol. 7, No 3. (Autumn 1973), pp. 75-79.

As it could be expected, Wright's harsh critique of Hurston's *Their Eyes* has fueled an ongoing battle where writers have refused to remain passive. For example, M. Genevieve West in "Finding Zora"[80] (2020) reflects on Wright's reviews of Hurston's *Their Eyes*—which she considers a breaking point in her researching career:

> I [West] happened across Richard Wright's review of *Their Eyes*. My chance encounter with that review changed *everything* for me. Wright's 1937 review describes Hurston as an Uncle Tom figure and the novel as minstrelsy. To say that I was taken aback by Wright's description of Hurston and the novel would be an understatement (xiv).

Apart from Wright's acrid review, Otis Ferguson agrees with Wright's words—albeit more subtly—when he remarks: "It isn't that [Hurston's] novel is bad, but it deserved to be better," to later question Hurston's use of Black Vernacular as he finds that the "dialect is really sloppy" (23). Besides, Hurston's descriptions of emotions do not satisfy Ferguson as he argues that:

> crises of feeling are rushed over too quickly for them to catch hold, and then presently we are in a tangle of lush exposition and overblown symbols; action is described and characters are talked about, and everything is more heard that seen. (77)

Ferguson concludes by saying that Hurston "leaves a good story where it never should have been potentially; in the grey category of neuter gender, declension indefinite" (23).

---

[80] In introduction to *Critical Insights: Their Eyes Were Watching God* (2020)

In contrast, besides Wright's, Ferguson's and other controversial opinions, Hurston's work has been considered one of a kind. Among the positive criticism, Walker's review describes Hurston's novel as "one of the sexiest most 'healthy' rendered heterosexual love [stories] in our literature" (*In Search* 88). In the same vein, June Jordan's enthusiastic response to the novel's positiveness is made clear as follows:

> "Unquestionably, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the prototypical black novel of affirmation; it is the most successful, convincing, and exemplary novel of black love that we have. Period." ("On Richard" 6)

In her essay "On Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston" (*Black World*, 23 August 1974), June Jordan argues that Hurston's obscurity results from the fact that the American media generally determine what figures will be given the dominant place, and, in Hurston's era, Richard Wright was the solitary black figure presented. One reason that he was acclaimed and Hurston was ignored was the assumption that, given the history of racism in the United States, it was time to consolidate the protest genre. Contrary to Wright's choice, Jordan highlights that Hurston chose to affirm blackness rather than to protest against whites., notes that there is a definite defiance in Hurston's works and concludes that it is not necessary to choose between Bigger and Janie—Wright's protagonist versus Hurston's protagonist—since "our lives are as big and as manifold and as pained and as happy as the two of them put together. We should equally value and equally emulate Black Protest and Black Affirmation, for we require both" (345).

Contrary to Wright's, Jordan judges Hurston's *Their Eyes* as "the prototypical Black novel of affirmation at the same time that highlights and appreciates that Hurston's novel "centres itself on *Blacklove*" (Jordan *On Richard* 6). The irony here lies in that, despite critics' diverse interpretations, recent reviews still keep Hurston's *Their Eyes* on a pedestal. One clear example is Carla Kaplan's (2016) "Feminism for Those Who Don't Like Feminism,"[81] as she compares Roxane Gay and Zora Neale Hurston:

> [Roxane] Gay is that rare progressive black feminist voice who has accomplished what Janie's grandmother in Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* dreamed of, but feared might never come: a "pulpit" from which "colored women sitting on high" could "preach" to others about the world (706).

As a review from Book Marks claims (published online on 8 March, 2017),[82] Miss Hurston's novel has been underrated and always surrounded by controversy by its previous reviewers:

> To call Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* an 'African American feminist classic' may be an accurate statement—it is certainly a frequent statement—but it is a misleadingly narrow and rather dull way to introduce a vibrant and achingly human novel. The syncopated beauty of Hurston's prose, her remarkable gift for comedy, the sheer visceral terror of the book's climax, all transcend

---

[81] In *Signs*: *Journal of Woman of Woman in Culture and Society*. Vol. 41, Number 3, pp. 706-7, 2016.

[82] From: Bookmark *https://bookmarks.reviews/the-dream-is-the-truth-their-eyes-were-watching-god-at-80/* Accessed on November 21st 2019.

> any label that critics have tried to put on this remarkable work. Although Hurston wrote the novel in only seven weeks, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* breathes and bleeds a whole life's worth of urgent experience.

Even more recently, on January 2020, Thulani Davis wrote for *The Village: Voice*, an article entitled "Black Women Writers Reclaim Their Past" where Davis aims to bring to the spotlight female literary names such as Paule Marshall, Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston, among others. As Davis argues, "Hurston sets herself apart from earlier novelists who chose to diminish the power of their characters' decisions by emphasizing the effects of racism and oppression." In addition, Thulani Davis (2020) argues in favor of Hurston's heroine because "Janie strikes home with women because she experiences traditional roles and then moves beyond them, and as many have put it, "creates herself"[83].

Marriage, love, freedom and power are the central axes in Janie's life, a life that she intends and needs to make her own in order to thrive as an empowered and independent female member of her black community. In her first novel, Hurston encompasses her voice–along with her own protagonist Janie Crawford's– and produces a personal narrative where the life and cultural identity of a Female Black girl is called for celebration. At the same time, Hurston's poetic and magnetic writing enables the audience to experience a feast of folklore and vernacular dialect, that makes *Their Eyes* the first modernist text by an African-

[83] Online article in *The Village Voice* entitled "Black Women Writers Reclaim their Past" by Thulani Davis (January 20th 2020)

American writer and the key text that marked the end of the Harlem Renaissance.[84]

Throughout the next section, we will focus on Janie Mae Crawford's experiences and will point at the turning events in her life and the relationships that shape a rather naïve Black girl into a powerful, self-sufficient, and independent Black woman.

[84] There are innumerable works on mainstream American modernist literature, but there are a few studies on modernism and black culture. In her study, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (1998), Sieglinde Lemke highlights the fact that black writers of the Harlem Renaissance are representative of modernism, that is, black modernism. In fact, Lemke argues that both "white" and "black" modernisms are "inextricably interrelated" (3)

5.2. Janie Mae Crawford: The Shaping of a Black Female Heroine

"If you are silent about your pain,

They'll kill you and say you enjoyed it"

Zora Neale Hurston

As mentioned in the previous section, Hurston's *Their Eyes* has also attracted some bitter criticism around the idea of whether the novel could be catalogued as feminist or not. Given the protagonist's personal journey, which aspects would make *Their Eyes* a feminist novel? Drawing on the definition from *Women and Gender Studies Magazine* online,[85]" Feminism is described as an "interdisciplinary approach to issues of equality and equity based on gender, gender expression, gender identity, sex, and sexuality as understood through social theories and political activism." That is, it is a practice where women and social and cultural constructs of gender are the focus of study. Among others, this includes aspects such as gender privilege, instances of oppression, and power relationships between genders. Therefore, if we adhere to these principles, should we considerate *Their Eyes* a feminist text? Should we praise Zora Neale Hurston as a feminist writer? Does Janie embody the attributes of a feminist character?

In this sense, I would argue that not only is *Their Eyes* a feminist-based work of art but that, furthermore, it is also necessary to analyze the novel from a Black intersectionality approach. Kimberlé Crenshaw–creator of this feminist

[85] "What is Feminism?" from *Women & Gender Studies*, University of Kentucky. Accessed from: https://wgs.eku.edu/what-feminism-0

theory–at a 2017 conference in the National Association of Independent Schools[86] sums it up as follows:

> Intersectionality is just a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and they create obstacles that often or not understood within conventional ways of thinking about anti-racism or feminism or whatever social justice advocacy structures we have.

As Crenshaw argues, there is no point in isolating feminism from other social or political constructions—especially when we deal with the reality of African American women. This is just the case with *Their Eyes*. It offers a convergence and a study of how gender, race, age, and class issues affect African American society and how the protagonist thrives despite the odds. Therefore, taking this into account, should *Their Eyes* be considered and analyzed as a feminist text? My answer is a resounding yes, as I would try to prove throughout these pages.

I will argue that, to some extent, *Their Eyes* is both a proto-feminist but also a feminist text where Miss Hurston goes way beyond her time and societal norms when she portrays a black female heroine, Janie, and allows her to attain self-growth and personal and financial independence in an oppressive society where white and male supremacy are at their highest. Throughout the following sections, I will delve into the topic to better understand Janie's evolution as an early feminist character.

---

[86] Talk accessed in *YouTube* on January 8th 2022.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViDtnfQ9FHc

5.2.1. Janie's Journey: From Childhood Towards Womanhood

"So the beginning of this was a woman

And she had come back from burying the dead"

(*Their Eyes*)

Throughout *Their Eyes*, Janie Mae Crawford's physical and psychological journey is definitely the primary reason for her growth. From being a very gullible, childish girl, and a virgin, we witness the rebirth and the metamorphosis of a newly-found woman. To understand this change, it is relevant to take a look at Janie's interpersonal relationships. Throughout this section, I attempt to shed some light into the first stages of Janie's transformation and focus on both her relationship with her grandmother Nanny–her solely maternal figure–and how she contributes to shape Janie's future decisions, her first experiences with love, careless love,[87] and marriage. To do so, it is necessary to start from the beginning of her story.

Everything begins at dusk, during the 1920s in Eatonville, Florida, when a black woman returns home from a tempestuous journey, in both emotional and physical terms. Janie's surprising return after years of "forced exile" keeps the entire village, and its porch sitters, on their toes. Why has Janie come back home after all this time?

[87] I am echoing here the title of a blues song "Blues, O Blues" (1925), made popular by blues and jazz vocalist Bessie Smith (celebrated as the *Empress of the Blues*), and composed by W.H. Handy and Spencer Williams)

In *Their Eyes*, we first hear the gossiping of Janie's neighbors. The "porch sitters's" accusations–as a result of both a lack of and the need for information–gives the readers full scope to the relevant role the porch plays in the rural South, and its therapeutic effect against white supremacy: "These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. […] They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed notions through their mouths. They sat in judgement" (2).

Neither do the gossips seem to be "gender" supporters since they criticize Janie's appearance at every chance they have: "What she [Janie] doin' coming back here in dem overhalls? Can't she find no dress to put on?" (2). Maybe it is their way to watch time pass by or they just act out of pure jealousy but, one thing is clear, Janie has to withstand the ridicule of her fellow neighbors. The porch is, in the end, a place of deceit and the icon of malice and resentment where, as Hurston continues, "an envious heart makes a treacherous ear" (5).

Apart from the black female porch sitters, we also see how fellow neighbors see Janie as a mere sexual object who is objectified and whose physique is worth mentioning and "praised": "The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unravelling in the wind like a plume" (2). Janie is an attractive woman whose appearance will be unfortunately used against her as well as an instrument of oppression and discrimination. In any case, throughout Hurston's novel, both the role of the porch sitters and some of the neighbors in town are perceived as elements of criticism and judgement that will be discussed in the following pages as they represent some undeniable symbols of oppression.

Their Eyes' is told by a third person omniscient narrator, and it starts when Janie recounts the story of her absence to her close friend Pheoby Watson. Janie's retrospective narrative–a *bildungsroman* or coming-of-age story–introduces a naïve young black girl who craves for the horizon, as an opportunity to explore the world outside.

The first woman and role model who has left a mark on Miss Crawford's early years is her grandmother on her mother's side, Nanny. A former slave herself, Nanny's protectiveness–quite extreme on some occasions–plays a crucial role on Janie's personal growth. It is my contention that Nanny helps Hurston denounce both the system of slavery and the black women's position as "de mule uh de world" for both black men and white society at large (14). As a slave, Nanny was repeatedly raped by her master and, thus, vividly carries the stigma of slavery when she tells Janie: "[U]s colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come 'round in queer ways" (15). As Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman argues in her article "'The Strangest Freaks of Despotism: Queer Sexuality in Antebellum African American Slave Narratives" (2006):

> What Nanny's pronouncement reveals is that slavery had the effect of corrupting and contorting the most basic familiar relationships. Not only did the institution deny slaves basic claims to familial, spousal, and hereditary bonds, insidiously it also assaulted their sexuality, robbing them of the basic rights of bodily autonomy and sexual choice. (223)

Forced to provide for Janie after her mother, Leafy, is raped by the school master, Nanny's words mirror her rocky path in life when she reminds Janie:

> Maybe it wasn't much, but Ah [Nanny] done de best Ah kin by you. Ah racked and scraped and bought dis lil piece uh land so you wouldn't have to stay in de white folks' yard and tuck yo' head befo' other chillum at school. (*Their Eyes* 19)

Therefore, Janie's upbringing has been conditioned by her grandmother's actions and decisions in life. A forty-year-old Janie remembers her childhood with a bit of nostalgia, despite her personal subaltern position. Take for example, the reason for her childhood's name, Alphabet: "[…] 'Cause so many people had done named me different names" (9). For Howard, Janie grew up as a child who is "devoid of any perception of her true identity" (6). Besides, the fact that Nanny worked as a domestic for a white family forced Janie to grow surrounded by white people, a fact that has prevented Janie's mind from fully acknowledging the meaning of race. It was not until she was six that Janie came to terms with the fact that she was "black" through a group photograph, or, as she recalls: "Ah, I'm colored.[…] But before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah was just like de rest" (9).

Contrary to Wright's complains, Hurston pays special attention to the pervasive and relentless issue of racism and makes her position clear throughout the novel. The question of race is, thus, present and intertwined with Nanny's years in captivity. Having been forced to work as a field slave, Nanny has fully experienced the brutality and dehumanization of the "peculiar institution," and this might explain why Nanny becomes so utterly protective of Janie's. As Houston Baker (1984) emphasizes, "having been denied a say in her own fate because [Nanny] was property, she assumes that only property enables expression (57). Therefore, in order to properly understand Nanny's strict education of Janie's, we

must look back at her life and existence based on sheer violence, terror and oppression. It goes without saying that Hurston employs the character of Nanny to clearly denounce and expose the roots of racist mainstream America.

While working as a labourer in a plantation in Savanah, governed by a white man, Nanny has been witness to the horrors of slavery. Not surprisingly, Nanny uses her schooling in slavery to instruct and prepare Janie for life: "Honey de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able to find out (14)". As Nanny wisely recalls, whites' social hierarchy has always relegated the black woman to the bottom of the social pyramid. In turn, Black slave women have become the "mules" of the world, as she instructs Janie:

> So de white man throw down de load and tell the nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to this women folks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world" "Ah been prayin' it tuh be different wid you." (14)

In the same thread of thought, the historian Susan Brownmiller's groundbreaking book *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975) claims that sexual abuse during slavery times becomes "an institutionalized crime, part and parcel of white man's subjugation of people for economic and psychological gain" (111)[88]. In Hurston's novel, the master's brutal acts of violence did not cease, not even after Nanny birthed a biracial baby girl as a result of non-consensual intercourse. Leafy was her name, a baby Nanny swore to protect and take care of. However, the sexual assaults continued in her early stages of

[88] Brownmiller Susan, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape.* Ballantine [1975] , 1993.

recovery after giving birth when she was “flat uh mah [Nanny’s] back” (16). In this state of physical, sexual and emotional disadvantage, she clearly recalls: “[…] he made me let down mah hair for de last time. He sorta wropped his hand in it, pulled mah big toe, lak he always done, and was gone after de rest lak lightnin’” (16).

In addition, as Hurston makes it clear, during slavery both white men and white women saw fit to exercise their “right” to subdue black women. In Nanny’s case, soon after the master’s wife acknowledges the existence of a baby girl who undoubtedly is the product of her husband’s rape, she ruthlessly endangers both Nanny’s and Leafy’s lives. However, Nanny will fight back for her baby and break free. This is Nanny’s turning point in her life. It makes her open up her eyes and flee in quest for a chance in life for both her and baby Leafy. Little did Nanny know then that the history of rape will sadly repeat itself, and put Nanny to the test once again.

Having left the plantation and settled with young Leafy in West Florida, Nanny devotes her life to protecting her baby because, as Nanny puts it, “Ah wouldn’t marry nobody, though Ah could have uh heap up times, ‘cause Ah didn’t want nobody mistreating mah baby” (18). Interestingly enough, we hear echoes of Hurston’s own preference for solitude when the love interest threatens to put her independence and her literary career in jeopardy. Furthermore, as Hurston’s case, while marriage was not a priority in Nanny’s mind, Leafy’s education was: “Ah put her in school when it got so it was a school to put her in” (18). At age

seventeen, Leafy was raped, too, this time by her school master[89]. These are Nanny's own words:

> But one day she [Leafy] didn't come home at de usual time and Ah waited and waited, but she never come all dat night. Ah took a lantern and went round askin' everybody but nobody ain't seen her. De next mornin' she come crawlin' in on her hands and knees. A sight to see. Dat school teacher had done hid her in de woods all night long, and he had done raped mah baby and run on off just before day (18).

It is relevant to note that both Nanny and Leafy share an intricate connection. Both are victims of non-consensual sexual intercourse. Both their lives have been truncated and their respective childhoods wasted. This is how Nanny perceives her position in life and the cause of her frustrations—contrary to white women's position on pedestals, as Hurston clearly condemns, there is no place for Black women to speak up:

> Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfil my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. [...] Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit of me (15).

In the end, there was no place in history for Nanny. She was stripped of her rights as a woman and as a mother. In the same line of thought, Sonia Sedano focuses on sexual oppression in her Dissertation entitled "Harriet Jacobs:

---

[89] It is important here to mention that Leafy's school teacher was White which permeates even more violence and oppression.

Forerunner of Gender Studies in Slave Narratives and African American Women's Literature" (Salamanca 2009). Here, the author acknowledges Harriet Jacobs[90]' when she states that "female slaves have to submit to rape and take it as natural in their circumstances." Besides, Sedano follows and explains that "Harriet Jacobs does not present herself as a victim, but as a strong woman who fights for her chastity with the weapons at her hand, as a heroine, a warrior within the system" (152). Just as Harriet has done before her, in Nanny's time, she manages to surface from the pit and put her motherless little girl first.

In the case of Leafy's rape, it broke her spirt and deprived her of her life force to the extent that Leafy abandons her daughter, and leaves Nanny to provide for baby Janie. The perpetuation of sexual violence on black women leads to some sexually abused victims being objectified and they frequently lose their self-esteem. in her article "Sexual Exploitation of Black Women from the Years 1619-2020," African American psychiatrist Dominique R. Wilson deepens on the idea of sexual crimes and/or abuse, and puts the light on the traumatic effects on women's psyches:

> It can be inferred that through personal experiences of being treated as an object, as well as sexualized media depictions, black women begin to learn to internalize an observer's perspective and come to view themselves through an objectified lens. As a result, being

[90] Harriet Jacobs (1813-1887) was an African American writer and abolitionist. Known for her autobiographical slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* where she portrays a first-person account on the hardships and oppression that enslaved African-Americans endured. She is well known for her quote: "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women."

> objectified can result in developing an influx of issues with mental health, which include body shaming and depression. It can be inferred that the negative feelings that black women resultingly have facilitate a host of damaging outcomes for them. Such feelings make them think that they are less competent, less worthy of moral consideration and treatment, more responsible for being raped, and more deserving of maltreatment. (128)

Following Wilson's arguments, both Nanny's, and Leafy's (to a larger extent) psyches show symptoms of the traumatic effects that brutal and repeated sexual assaults have had on them. As Nanny graphically puts it, "[Leafy] got lost off de highway and next thing Ah knowed you [Janie] was in the world" (15 Nevertheless, Nanny's love for Janie turns out to be unquestionable, while her overprotectiveness will influence Janie's emotional quest.

As for Janie, readers are witness to her spiritual and sexual awakenings at age sixteen. In a text where symbols of nature abound, and Hurston's own consciousness of nature permeates the lives of her female protagonists—and those of Janie in particular--Hurston shows Janie's sexual awakening through her contemplation of the blossoming of a pear tree. As Zora accounts, Janie was "stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it came to her" (10). Hurston constructs a scenery embedded

in latent eroticism as Janie contemplates nature at its peak. The blossoming of the pear trees and the bees pollinating, all contribute to her sexual arousal.[91]

> [Janie] saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree form root to the tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. (10-11)

The nature's dynamics evoke Janie's silenced feelings and transport her to a new and rediscovered world filled with unknown cravings. Phrases such as "ecstatic shiver", "frothing with delight" imply a very evocative, romantic and erotic language, a passage that can be definitely identified as the awakening of Janie's sexual appetite. We should also bear in mind Hurston's evocative use of vocabulary related to the joy of sex. Besides, Hurston's poetic and erotic portrait of how natural self-sexual satisfaction appears without negating women's self-pleasure and masturbation speaks volumes about the ways she pushes de boundaries of black women's sexuality long before the likes of Toni Morrison or Alice Walker would give their black protagonists permission to explicitly enjoy their sexualities.

In this state of "emotional bliss," Janie's awakening is externalized by the corporeal form of a young boy named Johnny Taylor. Young Taylor's appealing is enhanced by the presence of nature surrounding him, and, more specifically

---

[91] For Hemenway, Hurston's descriptions of Janie's orgasm "comes to represent the organic union Janie searches for throughout her life." However, he adds, "events conspire to deny her a feeling of wholeness" (233-234).

pollen, as the narrator implies: "[…] The golden dust of pollen had beglamoured his rags and her eyes" (11). Such an impression and enamored feeling has Johnny left in Janie that she soon experiences her first kiss, the first sign of romantic feelings and, for Janie, her wake-up call. As Bloom states, "no sooner is her [Janie's] dream born, however, than it is desecrated by her grandmother" (17).

Nanny witnesses Janie's and Johnny's physical connection, but she does not see it as a natural relationship between two teenagers. Instead, Nanny perceives it as a sign of corruption: "She bolted upright and peered out of the window and saw Johnny Taylor lacerating her Janie with a kiss" (11). While young Taylor is "lacerating" Janie, Nanny feels the need to protect her at all costs and ensure a "safe" future for her grand-daughter. And for Nanny, marriage equals safety. Even an unwanted marriage. As Tracy L. Bealer (2009) coincides, Janie and Nanny have the same reaction to Janie's sexual awakening: "a flight to marriage." According to Bealer, "Janie's response stems from ignorance of the way racism and sexism can distort love, and Nanny's from a painful and intimate familiarity with how sexual receptivity often translates into defilement from men white and black" (315). Interestingly enough, as we have suggested earlier, Nanny's response derives from her past traumatic experiences with extreme pain. This is Bealer's argument: about the confrontation between the different generations represented by Nanny and Janie:

> Janie's grandmother scolds her for kissing Johnny because Nanny's experiences with institutionalized racism and pervasive misogyny teach her that for black women, erotic love is infused with shame, physical pain, and unsatisfying labor. […] Nanny believes

> that sexual desire will render Janie vulnerable to becoming "a spit cup" for white and black men. For Nanny, sexual contact inescapably leads to sexual abuse, which she conflates with the imperative to work. (Bealer 314)

Nevertheless, I would argue that although Nanny herself could not be explicitly portrayed as a feminist in the modern sense of the word, her actions and beliefs align with certain principles related to freedom and empowerment. While it is true that she is attempting to rip Janie off her sexual freedom, she is also trying to protect Janie from the horrors she suffered derived from Racism. Bealer (2009) coincides and deepens on Nany's experience of racism as follows:

> Racism manifests itself through passing a physical burden along a hierarchy organized by white privilege. This racist mandate between men also incorporates sexism, because black men pass the burden "down" the hierarchy to black women. Under this system, the power to refuse to work is what separates humans from beasts of burden. (315-6)

In addition, Leafy and Janie's connection goes beyond their maternal bond. By comparing both Leafy's and Janie's breaking points in life, we notice that they take place at a similar age: Leafy's rape occurs at the age of seventeen, and Janie's kiss with Taylor at sixteen. Nanny's history repeats itself. As a very selfish way to keep Janie safe and to avoid losing another daughter, she imposes marriage as the solely option.

Bearing this in mind, although Nanny is in a way forcing Janie into marriage, her intentions are good. However, as Howard recalls, "Nanny's only flaw is that she wants to keep the romantic Janie from finding out about living for

herself" (1982, 405). Or, as Bone incisively reflects, by "seeking to protect Janie from the vicissitudes of adolescent love, she puts her up on the action block of marriage" (59). The tradition of denigrating women by imposing arranged marriages is undeniably related to slavery and the auction block where Black women were up for sale to the highest bidder. María Frías (1995) delves into Nanny's reasons for "selling" her own flesh as a response to her own daughter's tragic rape episode:

> Nanny is forcing Janie to get married because Nanny cannot forget that it was her own daughter (Janie's mother), who came home one night "crawling in on her hands and knees" after being raped by the black school teacher. To Nanny's understanding, marriage has the power to raise women from that humiliating position. (39)

Intrinsically related, Bone visualizes a parallel situation whereby Janie is "forced" into an arranged marriage while Nanny's has been raped as a former slave. Both situations epitomize black women's submission and the involuntary stripping of both Janie's and Nanny's free will.

As she tells Janie: "Ah wanted yuh to school out and pick from a higher bush and a sweeter berry. […] maybe it wasn't much, but Ah done de best Ah kin by you" (13). Nanny is eager to make it right this second time around but, as Lillie P. Howard writes, her intentions are misguided and, in the end, they will prompt the emotional death of Janie Mae Crawford.

> Nanny is often hurriedly dismissed as one of those desecrators of the pear tree who spit on Janie's idea of "marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think" by cluttering up her life with

> materialism, security, and other stifling trappings supposedly necessary to a happy marriage. (404)

Nanny is here portrayed as the entity that limits her granddaughter's wish "to walk to the horizon" and "wear her walking shoes". Although her actions are well-intentioned and inclined to protect Janie from the horrors she had to endure in her own flesh, Nanny's intentions are questionable to say the least. She is portrayed as the "desecrator" of the pear tree; the person responsible for truncating Janie's sexual awakening. Lillie P. Howard further explores this episode and asserts that "Nanny's only flaw is that she wants to keep the romantic Janie from finding out about living for herself" (405). That is, Janie is forced into marrying to protect her from a life of oppression; a life she will nevertheless face.

While young Janie neither needs nor wants to get married at that point, she is forced to marry Mr. Logan Killicks. Bealer (2009) argues that "access to Logan's economic privilege through marriage will save Janie from dehumanization and abuse." (316) It is not Johnny Taylor himself who makes Nanny wake up; it is the idea of a new hope, a love interest that could led Janie into following her mother's steps and–in the end–share the same terrible fate: "Dat's what makes me skeered. You don't mean no harm. You don't even know where harm is at" (13). Nanny's intentions might be perceived rather egotistical:

> "So you [Janie] don't want to marry off decent like, do yuh? You just wants to hug and kiss and feel around with first one man and then another, huh? You wants to make me such de same sorrow yo' mama did eh? (13).

Leafy's traumatic past chases Nanny, something she both abhors and fears, leaving no choice for Janie but to get married. At this point in Janie's life,

she abhors the idea of an arranged marriage. Instead, as Lovalery King proposes, “[Janie] dreams of romance and adventure, of experiencing sexual fulfilment with a man she loves, and of seeking the horizon, a metaphor of living the life to the fullest” (53).

For Janie, though, following Nanny’s mentality, there is no room for love within marriage. On the contrary, marrying Killicks appears to be Janie’s only option and as Abrar Ahmed et. All (2023) reflect, “a deity who is protecting her Honey” (619). Though he is much older than Janie, his sixty acres and a house make him the ideal candidate for Nanny. Janie’s unwanted marriage would fill her life with material things and a sense of security. From Nany’s point of view, this union would make Janie’s life enjoyable and safe. However, she aspires to something more than just sixty acres of land. Or, as Boner puts it, “she refuses to barter her fulfilment as a woman in exchange of property right” (59). As Janie herself points out: “Ah ain’t takin’ dat ole land tuh heart neither. Ah could through ten acres of it over the fence every day and never look bak to see where it fell” (22). Liu Jiana (2020) also deals with the notion of achieving economic stability and how it shapes male characters and their oppressive tendencies in Hurston’s novel: “[e]conomic self-confidence magnifies the strong and male hegemonic ideas in Logan and Joe’s [Janie’s second husband] personality, making them have a desire to control and oppress Janie” (4).

Economic stability is Nanny’s desire for Janie, quite the antithesis of what Janie pursues. While Janie craves romance and a marriage whose foundations lie in establishing an emotional connection with her partner, Killicks does neither understand nor shares Janie’s romantic idea of marriage. Janie tells her grandmother that she is not in love with Killicks, and fears things will not change.

Nanny, on her part, tries to soothe her by assuring her that love will come with marriage. The narrative voice also hopes that love would eventually appear:

> "Yes, [Janie] would love Logan after they were married. She could see no way for it to come about, but Nanny had said it, so it must be so. Husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant." (25)

Janie's first steps into forced obedience clearly corresponds with feminist criticism as Deborah L. Madsen (2000) in *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice* asserts that "women internalize patriarchal values to perfect their obedience; they conform to the stereotypes, they display unwavering loyalty, they do not betray any sign of dissatisfaction or resistance to male control. (161)

Despite the different views held by Nanny and Janie regarding the institution of marriage, the wedding finally took place. On a Saturday evening, young Janie became a married woman in Nanny's parlour. Hurston's choice of time for the ceremony is no coincidence, but quite meaningful. As the day dies, so do Janie's hopes for the horizon.

Once Logan and Janie married, love did not show up, although Janie tried her best to make things work. In a way, Janie feels deceived by the idea of marriage—in particular, the idea of being married and not loving her husband is troubling her-- thus, she complains to Nanny: "Cause you told me Ah [Janie] mus gointer love him [Logan], and, and Ah don't. Maybe if somebody was to tell me how, Ah could do it" (22). In a way, Janie feels heart-broken and cheated by Nanny's idea of marriage, because deep inside she abhors a loveless marriage while Nanny thinks otherwise:

> "You [Janie] come heah wid yo'mouth full uh foolishness on uh busy day. Heah you got uh prop tuh learn on all yo' bawn days, an big protection, and everybody got tuh tip dey hat tuh you and call you Mis' Killicks, and you come worryin' me 'bout love" (22)

The idea that Hurston's Janie needs to find a purpose in her marriage is also highly significant. Moreover, she is not shy about verbalizing her sexual desire: "Ah want to want him sometimes. Ah don't want him to do all de wantin'" (22). For Janie, marriage has become a duty, a sort of ritual she has to perform, following Nanny's advice when she affirms: "If you don't want him, you sho oughta" (22). Nanny's emotionless opinion puts Janie in an impossible situation, that of a loveless marriage that is crushing Janie's spirit, when she clearly admits: "I wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think" (23). Nature, once again, plays a decisive part in Janie's marriage, and becomes a symbol of hope: "Janie waited a bloom time, and a green time and an orange time" (23). However, none of this happens. Instead, Janie's new self would slowly awaken to the heartbreaking realization that sweetness is not always part of the equation of marriage. The veil of her naiveness has been abruptly lifted and her innocence lost. Nevertheless, as Hurston asserts, "Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (24).

5.2.2. Janie's Quest for Love: "Marriage Doesn't Make Love"

So she extended herself outside of her dream
and went inside the house.
That was the end of her childhood"
(Their Eyes, 12)

These are Nanny's last words: "Lawd, you know mah heart. Ah done de best Ah could do. De rest is left to you" (23). A month later, she passes away, but she is happy to leave Janie behind—finally a married woman who will be protected by her husband. From them on, the only thing left for Janie is to come to terms with her frustrated married status and leave her dreams aside. However, reality hits hard. Janie does not even feel physically attracted to her husband', as she frankly puts it: "Ah hates de way his head is so long one way and so flat on de sides and dat pone uh fat back uh his neck. […] His belly is too big too, now, and his toe-nails look lak mule foots" (23). Besides, Janie is absolutely repelled by his touch and the proximity to his body when she complains, "Ah'd ruther be shot wid tacks than tuh turn over in de bed and stir up de air whilst he is in dere" (23). More than anything, Janie feels trapped in an unsuccessful marriage where she does not even feel desired since "[Killicks] don't even never mention nothin' pretty" (25). The examples above make it clear that Hurston dares to approach black women's sexuality in a candid way, thus, subverting existing stereotypes that have objectified black bodies ever since the times of slavery.[92]

[92] See "Sex Stereotypes of African Americans Have Long History," a conversation between Herbert Samuels (sex educator and university professor) and Mireille Miller-Young (professor of Women's Studies at UCSB). NPR, May 7, 2007. https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10057104

Besides, Hurston's portrayal of the relationship between Killick and Janie helps Hurston to critique and destabilize the traditional and unbalanced marriage where the husband expects to be served by his servant who would blindly obey his orders. Within Hurston's discourse on marriage, moreover, the author allows Janie (and most of her female protagonists) to refuse to be overworked when she is ordered to work beyond her capacity—as occurs when Killicks forces Janie to work in the fields. Thus, through Janie's own experiences, Hurston also presents pioneering feminist characters. In the case of Janie, she is not the docile and subservient type of wife. On the contrary, she dares to question her husband's authority, thus, provoking his rage: "Mah fust wife never bothered me 'bout choppin' no wood nohow. She'd grab dat ax and sling chips lak uh man. You done been spoilt rotten" (25).

Killicks's accusations—Janie is definitely not "wife material"—only help her to adopt a feisty attitude and to clearly speak her mind: "Ah'm just as stiff as you is stout. If you can stand not to chop and tote wood Ah reckon you can stand not to git no dinner" (25). Here, once again, Hurston's feminist-like agenda gets the reader by surprise, (as well as Janie's newly married husband) since she is ready to break down traditional gender roles (she will not cook dinner for her husband). Besides, Hurston makes it clear that she wants her black female characters strong. To put it briefly, Janie's irrevocably self-assertiveness will also show when, in view of a joyless, suffocating, embittered, sexless, and loveless marriage, it is Janie who will choose to leave—thus showing her determination and self-sufficiency.

Leaving Logan Killicks behind might respond to Janie's unstopping determination to overcome her marital obstacles by herself and thrive in life.

However, it is interesting to note that Hurston's Janie does not remain single for long. Joe Starks is his name as well as Logan Killick's antagonist since Starks seems to be a sophisticated and stylish man who has come all the way from Georgia, and who does not belong to Janie's world. Besides, while Starks is a very determined and ambitious man with a clear objective in mind, Killicks have proven to undermining and "killing" Janie's self after imposing her a life in the fields she is not pleased to carry on.

In contrast with Killicks's work in the fields, Joe Starks is an assertive, self-confident striver who intends to become "a big voice" as the Mayor in the first all-black community in Eatonville—a prestigious position he intends to achieve due to his charisma and perseverance. In her article "Language, Speech, and Difference in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,", Cynthia Bond claims that Starks' obsession with achieving a "big voice" is connected to "a status dependent on the submissive silence of his wife" (46).

Surprised to see that a woman like Janie is married and forced to work in the fields behind a plow takes Starks by surprise. As far as he is concerned, she deserves to be put on a pedestal to worship her, and treat her like a lady:

> You [Janie] behind a plow! You ain't got no mo' business wid uh plow than a hog is got wid uh holiday! You ain't got no business cuttin' up no seed p'taters neither. A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on the front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for you. (28)

As mentioned earlier, the recurrent idea of placing white Southern women on a pedestal does for the most part exclude Black women from such a privileged social position. In contrast, Surinder Kaur (2016) suggest that the trope of the

pedestal is, instead, deeply related to women's confinement. As a matter of fact, Janie recurrently complains about Logan Killicks' fake promise of placing her on a pedestal from the moment her husband buys Janie a mule to help him in the fields. Instead, Kaur suggests that Janie becomes trapped by her husband's "patriarchal pedestal.". Kaur elaborates on this idea while she analyses Janie's journey. From Kaur's point of view, "this pedestal [Logan's] confines Janie's movement within the four walls of her house." Thus, according to Kaur, "pedestals are small and leave a woman very little room to do anything but fulfil the prescribed role" (7). Therefore, echoing Kaur's thoughtful arguments, Janie's apparent "pedestal" does not confer her the right to enjoy a satisfactory marriage nor is she positioned to plead for a special treatment. On the contrary, it only helps to minimize he both as a woman and as a wife.

Susan Edwards Meisenhelder agrees with Kaur's study of Joe Starks's masculinity, but she also suggest that apart from Starks's recreation of the power dynamics within wife-husband relations. "Starks draws his model for social relationships from the white world, [thus] his view of the ideal relationship between a man and a woman is similarly imported" (121). Over all, we would suggest that Hurston's Joe Starks is portrayed as a ruler of things, as a man who needs to have her wife under his control. In short, he fits into the category of a very possessive individual. Given these traits of character, it is no wonder then that Janie seems hesitant to trust him as he "did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees" (Hurston 28).

Going back to Hurston's characterization, "Joe Starks spoke for chance and change," but Janie still remains sort of restless as Nanny's words still echo in her head (28). However, Joe tries to convince and ease Janie's troubled

thoughts when he insists that his intentions are legitimate and truthful: “Janie, if you think Ah aims to tole you off and make a dog outa you, youse wrong. Ah wants to make a wife outa you” (28). Starks ’s true nature begins to lie in wait, and his status as the “boss” in the future marriage soon becomes evident. Sigrid King also delves into this idea as she looks at the question of Joe Starks’ masculinity and the separate and specific roles of husband and wife in Hurston’s novel. According to King:

> Hurston provides some hints about Joe’s true nature through the limiting and subjugating names he calls Janie when they first meet. He calls her ‘lil girl-chile’ and ‘pretty doll-baby’ (28), indications of the role that he will want her to play once she becomes mayor of Eatonville. When Jody names her in the socially prescribed role of ‘wife’ […] he clearly places himself in the position of power. (62)

Therefore, following King’s reading, Starks shows he controls the act of naming—but not only that. By infantilizing her, and by omitting Janie’s name from his discourse, ,’ he is appropriating Janie’s name together with her true self as “his wife and possession.. King also notices that at a certain point in the story Janie calls him Joe and, once again, he controls the narrative by stating: “call me Jody lak you do sometime” (28). The irony here lies in whether “Jody” might be used as a term of endearment to show off among his subalterns.

Consequently, it can be appreciated that there exists a clear contrast between Starks’ assertiveness towards making Janie the center of his world, and Killicks’’ more abusive behavior of Janie. Furthermore, Starks even wants to marry her and promises her a fulfilling life together: “the day you puts yo’ hand in mine, Ah wouldn’t let the sun go down on us single” (28). To summarize, it is

apparent that by choosing to abandon her first unwanted husband, Janie moves from being the mule of the world, to be presented with the opportunity to become someone worthy of respect and love.

Notwithstanding, as we have seen, Hurston has described black women as the "mules of the world," and this pejorative definition perfectly sums up Janie's current position in life when she is forced by Killicks to work in the fields. That is, Hurston makes Janie representative of those black women who happen to "carry the burdens of the world." This is, no doubt, a stressful, overbearing, and oppressive world where black women are absolutely dehumanized. However, things will soon change for Janie since. as Bailey (2016)[93] emphasizes, although Janie has been kept from taking her own decisions in life, Hurston finally enables her protagonist's spirit to flourish For Bailey:

> Janie has been held up as a model feminist character and Hurston as a model feminist writer having created a character to whom women can look for many of the traits they are traditionally accused of lacking, such as strength, courage, enduring love, and wisdom (322).

With Bailey's statement in mind, it is important to pause briefly and pay attention to the symbology behind Janie's clothes regarding her elopement. For example, while the morning–the beginning of the day–seems like a breath of fresh air that evokes the memory of a brand-new dress, the apron symbolizes her "marriage" to the household, her tedious domestic responsibilities and the burden

[93] Bailey, Amanda. "Necessary Narration in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *The Comparatist*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2016, pp. 319–337.

of tending to her husband. In a similar vein, once Janie has made up her mind to leave Killicks behind, Hurston's portraits Janie's celebration of her new-found freedom as follows: "[Janie] untied [her apron] and flung it on a low bush beside the road and walked on, picking flowers and making a bouquet" (31). Interestingly enough, happy to feel alone and free, it is only after Janie frees herself from her apron, a domestic symbol of "house enslavement," that she resumes her seemingly endless quest to find her true self.

Besides, following the interpretation of Hurston's use of symbols, Vivi J. Dabee's thesis "The Summons to Behold a Revelation: Femininity and Foliage in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" (2008) focuses on the same scene, and describes the episode as "an act that symbolizes her liberation from one marriage and discourse to the entrapment of another" (29), Also, Dabee echoes Elizabeth T. Haye's argument[94] to exemplify that "Janie's first action after leaving Logan is to throw off her apron, a symbol of that bondage" (178).

As Janie leaves Killicks, she soon notices her new love interest Joe Starks waiting for her with a hired rig and ready for a new beginning: "[f]rom now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom" (31). In this euphoric stage, that is associated with the "flourishing" of Janie's enthusiasm for her new life, Hurston portrays, once again, a resolute Janie who takes her own decisions and chooses to elope

94 Included in Hayes, Elizabeth T. "'Like Seeing you Buried': Persephone *in The Bluest Eye, Their Eyes Were Watching God,* and *The Color Purple*." *Images of Persephone: Feminist Readings in Western Literature*. U P of Florida: Gainesville, 1994.170-94.

alongside Joe Starks—also, note that both of them sit on the "high ruling chair"—thus, symbolizing a sort of equalizing relationship.

To Joe Starks's surprise, Janie soon got tired of sitting at the front porch and refused to be treated as a chandelier or a "pretty doll-baby." Hurston's Janie chooses how to conduct her life, how to live it and who to live with and, in the end, Mr. and Mrs Starks–now newlyweds–march together as husband and wife.

As they venture into the new town, Jody and Janie are "welcomed." After a quick assessment of the town and its adjacent land, Jody concludes by emphasizing that there is a clear shortage of space for the plans he has in mind—thus, showing his ambitious plans for both Janie and the country-folks. Their age difference is obvious[95], but Jody makes it clear that Janie is her wife, thus, implying that they should also pay their respect to her.

Once again, Starks' way of attracting the attention of the black people lies in his financial situation and his high plans for the future: "Ah'm buyin' in here, and buyin' in big. […] call people together and form a committee" (33). That is, Jody Starks could be described as a force of nature, wealthy and what today will be called "an entrepreneur" who easily imposes his plans to the villagers. No one questions him, no one dares to cross him or invalid his opinions. As for Janie, she does not feel so much "excitement" as some people would think she would

[95] Age difference is a constant in Hurston's fictional couples. In this case, Janie is much younger than her husband Jody Stark. Both in real life and in fiction, Hurston tends to choose younger men. This will also be the case with Janie's third partner, Tea Cake.

as Jody's wife: "Janie was not jumping at her chance like she ought to. […] She needed waking up" (35).

It could be argued that Janie's thoughtfulness also tells the reader much about Janie's character and her priorities in life. Thus, Hurston introduces this stage in Janie's life where the protagonist not only moves from the category of "a mule of the world" to being "put on a pedestal." While Janie is thankful that she does not have to work in the fields and be subject to Killicks's ill treatment, Janie takes her time to asses her new roles both as wife (private) and as Mrs. Mayor (public) at the same time she is eager to mingle with the folk people and become part of the new all black community.

Starks' determination and ambition to make the newly appointed Eatonville thrive allows him to be appointed "Mayor Starks." People obey him blindly and, in only six weeks, Eatonville becomes the product of his pride: a functioning and accessible town for the outsiders. As Susan Edwards Meisenhelder argues, it is interesting to highlight the fact that "[Starks] builds for himself a slave owner's mansion to symbolize his power over the community" (121). Bearing in mind Sherley Anne Williams theory on black masculinity, it could be argued that even a black leader and highly successful black man shows some signs of an inferiority complex derived from the recent experience of slavery and the never-ending denigration of blackness. Thus, as a consequence of the apparently unattainable social respectability, "nineteenth-century black men, confronted with the impossibility of being the (white) patriarch, began to subvert certain of patriarchy's ideals and values to conform to their own images" (71). Hurston cleverly exposes the existing dichotomy when the author includes the line that refers to Starks' speech "I god". When entering Eatonville, Joe's "I god, where's de Mayor?" (*Their*

Eyes 35) that implies a double assertion: “he’s God, so, the mayor, if there is one, must be lesser, and if no one has been elected, he’s an obvious candidate” (Lowe 80).

There is no doubt that Jody Starks enters in both Janie’s life and in Eatonville with a clear purpose in mind: his need to exercise authority over those he perceives to have lower social status. This issue is also dealt with in Dabee’s MS thesis where she concludes that “Joe’s obsessive needs to establish and maintain the image of a potent and wealthy man of prominence bleeds onto Janie and she becomes the ultimate symbol of his virility and entitlement” (29). Unfortunately, as Joe’s wife, though, Janie will be silenced both verbally and socially.

Meisenhelder also deals with Janie’s new position, and comes to the conclusion that “while Janie will be ‘above the gang,’ she will be subjugated and objectified in her relationship with Joe: her pedestal will place her above other black women, but decidedly beneath him” (121). Janie’s voice continues to be muted, but Molly Hite also addresses the different stages where she is forced to remain voiceless until she finally makes herself be heard loud and clear. According to Hite,

> “Janie discovers her voice and uses to assert her own authority in a world full of speechmakers and tale-tellers. Janie’s voice, first muted by the pathos of her Nanny’s stories, emerges to threaten her first husband but then is subsumed to the ’big voice’ of Jody Starks” (442).

With the passing of time, though, Janie’s apparently privilege life would reflect Nanny’s old fears. Meisenhelder continues and reflects that “ironically, she

[Janie] lives a life Nanny worked so hard to avoid for her, enduring what Nanny feared despite having attained the economic circumstances she desired. […] Janie becomes a spit-cup for Joe" (121). Furthermore, John Lowe pauses to analyse the symbol of "the spit-cup of men"[96] and concludes that "Nany's fears/prophecies for Janie have become true. Janie is transformed into a mule, first of work, by Logan, then of decorative leisure by Jody. She does become a spit cup" (108). As for Starks,' while his notoriety increases, and he soon becomes the centre of the town, Janie–known now as Mrs. Mayor–is left "behind" him.

Compared to the first relationship—that of Janie and Logan Killicks--Hurston offers a better insight into the true relationship between Janie and Starks. As for his relationship with Janie, Starks does not treat her as an equal partner. Instead, he sees Janie as his possession, and, as such, Mayor Starks forces Janie to play by his rules. As Shawn E. Miller argues in "'Some Other Way to Try': From Defiance to Creative Submission," "Janie had been kept in her place, either as domestic servant to Killicks' or as Starks' ornament, and in both cases had suffered the oppressions of a narrowly-defined sex role" (77). This sense of Janie's belonging is related to Anne Campbell's theory as she establishes a connection between jealousy and ownership since "jealousy is not only sexual but also extends to the wife's friends, family and workplace–anyone who claims her attention becomes a treat to the husband's emotional ownership" (107).

Authority and oppression come in different ways and, for example, by not

[96] The metaphor of the "spit-cup" refers to Nanny's fears that Janie would be abused by men.

allowing Janie to display her beautiful long wavy hair, Starks is exerting his power over her and diminishing her independence and right to choose once again. As could not be otherwise, just like the rest of the town, Janie submits to Joe's commands, not only as the "female" partner of the marriage but, as the subaltern of a higher social entity in Eatonville, Mayor Starks.

Mrs. Starks shows clear signs of sheer frustration, but she tries to convince herself that his work keeps them in a position where they "ain't natural wid one 'nother." Deep inside, though, Janie feels she is just "markin' time" (43) while Starks keeps reassuring Janie that she "oughta be glad, 'cause dat makes uh big woman outta you" (43). However, far from being proud of and satisfied with her current position as "Mrs. Major," Janie's current personal and emotional situation suffocate and further isolate her. In this vein, Mary Helen Washington makes Starks responsible for Janie's objectification when she claims that "once Jody takes her to Eatonville, he controls her life as well as the narrative […] and prescribes her relationship with the rest of the town" (12).

As a representative example of Starks' ever-increasing possessiveness, Hurston tackles the issue of Janie's "good hair"—a trope that persists from slavery times to nowadays and that, as in the past, it can still be a source of Black women's pride or prejudice. In Hurston's novel, Janie's fine hair –long and wavy– adds to her other beautiful features –the light colour of her skin– which intensify not only men's but also women's jealousy. As for Starks himself, he soon makes Janie's hair one the main targets of his fury to the extent that "he ordered Janie to tie up her hair around the store. That was all. She was there in the store for him to look at, not those others" (52). Shatema Threadcraft (2016) delves into this idea in her chapter dedicated to "Embodiment" where she states that

> "[n]ot only have women been primarily responsible for caring for the bodies of men, children, and elders, but ideals of Western feminine subjectivity call on them to fashion their own bodies as ornamental surfaces for the male gaze. (204)

More than anything, it irritates Janie to comply with his "command" to cover her hair because, as she puts it "this business of the head-rag irked her endlessly. But Jody was set on it. Her hair was NOT going to show in the store" (51). However, I would like to highlight that, despite the constant threats, and the imposition of hiding her thick and long hair under those head rags, Janie's is not shy to verbalize her disappointment and even confront him with her own arguments.

We would even sustain that Janie's hair represents her essence since, as Washington argues, "Janie's hair is one of the most powerful forces in her life, mesmerizing men and alienating the women" (18). On her part, in her article "The Porch Couldn't Talk for Looking:" Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Deborah Clark recalls Laura Mulvey's notes on female figure from her psychoanalytic study "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". (1975/2003). As Mulvey argues, "the female figure, beyond providing pleasure for the looker, also implies a certain threat," the woman is portrayed "as an icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of the men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke that anxiety it originally signified"[97] (155).

---

[97] Laura Mulvey's notes on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" are included in Mulvey, Laura. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989.

As with a great deal of African American female critics and scholars, Washington also pauses to analyse the recurrent present of the trope of Janie's "good hair" when she refers to the protagonist's ambivalent double role--as "heroine" and "hero" when she claims:

> Like all romantic heroines, Janie follows the dreams of men. She takes off after Jody because 'he spoke for far horizon'. […] By the rules of romantic fiction, the heroine is extremely feminine in looks. Janie's long heavy, Caucasian-style hair is mentioned so many times that […] it becomes another character of the novel." (18)

In addition, Starks also prevents Janie from joining the folks in the porch to both listen to and tell "old lies," but she dares to ignore her husband's threats and reclaims her voice: "Ah [Janie] knows uh few things, and women folks thinks sometimes too!" (67). Here is another instance where Janie is not shy to answer her husband back, make her voice heard and use her words as weapons. After having clearly put into question women's intellect, Starks keeps putting into question women's brains: "Aw naw they [women] don't. They just think they's thinkin'" (67).

Since Starks' is a clear case of pathological jealousy, we will first take a look at Campbell's theory on domestic violence that can be applied to Janie's and Jody's marital problems. I would start by referring to Campbell's pernicious effects of extreme jealousy within a couple. In Campbell's words:

> Obsessive jealously on the part of a husband succeeds in effectively isolating his wife from other relationships. He increasingly controls her whereabouts, so that she rarely has even the opportunity to meet anyone. (107)

Janie has remained silent and obedient for almost twenty years, but she somehow finds the strength to use her voice and fight Jody back. As a consequence, Jody's manhood has been challenged, his ego bruised and his "dominance" over her wife shattered while Janie has regained the power she desperately craved. As he is publicly ridiculed by his own wife, Starks fights back and uses physical violence because, as Hurston puts it:

> Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible. […] There was nothing to do in life anymore. Ambition was useless. […] Joe Starks didn't know the words for all this, but he knew the feeling. So he struck Janie with all his might and drove her from the store. (75-76)

Note here how easily Starks moves from verbal and psychological violence to physical domestic violence—a sort of vicious circle that includes all types of violence. It goes to the point that Starks needs to inflict as much pain as possible even if his strength is debilitating. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that he refuses to tolerate the sight of his wife, rejects her meals, and wrongly accuses her of trying to poison him. It is relevant to notice that Hurston allows Janie to find comfort and support in her friend Phoebe, who would try her best to ease Janie's pain. Once again, Hurston underlines the relevance of black women's sorority.

Besides, as is common in most of Hurston's short fiction and novels, the author tends to punish the male partner who has mistreated his female partner by causing his death, thus, allowing her female protagonists to regain their freedom and move away in search of the horizon and, even at times, to get ready to choose a new lover. Jody's case is not the exception, but before his appointed time to die arrives, Hurston allows her protagonist to say her saying. However,

we should bear in mind that this Janie—already in her forties—is no longer the naïve woman who has been "saved" by her former husband. Starks, though, is in no better shape—sick, older, and criticized by his all-black community. Nevertheless, Janie. is neither hesitant nor afraid to confront her dying husband. Because Janie's voice has been suppressed all those years, she feels the need to "come clear" and express herself freely one last time. Note both Janie's boldness and honesty:

> Naw, Jody, Ah come in heah tuh talk widja and Ah'm gointuh do it too. It's for both of our sakes Ah'm talkin. Jody, maybe Ah ain't been sich uh good wife tuh you. […] it wasn't because Ah didn't have no sympathy […] Ah ain't here tuh blame nobody. Ah'm just tryin' tuh make you know what kinda person Ah is befo' it's too late (81).

Note, also, that Starks does not conform to the idea that he his dying—it is only Janie's sudden confession of his prompt death that allows the reader to perceive his weakness and his subsequent fear to die, when he mutters: "Ah got tuh die, and Ah ain't used tuh thinkin' 'bout it" (82). Ignoring Starks's mumbling, Janie's final and bold confession to Jody can be interpreted as her first step towards liberation, without leaving any "unfinished business" behind.

As Tyina Steptoe (2014) argues in her article "'Jody's Got Your Girl and Gone': Gender Folklore, and the Black Working Class," "Starks behavior led Janie to tell him that he is no longer her 'Jody,' since she has long stopped desiring him" (259). With her words, Janie resents her husband's inability to allow her to be her own woman and express herself:

> Listen, Jody, you ain't de Jody ah run off down de road wid. You'se whut's left after he died. Ah run off tuh keep house wid you in uh

> wonderful way. But you wasn't satisfied wid me de way Ah was. Naw! Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me (82)

Janie's world–and marriage– is crumbling apart, to the point that she dares to questioning her whole life. Not only has she begun to open up and think outside the boxes into which both her Nanny and her husband Killicks had put her, she also starts wondering how her life would change if she were to leave her husband. As she confronts Killicks, she even dares to "threaten(s)" the future of their marriage: "S'posin' Ah wuz to run off and leave yuh sometime" (29). This burst of confidence and empowerment is Janie's first step towards independence, a feeling that Killicks tries to "kill" by undermining her spirit when he shouts at Janie: "Shucks! 'Tain't no mo' fools lak me. A whole lot of mens will grin in yo' face, but dey ain't gwine tuh work and feed yuh. You won't git far and you won't be long, when dat big gut reach over and grab dat little one, you'll be too glad to come back here. (29). While Mr. Logan Killicks thinks of him as Janie's "saviour" Janie does not: "You ain't done me no favor by marryin' me. And if dat's what you call yo'self doin', Ah don't thank yuh for it. (30).

This is the ending of Janie and Starks' marriage; the end of her period as an enslaved wife. Their marriage began on the premise that it would save Janie by providing her with stability and the social status that a married woman would obtain but, in the end, it took a toll on her freedom. Her freedom of choice had been snatched away but by leaving she is reassessing her position within society and marriage.

As Hurston states: “A feeling of sudden newness and change came over her. Janie hurried out of the front gate and turned south. Even if Joe was not there waiting for her, the change was bound to do her good” (31). Ryan Simmons delves into Janie’s decision to break her marriage, “in leaving her first marriage, Janie reasons that, even if Joe has lied to her, any possible future is preferable to her past with Logan” (177). Her hope for a better future shade any second thought she could have. Zora’s words help to fully understand Janie’s joy as she leaves: “[t]he morning road air was like a new dress. That made her feel the apron tied around her waist.” (31) She is fully in control of her life at this point and this new dress she is wearing is something she chooses to. Undoubtedly, this is a metaphor about how comfortable and happy she feels once she has made up her mind about leaving a suffocating and unhappy marriage once again. Alali Salam (2023) delves into the symbolism of the “morning” and this “new dress”. She echoes that “the opposition between the refreshing morning air and the apron–a metaphor of women’s domestic space–, makes clear Janie’s new awareness” (449).

Mary Helen Washington concurs in this idea of Hurston’s portrayal of “women’s exclusion from power, particularly from the power of oral speech” (“I Love” 9). This is clearly represented in Janie’s second marriage as prohibits Janie from speaking in public to the town’s people: “[t]hank yuh fuh yo’ compliments, buh mah wife don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no speech-makin’. Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s uh woman and her place is in de home” (40-41). His understanding of marriage is not one that is based on equality but on domesticity. Taking Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s article “My Statue, Myself”, she concurs in Hurston’s portrayal of black women as being object of male patriarchy. As she

states, “the black community–or black men–have embraced the gender conventions of white bourgeois society. Black men seek to transfer their burdens to black women by forcing those women into domestic corsets” (196).

In Jody’s speech, not only is he depriving Janie of her freedom of speech but also, he is imposing his position of power over her in front of their fellow neighbours. He is proclaiming himself at the top of the “marriage hierarchy” as he is setting a precedence for his wife’s obedience. By asserting his power in public, we can foresee the same–or even worse–DOMESTIC VIOLENCE in the house. Here, It is important to go back to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s intersectionality in her article “Mapping the Margins” (1991) as she asserts that “men consider their homes as a safe haven […] which is why they use their homes as a place to show that they are the ones who dominate” (1257).

Janie’s self is once again crushed and she starts to feel powerless. Having left her previous arranged marriage where she did not have a choice, she is once again submitted to a man’s voice. Maybe it wasn’t the speech she wanted to make, but it was definitely the choice of speaking up she was deprived off and her free will.

In this state of verbal suppression, storytelling is a symbol important to analyse. Against this oppressed silence, the power of language appears as Barbara Christian asserts in “The Highs and the Lows of Black Feminist Criticism" (1990), “storytelling is a dynamic form of remembering/recreating” (49). Hurston evokes Janie’s need to connect with her community through storytelling as a way of freeing her from her oppressive existence:

> When the people sat around on the porch and passed around the pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and see, it was

> nice. The fact that the though pictures were always crayon enlargements of life made it even nicer to listen to. (48)

This idea of having a voice is intricately related to the power of the porch as Trudier Harris asserts in *The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan* (1996). According to Harris, "[t]he voice establishes the porch connection that serves as the interactive metaphor for tellers and listeners" (57). She is deprived of being a part of this speech once again: "Janie loved the conversation and sometimes she thought up good stories on the mule, but Joe had forbidden her to indulge" (50). While she craved the contact through storytelling at the same time that connecting with the townsfolks, Jody thought this behaviour as one no suitable for the wife of the Mayor: "You'se Mrs. Starks, Janie. I god, Ah can't see what uh woman yo' stability would want tuh be treasurin' all dat gum-grease from folks dat don't even own de house dey spleep in" (50-51). Janie's social distance from the towns people and her status and belonging as Mrs. Starks are her husband's reasons. As Shawn E. Miller defines, "the porch talk is carried solely by men; when women enter the scene, they are object of judgement. In both cases, the husband acts to keep the wife out of sex–and class–inappropriate situations" (203).

These cumulative oppressive attitudes have taken a toll on Janie's previous vision. As Hurston expresses, she was taken off her choice and that is what started to open her eyes and "take the bloom off of things". In the same sense, and quoting Inés Casas (2013) in her article "'So This Was Marriage!" Intersections of Natural Imagery and The Semiotics of Space in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*": Janie's existence with Jody: "becomes as lifeless as the virgin trees, he cut down to build his own house and

store” (76). With this symbolism, we are taken back to the time she craved the blossom of the pear tree and her sexual and emotional awakening something that seems alien to her now.

His authoritarian attitude has become evident towards his wife as to his fellow townspeople. This hierarchy propitiates a social separation among the community with people starting to speak behind his back. His use of “spittoons”, these “gold-looking vases that anybody else would have been glad to put on their front-room table” (44), made people feel like “they had been taken advantage of. Like things had been kept from them” (45). Susan Edwards Meisenhelded deepens into Starks’ use of power within “one of your own color” as “whereas the community members are awed and intimidated by Starks, they sense something unnatural in his actions” (120). His flaws as a leader become clear, and more importantly as a black leader in a black community. Although this discontent and mixed feelings were evident, he faced nothing which would make his “rule” crumble. As Huston empathizes: “none had the temerity to challenge him. They bowed down to him”. (47) Hannah Arendt (1968) delves into this idea of hierarchy in her article “What is Authority?”, it is intricately related to social conventionalisms:

> The authoritarian relation between the one who commands and the one who obeys rests neither on common reason nor on the power of the one who commands; what they have in common is the hierarchy itself, whose rightness and legitimacy both recognize and where both have their predetermined stable place (93).

Mrs. Starks identity is being supressed and, as stated before, while her hair has always seen as an icon of beauty, it becomes Stark’s possession and

one only her husband could admire. Janie's hair is a symbol of her power, her sexuality too, and unconventional identity; it definitely represents Janie's individuality and inner strength. As Jody forbids Janie to show her beautiful hair[98], he is keeping her from being herself and making a symbol of patriarchy of her. As Yvonne Johnson (1998) states: "Janie leaves her hometown and first husband for Joe Starks but discovers that he wants only to put her on a pedestal, to make her an ornament, a testimony to his greatness" (50).

As an extension of her husband, she begins to fathom the extension of her oppressed situation. In the following lines, Janie's thoughts verbalize her frustration, although "[t]imes came when she [Janie] fought back with her tongue as best as she could, […] it didn't do her any good" (67). Her discourse cannot at this time surpass the patriarchy and her husband as, as Hurston interiorizes: "He wanted her submission and he'd keep on fighting until he felt he had it". Janie is falling in this kind of vicious circle where the sole option she finds is to pressed her teeth together and learned to hush" (67). Shawn E. Miller reflects on Janie's difficult position as "over the years, Janie tries to mask her fighting spirit to avoid conflict, but never really gives it up entirely" (192).

This latent resistance is embedded in Janie as their marriage shatters. She is aware of a shift as "[t]he spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. It was there to shake hands whenever company came to visit, but it never went back inside the bedroom again" (67) where, as Emily Frampton

[98] Note that in the African-American community, long, straight and abundant hair like Janie's is a synonym for "good hair", while black hair or "kinky hair" is called "bad hair". Thus, Janie's long and beautiful hair is an assert and therefore, she is very much envied for her luck.

(2021) argues in her article "'They All Leaned Over While She Talk': Storytelling and Community in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*", "she had resigned herself to exist as another symbol of Joe's power (52). In the end, "[t]he bed was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in. It was a place where she went and laid down when she was sleepy and tired" (67). Rather than a place to joyful experience the bond of two "loving" individuals, Jody and Janie's life in the bedroom was non-existent.

The deterioration of the marriage is clear as it is Janie's hopes and inner thoughts, her younger version who craved love and a fulfilling life is now subdued. As Hurston writes "she wasn't petal-open anymore with him. She was twenty-four and seven years married when she knew" (67), something is clear and that is the impossibility of blossoming in her living with Joe. That is something that is dead and she comes to terms with it. Sepideh Hozhabrossadat (2015) in "Illuminating nature and Gender Trouble in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" analyses this passage and coincides in Janie being "oppressed and robbed of her chance to bloom. […] she cannot expect any blooming from her marriage with Jody, and as days pass by it becomes clearer that their relationship is sterile" (127). Her marriage's death echoes her sexual awakening as "[s]he had no more blossom opening dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be. (*Their Eyes* 68)

While Janie tries to envisage her future, Joe's is crumbling. Time, that abstract concept that people need to cling on to and treasure is what gets Joe's life upside down. Joe's insecurity regarding the age difference between them has always been an issue in their marriage. It needs to be pointed out that, even at the beginning of "his" quest in Eatonville, Janie was mistaken and thought to

be “his daughter” something that got into Stark’s nerves: “[t]his here is mah wife” (33).

> You oughta throw somethin’ over yo’ shoulders befo’ you go outside. You ain’t no young pullet no mo’. You’se uh ole hen now. […] You oughta throw somethin’ over yo’ shoulders befo’ you go outside. You ain’t no young pullet no mo’. You’se uh ole hen now. (73)

No matter how hard he threw his words at Janie and wanted to deceive her and diminish her worth, Janie saw all through that presumptuous façade: “for the first time she could see a man’s head naked on its skull” (73). The more he deteriorated, the more arrogant and unbearable he became and the more he “insulted” Janie’s physical state. As older he gets, the more unbearable the situation becomes to the point of mistreating and insulting her in public: “the more people in there [the store] the more ridicule he poured over her body to point attention away from his own” (74).

Their marriage is crumbling and so is Joe’s hold on Janie. She feels empowered to speak up and Hurston evokes this new-found spirit and voice: “Janie took the middle of the floor to talk right into Jody’s face, and that was something she hadn’t done before” (74). She is asserting herself as a deserving part of their marriage and this undoubtedly became the turning point in Janie’s life. A pivotal moment when she faces him and reclaims the power he had taken from her all those years ago: “Stop mixin’ up mah doings wid mah looks, Jody. When you git through tellin’ me how tuh cut uh plug uh tobacco, then you kin tell me whether mah behind is on straight or not” (74). She is set on iinflicting as much pain as she can. As E. S. Sharmila Sigamany (2021) echoes in his article

"Quest for identity in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*", "she lashes out verbally and asserts her feminine identity after almost twenty years of living an empty life" (24). By questioning Jody's manhood and his physique, she is undermining his power and taking it back:

> Naw, Ah [Janie] ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n you [Jody] kin say. You big-bellies round her and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout me old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life. (75)

Coming from a place of submission and oppression, Janie now subverts the power dynamics. Deborah Clarke in "Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God"* deepens into Janie's assertive speech where anger and built-up frustrations perform the ultimate castration: "having set up the dynamic of the body as visualized object, Joe becomes its victim, as Janie linguistically performs the castration of which she is the visual reminder" (156). Janie is here making fun of Jody's decadent sexuality, and, possibly his poor masculinity. As he is losing his authoritarian position in marriage, he is dying. Deborah Clarke deepens into this death as she suggests that "feminized by the visual dynamics that he has established, Joe dies, unable to withstand the gaze which erases his masculinity and identifies him as empty armour" (156).

Related to this idea is Cynthia Bond's theory on language and speech as she asserts that Janie "uses as image which in its application simultaneously implies a de-sexing. […] her performance of the image represents a castration,

the figurative correlate of male power" (49). Janie has embarrassed him in front of his "subjects" and has taken both his sexual and political power from him: "she had cast down his empty armour before men and they laughed, would keep on laughing" (*Their Eyes* 76). Janie taking the power from him makes him vulnerable; a vulnerability that he chooses to conduct through violence. By slapping Janie's face, he is trying to take some of that power back by, once again putting himself over her.

Janie and Jody's public marriage–and image–is in life support and this clearly sets the tone for Jody's outcome. From this altercation onwards, Jody is restraint to the bedroom as his health deteriorates. They become distant parts in marriage and, Jody's death unchains Janie's freedom.

Jody's health keeps debilitating to the point of getting extremely sick and suffering from kidney failure. As they grow apart, Jody faces his illness in total solitude not wanting her wife to see him weak. Jody refuses not only Janie's care but also any kind of medical treatment. Instead of relying in medicine, he is drawn to seek advice to healers, quacks and mere charlatans. Jody once again tries to exert his power and dominance over her by not letting her take care of him. Maybe it is pride or maybe it is shame but one thing is clear: Jody does not want to be seen as weak of feeble by anyone, not even her own wife.

There is no point in regretting the past and, as Janie becomes aware of it, she promptly shifts her discourse. She starts thinking about herself and only her: "[y]ears ago, she had told her girl self to wait for her in the looking glass. It had been a long time since she had remembered" (83). That young and naïve little girl–who had been told to shut up and move on–tries to come out through the cracks of her mind. With this revelation, Janie looks at her reflection in the mirror

to see that that young girl is long gone but, “a handsome woman had taken her place” (83). Janie–the woman–emerges and lets all her glory out: “she tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there” (83). With Joe’s death, Janie’s identity is revealed once and for all and, with this cathartic moment, Janie is born again as she takes of her head–rag and lets her hair flow.

5.2.3. To the Horizon and Back: Towards Self-Discovery and Independence

So she sat on the porch and watched the moon rise.

Soon its amber fluid was drenching the earth,

and quenching the thirst of the day"

(Their Eyes, 95)

While Janie wears her widow mask on for the outside world, the truth is that she has never felt better deep inside to the extent that, in an effort to meet social expectations, "she sent her face to Joe's funeral, and herself went rollicking with the springtime across the world" (84-5). Besides, as a free-spirited woman, Janie decides to carry on with her life but, she keeps her outside "widow appearance." More than anything, as the sole owner of the store, Ms. *Starks* feels liberated, empowered and, for the first time in her whole life, she finds herself in control of both her destiny and her intimate feelings. Hence, In an attempt to cut short the town folks's incisive and repetitive questions about her marital status, she would assertively responds: "Marry? Joe ain't had time tuh git cold yet. Ah ain't even give marryin' de first thought" (87).

But the black folks of Eatonville would still insist: "You'se too young uh 'oman tuh stay single, and you'se too pretty for de mens tuh leave yuh alone. You'se bound tuh marry" (87). Interestingly enough, Janie can hear the echo of Nanny's insistence when, in her youth, she constantly preached that marriage and protection went together because "womenfolks is easy taken advantage of. […] Whut yuh needs is uh man dat yuh done lived uhround and know all about tuh sort of manage yo' things fuh yuh and ginerally do round" (87). Instead, readers find a trully mature Janie who aims to fully experience this newly found

independence because “she liked being lonesome for a change. This freedom feeling was fine” (86). Bearing in mind Janie’s time and her personal circumstances, it is worthy to note that, for the most part, Hurston wants her female characters to be strong and self-sufficient, and Janie is no exception—thus the tendency to read, analyze and celebrate Hurston among the Black feminist pioneers on the Harlem Renaissance. [99]

However, as occurred in Hurston’s real life, Janie’s widowhood is not characterized by a profound and unbearable period of feeling alone and sorrowful or by suffering the devastating loss of Starks or Killicks, as her apparent life-partners. Perhaps, these are some of the reasons why the unexpected appearance in Eatonville of an outsider together with Janie’s unambiguous enthusiastic welcoming comes as a surprise—given Janie’s devotion to, but short-lived freedom. Hurston, though, offers the perfect timing for the couple’s first accidental encounter-- everyone is off town to watch a baseball game. His name is Vergile Woods, and he looks like a tall, handsome young man. Thus, in no time, he will become Janie’s new love interest. Vergile Woods–mostly known as Tea Cake–enters into her life, and they make each other’s life brighter: “Tea Cake wasn’t strange. Seemed as if she had known him all her life” (94). Besides, Tea Cake helps Janie regain her self-confidence as he teaches her how to fish, hunt, or even how to play checkers. As Janie puts it, “she found herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play” while Killicks always thought it was “too heavy fuh mah [her] brains” (92).

---

[99] Among others, we could mention Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), and her two female antagonist characters Claire and Irene Redfield.

Janie's and Tea Cake's fascination with each other is clear from the start, but Janie takes things in a much easier way now that she is more experienced. To start with, she becomes rather obsessive concerning certain issues. For example, Tea Cake has no fortune and could be hanging around just to "strip her of all that she had" (96). Or, maybe, "he was probably the kind of man who lived with various women but never married" (96), to later wonder "What do Ah want wid some trashy nigger out de streets? Bet he's livin' wid some woman or 'nother and takin' me for uh fool. Glad Ah caught mahself in time" (102). But, what mortifies Janie the most is their age differences. Janie is twenty years older, and she is afraid this might make her less "desirable" or Tea Cake more eager to later pursue younger women. It should be noted here that, in real life, Hurston's lovers and partners tended to be as far apart in age as her male fictional characters, thus, subverting the established social cliches about the "acceptable" age gap. That is, while it was (and still is) socially accepted for old men (or "sweet daddies")—whether white or black--to date or marry much younger women who might have up to thirty or forty years of difference in age, it has taken longer to socially accept the age gap difference when women are from ten to forty years older than their male partners. By openly privileging and redefining the binaries of "decline" (older women) and "success" (older men) that tend to widely disadvantage women, Hurston's depiction of the age difference between Janie and Tea Cake' avoids to criticizing enduring stereotypes, that had been accepted without much question, until current feminist theories of aging tend to look beyond earlier theories of aging. In addition, it should be stressed that more than four decades earlier, Hurston's marital couples could be read in the light of some of today's current theories of aging that go beyond the binaries of "success" and

"decline," that aim to theorize the male/female ageing body in terms of difference. In short, contemporary feminist critics and scholars of ageing theories look at "age differences," but take pains to erase the negative aspects that are associated with ageing such as body marks of "decline," "lack" or "negation." However, as it has been highlighted, by redefining gendered old age (Janie's), and celebrating age-gap differences within couples (Janie and Tea Cake versus Janie and Killicks, or Janie and Starks), Hurston's innovative discourse deals with current feminist theories of aging.[100]

Therefore, following the "decline" reading of ageing, it becomes noticeable that Hurston's innovative representation of age is also portrayed as a potential layer of oppression when readers are taken back to the beginning of Janie's story through Hurston's circular narrative and her final and solo-journey back to Eatonville—three marriages later and thirty years older. The gossiping of the people from Eatonville asserts this layer of oppression: "What dat ole forty year ole 'oman doin' wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal?" (2). Her age is being questioned as it is her mature physique as it doesn't align with the way people from her class should look and behave:

> Where she left dat young lad of a boy she went here off wid? – Thought she was going to marry? – Where he left her? – What he

[100] For a better understanding of Hurston's pioneer approach to and path-breaking characterization of age gap fictional partners, see, for example: Linn J. Sandberg's "Affirmative Old Age: The Ageing Body and Feminist Theories on. Difference." *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life*. October. Vol. 8 (1). October 2013: 11-40.

done wid all her money? – Betcha he off wid some gal so young she ain't even got no hairs – why she don't stay in her class? (2)

Sexism, race and class are intertwined here and represent what Clenora Hudson Weems (1989) identifies as the "tripartite of oppression." In her article "The Tripartite Plight of African American Women as Reflected in the Novels of Hurston and Walker," Hudson-Weems delves into analyzing *Their Eyes* from these three different layers of oppression and comes to the conclusion that while married to Janie both Killicks and Starks subjected her to a terrifying ordeal. female subjugation. As for Janie's marriage to Tea Cake, Hudson-Weems claims that classism and racism are emphasized. Thus, while the first half of the novel explores female subjugation, the second half emphasizes classism and racism (198).

For her part, Serena Volpi delves into a reading of aging in her piece "She Called her Soul to Come and See: Representations of Ageing in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." In her study, she pays special attention to ageing within African-American women and supports her thesis by echoing Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth's theory[101] on the fact that ageing in British society where "modern representations tend to describe elderly people as dependent and powerless" (10). Volpi also observes that "mainstream culture tends to stereotype the elderly as sedentary, set in their ways, and physically or emotionally inactive," while at the same time they provide a "wealth of alternative views that demonstrate the emancipatory possibilities of late life" (10). In contrast, for the people in Eatonville, Janie's lush

[101] Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth "Images of Ageing." In J. Bond, P. Coleman and S. Pearce *Ageing in Society: An introduction to Social Gerontology* (1993).

hair and appearance does not match her now old age. Volpi delves into the difference between Janie and the women of Eatonville:

> The problem is that Janie does not behave according to their model of appropriateness related to the stage of life she occupies. More than unsuccessful, her way of ageing is considered 'dishonorable' according to the vision of age accepted within her community. (11)

Note also that the folks still refer to Janie as *the wife of* the late Mayor. In their opinion, she has not grieved enough: "Joe Starks hadn't been dead but nine months and here she goes sashaying off to a pink in linen" (105). It is at this time when Hurston portrays Janie as a single woman, and disposes of her "grieving clothes." After this sort of ritual, Hurston allows Janie to emerge as an independent woman who chooses bright colors, thus, sending a powerful and meaningful statement to her folks.

What it is clear is that dressing up in colorful clothes, going hunting, going fishing and playing checkers are manifestations of Janie's newly found spirit. She is no longer hiding behind her black clothes; she is living a new life with Tea Cake. Within this courtship, a new person emerges—she wears "new dresses and her hair combed a different way nearly every day" (106). As Mr. Joe Starks's widow, she was supposed to parade her grief all over the town, but that is something Hurston's Janie refuses to do:

> Ah ain't grievin' so why do Ah hafta mourn? Tea Cake love me in blue, so Ah wears it. Joe ain't never in his life picked out no color for me. De world picked out black and white for mounin' Joe didn't.

> So Ah wasn't wearnin' it for him. Ah was wearing it for de rest of y'all (107-108)

While wearing bright colors might represent one's personality or state of mind, Janie's black clothing have been sending a wrong message since being The Major's widow only makes her feel absolutely liberated. In this thread of thought, note that Janie starts to wear blue clothing because Tea Cake loves her in blue. In this sense we could interpret that Janie still lacks self-confidence and prioritizes pleasing others, instead of herself; and that she really loves Tea Cake and cares about him, thus, pleasing both her lover and herself.

Janie is spellbound by Tea Cake and, at this time, he represents everything that she had longed under the pear tree. Hurston's description of Tea Cake evokes a lushing and flourishing scenery. He is portrayed as an infatuating character, an object of desire for any woman.

> She couldn't make him look just like any other man to her. He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom–a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God. (101)

This evocative and sensual description undeniably takes us back to a much younger Janie, a girl who craved love and happy endings. Now that she feels that love is attainable, she pursues marriage once again hoping that third time is a charm.

After her two previous marriages went wrong, Janie leaves Eatonville in the company of Tea Cake, when she chooses to embark herself in a new and rough type of life in the Everglades. [102] Therefore, this time Janie enters the Everglades in high spirits and experiences a sort of personal awakening from the moment she first meets Tea Cake—as a matter of fact, Janie is "beaming out with light" (97). the profusion of wild vegetation plays its part in Janie's welcoming the new destination as her future home.

Tea Cake, on the other hand, with the promise of building a life for themselves, enters the Everglades with a clear purpose in mind: working in the fields and making Janie happy in the process. In so doing, he is asserting his position as the "head" of their marriage and, consequently, Tea Cake soon becomes a "big voice" in the couple's new town. As Hurston puts it, "Tea Cake's house was a magnet, the unauthorized center of the 'job.' The way he would sit in the doorway and play his guitar made people stop and listen" (126). However, note that in Hurston's discourse readers start to subtly perceive Tea Cake's dominion over Janie as *their* home is described as "*Tea Cake's* house".

However, if we compare Joe Starks' "dominion" by which he is respected and looked up to Tea Cake's, we would find that the latter's free-spirit bond with the Everglades' society is contrary to Mr. Major's fancy home and authoritarian

---

[102] The Everglades is located in the South East Coast of Florida. In the last decades, it has become a National Park that is home to endangered species such as the American panther, crocodiles and alligators as well as lushing grass of different kinds and unique flora. The territory was home to the Seminole Indians who still occupy the land in small numbers. In *Their Eyes*, Hurston refers to the first inhabitants and praises the uniqueness of their eco-system.

and distant personality. Besides, in the Everglades, both Janie's and Tea Cake's home instantly becomes the center of storytelling, amicable gathering and games:

> The house was full of people every night. That is, all around the doorstep was full. Some were there to hear Tea Cake pick the box; some came to talk and tell stories, but most of them came to get into whatever game was going on or might go on (127)

Clearly, too, Tea Cake's easy-going attitude clashes with Janie's previous position as the mayor's wife. As mentioned earlier, back in Eatonville, Janie was kept from joining the gossiping, the talking and the telling of stories. Instead, as the Mayor's wife, she is systematically sent inside the house and deprived of socializing with the townsfolk. In contrast, and to Janie's delight, she finds that Tea Cake makes her feel that she belongs to the group. To put it briefly, Janie is no longer kept out the porch, but instead she becomes a very active part of it: "[t]he men held big arguments here like they used to do on the store porch. Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to." (158)

Given the above, it is undeniable that Janie's life has taken a new turn after she meets Tea Cake since she not only feels rejuvenated, but also more assertive when compared to her relationships to her previous marriages. In this thread of thought, Shawn E. Miller delves into the idea as she compares her first two marriages and her subaltern position while she also offers a feminist reading of Hurston's characterization of her protagonist. As Miller claims, "[h]er first two marriages fail because Logan Killicks and Joe Starks insist too severely on Janie's obedience to them and to conventional sex-role and class-role

stereotypes" (186). Miller also delves into the figure of Tea Cake and the role he plays when she asserts that "Janie heroically defies the roles imposed upon her, and eventually finds the love she had envisioned under the pear tree when she marries Tea Cake Woods" (186). Here, Miller highlights Tea Cake's liberal and respectful attitude that helps Janie feel more comfortable when she concludes that "their marriage [Janie and Tea Cake's], unlike her first two, is egalitarian and liberating" (186).

Notwithstanding Janie's gained freedom of speech thanks to Tea Cake—she now feels free to choose and her voice is heard—is she really free? Is her marriage egalitarian? Is her marriage to Tea Cake the antithesis of the patriarchal relationships with Killicks and Stark? Or is just Janie's perception? Trying to respond to these questions, Miller explores the theory behind oppression and refers to the existing duality regarding the "willingness" of the oppressed. That is, according to Miller,

> If a subject is not willing to be ruled, then the would-be ruler must resort to coercion to achieve power. If, on the other hand, a subject submits willingly to rule, then a ruler's power derives directly from the subject's will (196).

One can argue that Janie is in total control of her actions, but one can also look more profoundly into this "submission" as an act of oppression once again.

That is, as Meisenhelder argues, Tea Cake is portrayed Janie's first partner that, "has not wanted to make her a spit-cup for his words" (124). He is charming and his lovable courting attitudes put him on an advantageous place to subdue Janie. Hurston portrays a Janie who, different from her two previous marriages, feels like she is in control of her fate and decisions. On her part, Carla

Kaplan (1995) seems to enter into a dialogue with Meisenhelder in her article "The Erotics of Talk: 'That Oldest Human Longing' in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,*"* when she refers to the way Hurston deals with Tea Cake and Janie's romance as "double-edged" (132). For Kaplan, in Hurston's characterization of Janie and Tea Cake's relationship, the portrayal of love, sexuality and romance is not what it seems, since there is an underlying oppressive attitude that prevents Janie from acquiring independence. Miller goes more in depth as he asserts that "[t]his is the problem for those who celebrate Tea Cake as Janie's liberator: he displays all the nasty characteristics of her oppressor" (190).

Hurston's portrayal of romance needs to be analyzed as well as Janie's response to Tea Cake's. Her body, unlike with the previous sexual experiences, is hers to experience with. They share an indescribable bond, a reciprocal desire and longing for each other that definitely proves that their love is reciprocated. In addition, their physical, sexual and emotional attachment, far from diminishing, keeps growing to the point of craving for each other's constant contact and presence. However, I will argue that this longing and desperation to be in each other's presence might not be as romantic as one could perceive at first glance. Tea Cake misses Janie while working on the fields on a daily basis and, with the purpose of keeping tabs on her, he urges Janie to join him in the muck so he "won't be losin' time comin' home" to check up on her (127). I would argue instead that Tea Cake's pressure on Janie aims to impose his "peace of mind" on her by "checking up on her." By doing so, Tea Cake proves he is in control. To put it briefly, I would suggest that here Hurston portrays a vision of a higher person controlling a subject.

In addition, I would suggest that in Hurston's novel, the author refers to control as another layer of oppression. While it does not become as evident as in the cases of Killicks' or Jody's, Tea Cake is increasingly asserting his authority on Janie. When this occurs, Tea Cake is far from being Janie's liberator as she is not in total control of her own life yet. It is also true that Tea Cake does not perceive Janie as an object but rather as a life companion and, as a result, Tea Cake's sense of gender equality is enhanced when he asks Janie to work in the fields with him. If we take Killicks–who forced Janie to her 'house wife duties–, and Starks who kept her isolated as "the Major's wife," and "protected" from the outside world, Tea Cake encourages her to work in the fields. Interestingly enough, one could think that Tea Cake's attitude is empowering Janie and treating her as an equal but, as Miller wittingly argues "[t]hough Tea Cake's invitation to Janie to work in the fields has been much-discussed as a site where roles break down, its significance pales when we realize that Tea Cake is only asking Janie to do what 'de rest uh de women' do" (189). Here, Hurston is once again proclaiming and asserting the traditional sex roles and how they permeate society. Thus, following Miller's assertion, Janie is in no control although she may think she is, which is undoubtedly more worrying.

Although he is portrayed by Hurston as Janie's "true love", Tea Cake will show some deeply troublesome attitudes that invalidate him. Tracy L. Bealer coincides with this theory when she deals with the layer of jealousy. For Bealer,

> Tea Cake's jealousy and violence is the novel's most intense and disturbing representation of the pervasiveness of domination because he is so unlike Logan and Joe, yet sporadically performs the same dominative masculinity (310).

Both Janie and Tea Cake show instances of jealousy. On Janie's part, she becomes absolutely dependent on Tea Cake's attention and at times unsure of her appeal due to their age differences to the point of seeing a young girl named Nunki as a potential danger to their marriage. This moment in particular needs to be analyzed as it provides insight into the presence of emotions as anger and violence within their marriage. While confronting Tea Cake, anger possess her and acts accordingly:

> [s]he cut him short with a blow and they fought from one room to the other, Janie trying to beat him and Tea Cake kept holding her wrists and wherever he could to keep her from going too far. (131)

Women's rage appears to be different from that of men, and Anne Campbells dwells on this subject in her theory on *Men, Women and Aggression*. Referring to women's anger, Campbell states:

> The invisible mental fight between anger and restraint inside the woman is common. Women identify the essence of themselves with the forces of self-control. They are not angry people by nature. The anger, though firmly located inside them, is brought into being by insensitive, bullying, or condescension of others. (42-3)

Although Janie has been portrayed as a controlled and even a silenced woman, the above-mentioned event unfolds a rage we thought she did not have. As the fight continues, Hurston writes: "[h]e [Tea Cake] does not fight back; he tries to hold her back. If it was the case of Jody, Janie's body would have suffered the terrible consequences of her burst of anger" (131). There is a clear difference between Janie's and Tea Cake's marriage and the two previous ones. It is at this time that we can argue that she feels strong enough to confront her husband,

something completely alien to her before. Although she is brave enough to fight her husband back, she is not entirely free *yet*. Janie's response can be argued as the first steps into her liberation, one that keeps to be tested by Tea Cake's acts of violence.

Furthermore, it should be added that sexuality is clearly connected with the vortex of violence. There exists and obvious sensual and sexual chemistry between the couple that in a given heated violent situation, it would turn anger into lust. Hence, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues that Janie's and Tea Cake's sexual relationships are "mutual delights in shared sexuality" (196). Interestingly enough, for Fox-Genovese, the couple's brutal fight transforms their anger into repressed libido:

> They fought on until they were with their own fumes and emanations; till their clothes had been torn away; till he hurled her to the floor and held her there melting her resistance with the heat of his body, doing things with their bodies to express the inexpressible; kissed her until she arched her body to meet him and they fell asleep in a sweet exhaustion. (*Their Eyes* 131-2)

Fox-Genovese argues that "even in this seemingly idyllic treatment of erotic love, female sexuality is always associated with violence" (37). Interestingly enough, it is pertinent to analyze Hurston's previous portrayal of sex with Janie's mother and grandmother. They were sexually exploited and received horrendous treatment by authoritarian and controlling men and, while that does not imply a violence in itself, one could argue that Tea Cake's loving attitude would change that cycle of violence. Fox-Genovese agrees on this thesis as she wonders whether in the end women would be allowed to exert over their sexuality (37).

One would argue that violence appears as another character within *Their Eyes*, whether it underlies oppression or it shows in active waves of premeditated rage. One case worth analyzing is Tea Cake's beating of Janie's, a calculated and intentional "brainstorm" (140). In a state of pure and blindless jealous attack, he asserts his power over Janie by imposing on her physical violence. Tea Cake's purpose became clear as beating Janie "relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating al tall. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss" (140). Tea Cake's assertion of dominance is the result of his need to emphasize his masculinity. As Hurston exemplifies, his acts of violence towards his wife will be applauded by their neighbors and a sense of pride and jealousy of being able to *tame* Janie will invade them all:

> Everybody talked about it next day in the fields. It aroused a sort of envy in both men and women. The way he petted and 50 pampered her as if those two or three face slaps had nearly killed her made the women see visions and the helpless way she hung on him made men dream dreams (140).

Once again, Tea Cake shows all the attitudes that make an oppressor out of him. Although manipulative and coercive behavior, this act of violence infused the people with envy making it a socially acceptable way of being possessive and reclaiming his authority within his marriage. Consequently, by performing these acts of violence, he is establishing his role in their marriage as Tea Cake publicly declares: "Janie is wherever *Ah* wants tuh be. Dat's de kind uh wife she is and Ah love her for it" (141). With this statement, one thing becomes clear; he is in love with the control he exerts over her, very differently from loving her as she is.

To return to the subject of Janie's hopes and dreams in her adolescent years, she had pursued her liberation and sense of empowerment linked to that youthful romanticism that was not achieved. While at the beginning of Tea Cake and Janie's relationship it was still possible to believe that marriage was akin to love and she would live happily ever after; things went wrong. Molly Hite comments on this unfulfilled marriage when she asserts that "the heterosexual idyll with Tea Cake is thus not the culmination of the plot, but a transformative moment that leads to the culmination" (443). That is, in my reading of Hite's statement, I would argue that Tea Cake is not Janie's ending. On the contrary, for Janie to become independent, happy and find her voice, she needs Tea Cake out of her life.

In this sense, Tea Cake's death becomes Janie's clean slate in life. The events surrounding Tea Cake's end are worth analyzing due to Janie's role in it. Authors such Alice Walker or Thomas Cassidy have examined such arguments. Walker establishes Tea Cake's beating as the reason why Hurston permits Janie to kill Tea Cake in the end. As Walker argues, "Janie knows she has been publicly humiliated, and though she acts the role of the battered wife […] her developing consciousness of self does not stop at that point. She could hardly enjoy knowing her beating becomes 'visions' for other women" (*In Search* 305-6). As for Cassidy, he asserts that [103] the "events of the hurricane leading to Tea Cake's death after being hit by a mad dog can be read as an eruption of Janie's

[103] Cassidy, Thomas. "Janie's Rage: The Dog and The Storm in 'Their Eyes Were Watching God.'" *CLA Journal*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1993, pp. 260–69. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44322524. Accessed 30 July 2023.

unconscious turmoil and rage" (261). Both Walker's and Cassidy's approaches establish Janie and–more specifically– her suppressed rage as the focus.

After being infected by rabies and barely surviving from a storm, Tea Cake succumbs to madness. It is possible to consider that the natural elements and the storm provided the chaos that Janie needed, a sign that set the path for her to be freed from patriarchy. Unable to set herself free, she is given a window of opportunity. Tea Cake is no longer in control of his life as the illness has taken over his mind. And it is in this state of madness that he attempts to murder Janie. Here, Janie is faced with two different scenarios and two different *Janies* could be portrayed. As Meisenhelder argues, "the internal struggle in Janie's mind between one woman tempted to protect her lover whatever the cost and another who protects herself from aggressive threat even in the person of her beloved" (140).

After battling against paranoia and allocations, Tea Cake's life ends in the embrace of his lover and Janie's words echo her suffering and despair, a moment of breaking that will unfold putting herself back again:

> It was the meanest moment of eternity. A minute before she was a scared human being fighting for its life. Now she was her sacrificing self with Tea Cake's head in her lap. She had wanted him to live so much and he was dead. No hour is ever eternity, but it has its right to weep. Janie held his head tightly to her breast and weep and thanked him wordlessly for giving her the chance for loving service. (175)

Whether she is protecting her lover or prioritizing herself for the first time, one thing is clear; Janie takes action. She is not paralyzed by her husband's

violence. As Meisenhelder claims, it is an act to "purge from her life the racial, spiritual, and sexual threat that Tea Cake has come to represent" (141).

Returning to the existing intersectionality of oppression involving gender, sex, colorism, marital violence, and class, it is important to analyze race as well. Janie is confronted with two different audiences while being on trial for Tea Cake's murder. She is to face the black community that, as John Lowe asserts is "the defendant's real enemies" (103), and the white community, as Hurston describes "twelve strange men who didn't know a thing about people like Tea Cake" (176). It is important to note here that Hurston also introduces women in this courtroom who "were nobody's poor white folks" (176). They are mere observants, just like women–and especially black women–have been historically.

The way they treat Janie is to be considered as oppressive and silenced. As Lowe puts it:

> [The community] treats a recent widow whose husband received a regal burial, dresses her shabbily, reduces the supportive white women […] recreates the 'hushed' response to a pathetic story, and demonstrates the special need for eloquence and silence the black community has when placed in the jaws of an unjust legal system" (102-3).

Kaplan delves into the suppression of Janie's voice when she claims that "in this representation of Janie's trial, Hurston enacts the social history of African American voice. Janie is silent, like African Americans denied the right to testify, vote, or learn to read and write" (128). It is obvious that at a time when Janie should be assertive and voicing her voice, she chooses to keep silent. Stepto delves into this question as Mary Helen Washington examines in "Zora Neale

Hurston's Emergent Female Hero". According to Washington, "[Stepto] claims[104] that Hurston creates only the illusion that Janie has achieved her voice, that Hurston's strategy of having much of Janie's tale told by an omniscient third person […] undercuts the development of Janie's voice" (15). Choosing to be silent and being silent are two different things and, in my understanding, Hurston chooses here to suppress Janie as a revindication. It is true that we are only able to hear Janie's voice when she returns to her storytelling with Pheoby, her best friend (her "kissing friend) a place she understands as safe.

Through Hurston's circular structure we are taken back to the beginning of Janie's story. And, as Janie voices her story, she asserts herself as a worthy, free and empowered woman. She is husband-less but she is whole. She is alone but she is not. She is, in the end, her own person to choose.

Throughout *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston portrays a woman in quest of love, a quest to find identity. Janie's story can be perceived and analyzed as a learning experience that leads to individual happiness regardless sex, gender, race or class. As Caputi asserts, "is an assertion of racial and sexual pride, and freedom and self-love for women, regardless of oppressive attitudes regarding race, sex and age (709)[105].

---

[104] Robert Stepto "From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative" (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1979), 164–167. Robert Stepto raised this issue at the 1979 MLA (Modern Language Association Meeting).

[105] Caputi, Jane. (1990). "Specifying" Fannie Hurst: Langston Hughes's "Limitations of Life," Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God*, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* as "Answers" to Hurst's *Imitation of Life. Black American Literature Forum*. 24. 697-716. 10.2307/3041797.

The final moments in Hurston's narration leave us with a peaceful feeling due to Janie's inner reflections. At a moment in Janie's new-found life, she sees herself and the world in new, more encompassing and fulfilling ways:

> Of course [her lover Tea Cake] wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great-fish net. Pulled it from around the waist and draped it over her shoulder (183-4).

-

6. Alice Walker

6.1. Walker in Context: From Civil Rights Movement to Multiracial Feminism

> "*If the Civil Rights Movement is dead and if it gave us nothing else, it gave us each other forever" (Alice Walker, Gardens 128).*

Those are the powerful words that Alice Walker uses to start her first published essay in 1967, a straightforward statement that summed up to perfection the collective fight against oppression during the 1960's in America, a struggle that unified people towards a common goal: the recognition of racial equality. With the purpose of understanding Alice Walker's writing and providing an in-depth analysis of her masterpiece *The Color Purple*, I will be discussing the historical background that shed light on Alice Walker's literary, political and activist career.

The American Civil Rights Movement is described by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* as a "mass protest movement against racial segregation and discrimination in the southern United States", one that came to national notability during the mid-1950s in response to the so-called "Jim Crow Laws"[106]. This movement surfaced as a result of the unceasingly efforts of African American slaves to abolish the slavery and its oppressive laws. But, as Clayborne Carson[107]

---

[106] *Jim Crow* laws were a collection of state and local legal statues that legalized the implementation of racial segregation and have their roots at early as 1865–where the slavery in the United States were abolished in the 13th Amendment.

[107] History professor at Stanford University and director of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute.

argues, only nowadays are we able to comprehend to what extent the southern black struggle has been portrayed "as a locally based social movement with its own objectives instead of merely as a source of mass enthusiasm to be mobilized and manipulated by the national leaders" (616)[108]. So, what was the Civil Rights Movement? A very good place to start would be with its beginning and, more importantly, the spark that ignited the revolution.

As Adam Fairclough[109] suggests, the quest for its origins goes way beyond Montgomery, beyond *Brown v. Board of Education* and even beyond World War II. In his words along with Harvard Sitkoff's, "it was during the Great Depression […] that the seeds that would late bear fruit were planted and that by the 1940's black people believed that a new page in American history had been turned" (387). At this point the first steps towards the movement started and was no longer a mere protest; it was a struggle to eradicate segregation and gain equal rights under the law.

The early days of the Civil Rights Movement are often mistaken by most historians but, as Korstad and Lichtenstein in their essay[110], "the civil rights era began, dramatically and decisively, in the early 1940's when the social structure of black American took on an increasingly urban, proletarian character" (786). It was during this time when a massive exodus of population from the rural southern

---

[108] From "Constitutional Commentary", Vol. 3 "The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change."

[109] Fairclough, Adam. "Historians and the Civil Rights Movement." Journal of American Studies, vol. 24, no. 3, 1990, pp. 387–398. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/27555365. Accessed 17 Apr. 2021.

[110] "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement", *The Journal of American History*, (Dec 1988), Vol 75.

towns left their previous lives behind to become part of northern ethnic groups. Undoubtedly, as stated in Korstand and Lichtenein's research, the amount of colored people increased to the point of quadrupling black registration in the eleven states of Old South as well as the incredible escalation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) membership.

Despite of the exact date when the revolution started, it was in the 1950's–1954 to be exact–when the spark of the movement was ignited and would not be put down until racial and social equality was reached. One of the most important cases that the NAACP was fighting at court at that time was *Brown versus Board of Education of Topeka* (Kansas). In 1954 the Supreme Court decided that the "separate but equal"[111] doctrine did not apply to schools as they needed to be integrated within the society. This would be considered to be the first mayor victory of the Civil Rights Movement. While the Supreme Court had ruled out against racial segregation, the decision and its consequences were not immediate, leaving protests held by white population outside the schools where black students were admitted. As a consequence, many public schools–such was the case in Virginia– opted for closing rather that integrating black students in their classes.

Little by little, the pressure on combating segregation was escalating but it was on August 28th 1955 with Emmett Till's murder that national attention was brought to the injustice and violence that the black population in America was undoubtedly facing. It was in Mississippi where, after being accused of flirting with a white girl, the life of Emmett Till–a fourteen-year-old boy–was taken. After

[111] Doctrine established in 1986 by the Supreme Court. It declared racial segregation to be constitutional on intrastate railroads.

nearly being beaten to death by the woman's husband and brother, he was finally tossed into a river. At the time it was claimed that he had approached a white woman and whistled at her. The men accused of Till's murder were arrested and went to court but, even though many witnesses were found, they were pronounced not guilty and set free. Emmett Till's fatidic murder led the black community to a realization: things had to change, and so, the boycotts started.

One of the most famous and relevant boycotts took place in Montgomery, Alabama which supposed an important early victory for the Civil Rights Movement. During 1955, the black community was required by law to sit in the rear parts of the bus. Consequently, it would be on December 1st 1955 when this was challenged by the notorious Rosa Parks[112], as she was arrested for not giving up her seat to a white passenger. As an active member in the NAACP, she had purposely decided to challenge segregation but, as simple a gesture of rebellion that this could have been, it was moment which triggered off a whole series of events that would leave her standing as a symbol of freedom. As she herself recalls, "It was not pre-arranged. It just happened that the driver made a demand and I just didn't feel like obeying his demand." In the end, in her own words, she was "tired of being treated like a second-class citizen"

From this moment onwards, many other bus boycotts took place in Montgomery and this became a movement, one she had started. In Davis' (2016) words: "[w]hen Black women stand up— as they did during the Montgomery Bus Boycott—as they did during the Black liberation era, earth-shaking changes

[112] Rosa Parks–a black woman from Alabama– is known to be one of the most famous protesters of the Civil Rights Movement.

occur." (71) The immediate next day, Rosa Parks' supporters printed thirty-five thousand handbills where the following could be read:

> Negroes have rights, too, for it Negroes did not ride the buses, they could not operate. Three-fourths of the riders are Negroes, yet we are arrested, or have to stand over empty seats. If we do not do something to stop these arrests, they will continue. The next time it may be you, or your daughter, or mother. This woman's [Rosa Parks] case will come up on Monday. We are, therefore, asking every Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trial.[113]

As the movement escalated, its purpose would become much wider, like Angela Y. Davis (2016)[114] recalls: "[t]he freedom movement was expansive. It was about transforming the entire country. It was not simply about acquiring civil rights within a framework that itself would not change." (93) On this note, regardless of the immeasurable shows of support that the civil rights movement attained, a hate group gained adepts at this time: the Ku Klux Klan. This hate group–masked under white hoods–which was first created among friends, quickly gained support from white supremacist groups and ended up becoming a terrorist organization which bombed the homes and churches of many black people.

At this point, a key figure in the racial segregation fight was Martin Luther King Jr. As these previous boycotts inspired African Americans to claim what were their rights, King would become an active figure and symbol of resistance and

---

[113] From *Historical Thinking Matters*: http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/rosaparks/1/sources/21/fulltext/

[114] From *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* (2016)

fight within the movement. Little by little, young people became deeply involved in the movement for change. A series of non-violent protests led by King took place during sit-ins in restaurant, hotels, parks or even libraries to fight segregation. This form of protest became very common during the 1960s and more than one thousand and seven hundred students were arrested for taking part in these sit-ins.

A new turn in the Civil Rights Movement in America happened in 1963 when President John Fitzgerald Kennedy delivered a very compelling speech promising to push a Civil Rights Bill through Congress. For this to succeed, Civil Rights leaders, led by King, organized the March on Washington for jobs and freedom which was held on August 28th 1963, where the now-iconic "I Have A Dream" speech was delivered. King's stirring speech to the crowd will be remembered for generations to come:

> I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. […] I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character[115].

As King delivered his speech at the March of Washington, his words inspired people from all over the country: "There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt

[115] From the "I Have a Dream" speech

will continue to share the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges". People from all over America were committed at this point at making a better life for every African American citizen.

Unfortunately, as with every revolution, there are casualties and one of the major tragedies in the fight for the Civil Rights Movement took place in Birmingham. In September of 1963, a bomb was planted in a church in Birmingham (Alabama) and four black little girls were killed while attending Sunday service. This was a time of severe unrest. On the one hand, people were motivated and encouraged to fight for their rights, but while so doing they were constantly receiving blow after blow. Only two months later, on November 22, 1963, President Kennedy–who had received large shows of support from African American voters since the very beginning of his political career–was assassinated. The period of severe mourning–both for him and what he represented– is summed up to perfection in King's book *Why We Can't Wait*:

> We were all involved in the death of John Kennedy. We tolerated hate; we tolerated the sick stimulation of violence in all walks of life; and we tolerated the differential application of law, which said that a man's life was sacred only if we agreed with his views. This may explain the cascading grief that flooded the country in late November. We mourned a man who had become the pride of the nation, but we grieved as well for ourselves because we knew we were sick. (160)

At this time of pure mourning and despair, a new figure emerged: Malcom Little. Mostly known as Malcom X, he was a prominent African American Leader priest and activist known to have preached concepts of Black nationalism during

the 1960s. As has been broadly claimed, “his advocacy of achieving ‘by any means necessary’ put him at the opposite end of the spectrum form Martin Luther King’s nonviolent approach”[116]. He had more radical ideas that claimed that Black people should rebel against white supremacism. One of these moments–which is documented in his autobiography *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*–occurred immediately after King’s “I Have a Dream Speech” where he commented on his radical ideals and his call for arms:

> We Shall Overcome. . .Suum Day. . ." while tripping and swaying along arm-in-arm with the very people they were supposed to be angrily revolting against? Who ever heard of angry revolutionists swinging their bare feet together with their oppressor in lily-pad park pools, with gospels and guitars and "I Have A Dream" speeches?[117] (306)

Marches throughout the streets of America kept taking place as was the case of one held on March 20th, 1965 when Martin Luther King led a fifty-mile march from Selma (Alabama) to the state capital of Montgomery. Thousands of Civil Rights protesters put the Voting Rights Act in the spotlight. Consecutively, on the summer of that same year, the Civil Rights Act of 1965 was passed. Not only in terms of voting rights but also racial segregation were people more discriminated in the south than in northern states. This sentiment of inequality created a palpable anguish where black communities in the north claimed that little to night has been done to help them. Although Luther King wanted to help northern areas to fight racism, some young black people started to question his

[116] From https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/malcolm-x

[117] From *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

methods and started to support the ideas of another African American leader, Malcom X.

As previously stated, Malcolm X's methods were more radical and extremist believing that black people should fight to gain individual power–no matter the consequences. These were disturbing times during the mid-1960s, where more and more African Americans took the streets with a series of riots. At this point Martin Luther King had lost supporters that did not believe in the so-called nonviolence policy. King's fight will end on April 4th 1968 when he was assassinated in Memphis Tennessee. With King's death, a void was left where many black people could not agree on how to keep fighting at this point. As a response to this moment of uncertainty, young black people started to organize and talk about a new movement: the Black Power Movement which Angela Y. Davis (2016)[118] talks about when asked 'What is left of the Black Power movement'?

> I think of the Black Power movement—or what we referred to at the time as the Black liberation movement—as a particular moment in the development of the quest for Black freedom. In many ways it was a response to what were perceived as limitations of the civil rights movement: we not only needed to claim legal rights within the existing society but also to demand substantive rights—in jobs, housing, health care, education, et cetera—and to challenge the very structure of society. (13-4)

[118] From *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* (2016)

This group wholeheartedly believed that they needed to use violence to fight discrimination and racism. His ideals gained adepts overnight and it was consolidated with the creation of a new group called the Black Panther Party. This group's aim–and therefore its followers–pursued Malcom X ideals whose aim was not the integration of black people into a White America but, making the black community independent and successful on their own. Not only at this moment in history, by late 1960s, it is believed that the Civil Rights Movement had come to an end but, at the same time Black Panthers continue to strike back at the still palpable absence of justice, opportunity and equality.

The Civil Rights Moment had been incredibly successful, its achievements are still noted nowadays and, as Davis (2016) argues, "[t]his happened and we should not underestimate its importance. The problem is that it is often assumed that the eradication of the legal apparatus is equivalent to the abolition of racism. But racism persists in a framework that is far more expansive, far vaster than the legal framework." (23).

So, up until this point, people had fought unceasingly for black people but, what happened to Black Feminism at this point? This is a time where the Second Wave of Feminism took place or, as Chela Sandoval likes to call it: the 'hegemonic feminism'[119] (41-2). A feminism that Thompson describes as "white led and marginalizes the activism and world views of women of color, focuses mainly on the United States, and treats sexism as the ultimate oppression". She follows and argues that the hegemonic feminism "deemphasizes or ignores a class and race analysis, generally sees equality with men as the goal of

[119] Chela Sandoval, Methodology of the Oppressed (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2000)

feminism". One of the major drawbacks of this movement is that it does not include nor recognize the centrality of the feminism of women of color in the history of Second Wave feminism. (336).

As a response, a new liberation movement led by women of color emerged in the United States in the 1970s and it gave birth to the rise of multiracial feminism. This movement was centered and focused on its international perspective and its attention to intertwined oppressions. Many denominations collided at this point such is the case of Patricia Hill Collins's understanding of women of color as 'outsiders within' or even Barbara Smith's concept of 'the simultaneity of oppressions' (Thompson 336-7). This interlocking of the concept of race and feminism to be dealt interjectionally was argued by Angela Davis (2016)[120], as she argues that Black Feminism emerged "as a theoretical and practical effort demonstrating that race, gender, and class are inseparable in the social worlds we inhabit", she follows by asserting that "at the time of its emergence, Black women were frequently asked to choose whether the Black movement or the women's movement was most important. The response was that this was the wrong question." (15) While at the time of the civil rights movement black people were fighting for racial equality, gender equality was left into the oblivion for the next decade to deal with.

Following Becky Thompson's thread of thought, she argues that the rise of this multicultural racism comes as a reaction to white feminist movements. It is because of this that, many black people got involved in the National Organization of Women (NOW)–founded in 1966– and the emergence of women's

[120] From *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*

consciousness-raising groups (CR) in the late 1960s. (338). All of this is what made Black women march this time around as, Nadasen (2002) includes in her article “Expanding the Boundaries of the Women's Movement: Black Feminism and the Struggle for Welfare Rights”: “[P]or Black women, along with o women of color, have fought for decades to demonstrate the connections among race, class, and gender injustice and to use the demand for welfare rights as a vehicle for developing feminist theory and action.[121] (271-2).

Black people had fought racial discrimination but black women had to do it all. No women–and no men–regarding their origin, sexual orientation or religion should be biased and this time in history has set the basis for future fights. As Becky (2002) argues: “Although the strategies for multiracial feminism were firmly established in the 1970s and 1980s, I contend that these principles remain a blueprint for progressive, feminist, antiracial struggle in this millennium.” (349). There is an undeniability that there is a long road ahead of us, not everything has been done and the fight has not ended.

An incredible powerful quotation from Rosalind Coward[122] (2012) that reminds us that the struggle left behind us is not to be left forgotten: “Those women who fought the original battles suffer more than most. Hated and opposed when originally pushing down the barriers, they now often have to face contempt

[121] Nadasen, Premilla. “Expanding the Boundaries of the Women's Movement: Black Feminism and the Struggle for Welfare Rights.” Feminist Studies, vol. 28, no. 2, 2002, pp. 271–301. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3178742. Accessed 22 Apr. 2021.

[122] Rosalind Coward, *Sacred Cows: Is Feminism Relevant to The New Millennium?*

from a society which takes for granted their achievements.” (8). In the end, black lives matter, no matter what.

6.2. Alice Walker: A Life

"When life descends into the pit

I must become my own candle willingly burning myself

to light up the darkness around me." (39) [123]

Internationally known as the first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1983 for her novel *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker has consistently been regarded as one of America's greatest authors of the twentieth century. Through her powerful writings, Walker gives voice to those who have been traditionally silenced who, in most cases, include poor rural black women with a background of violence and oppression. Throughout this chapter it is my aim to shed some light on Alice Walker's controversial life and writing. Her personal experiences have shaped her distinctive usage of language and her in-depth construction of overwhelming characters throughout her literary career. As a whole, as Plant describes her in her book: *Alice Walker: A Woman of Our Times*, "[she] is the adventurer, the old sister, the philosopher, the sage who returns to light the pathway" (xvii).

Alice Malsenior Tallulah-Kate Walker–named after her two maternal aunts–was born the last of eight children on February 9th in 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia. She was brought up in the rural South where sharecropping was a common way of making a living. Daughter of a sharecropper and a stay-at-home mother her life was most spent in poverty although her parents made sure that nothing would

[123] From Alice Walker's *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting for: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness*

ever be missed from their lives. From a very early age, Alice was a bright child and an avid reader. It was her mother who realize how essential education was for Alice's personal and educational thriving and she deeply encouraged her child to become involved in her studies. Unlike with her mother, Walker had an emotionless connection with both her father and brothers.

Her parents joined their lives at a time when the white supremacist politics reigned in the Jim Crow South and black people were starting to fight back the oppression. From an early age, Walker's family had to go through economic hardships. Alice was raised in a mostly black neighborhood in the Southern part of the United States. Her parents, Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Tallulah Grant came from a family of slaves and sharecroppers in the southern farming community. Despite the difficult economic and social situation of her family, Walker would break barriers and become a multiple award-winning author and activist.

Walker was ahead of her time and it is shown from a very early age as far as her education is concerned. As Sally Wolff recalls in her article on Alice Walker– in Alice Munro's *Critical Insights (2012)*– "Walker started first grade at age four, a year earlier than usual, because her mother was forced to work to support the Walker family and had no one to watch her young, curious, and highly independent child" (19). Millie's dream was to provide a better future for her youngest daughter, a future which would keep young Walker from ending up just like her working in the fields.

Walker's character took a dramatic change when she was just eight years old. In the summer of 1952, Alice suffered an eye injury inflicted with a BB gun while spending time and playing with her brothers Curtis and Bobby. As a

consequence, she was left blind in her left eye. Being visually impaired really affected young Walker, as Wolff underlines: “the injury indelibly altered Walker’s personality and her perspective on the world. Her schoolwork suffered, as did her self-steem (20). This time in Walker’s life is described by White as a pivotal moment that affected the entire family:

> There is no denying the anguish that settled over the Walker household in the aftermath of the incident that left an unsightly scar and permanently damaged the vision of the sassy, outgoing child who had once happily proclaimed herself to be the prettiest in the family. (36-7)

Walker’s reassurance took a drastic turn, a change that affected her emotionally. As quoted by White, Walker openly expresses her fears: “[N]ow when I [Walker] stare at people–a favorite pastime, up to now–they will stare back. […] Not at the cute little girl, but at her scar. For six years I do not stare at anyone, because I do not raise my head” (38). On top of this, Alice Walker also felt alienated as the family moved to Milledgeville that very same summer. It was a place where she felt the insecurity of being an outsider, as she was sent to a new school and taken away from her friends and the teachers whom she had known since her childhood. As Donnelly points out: “Alice said she felt both abandoned and punished by her parents’ decision to send her away from home. […] Ashamed of the appearance and unable to understand why she was ‘exiled’. […] Walker became increasingly despondent and withdrawn” (13-4).

As a result, her attitude towards people not only did not change, but worsened, only finding solace in her books and writings: “She took refuge in the books she received from friends and relatives. […] She also began to write sad poems”

(White 39-40). White follows up and recalls how much Walker had changed: "Before, Alice was inquisitive, and extremely outgoing. […] She was the type of child that could charm a rock. After the accident, she wanted to be more alone. She tended to be more to herself. […] She wasn't as talkative as before" (40).

Despite of the anguish she felt, she did not want to be pitied and always tried to treat the eye accident as privately as possible. In this sense, she herself describes her inner emotions: "For a long time I [Alice] thought I was very ugly and disfigured. This made me shy and timid, and I often reacted to insults and slights that were not intended. I discovered the cruelty of children" (White 43). Her self- effacing demeanor drastically changes when she has eye surgery to remove the scar tissue from her eye. Unfortunately, she does not recover her eye sight but, at least, her change of appearance boosts her sense of self. As Walker herself describes in *Beauty,* she starts to see life in a different light:

> Almost immediately I become a different person from the girl who does not raise her head. […] Now that I've raised my head, I have plenty of friends. Now that I've raised my head classwork comes from my lips as faultlessly as Easter speeches did, and I leave high school as valedictorian, most popular student, and queen, hardly believing my luck" (594)

Walker's regained identity not only allowed her to thrive academically but it also helped her to get a scholarship for Spellman College in the fall of 1961. Spellman was an institution established with the purpose of educating young black women to be good Christian mothers and wives but, for Alice Walker, there were things far more important. This was the time of the Jim Crow laws, a time in the South where racism was at its peak. Walker's purpose as she stepped foot in

Atlanta was to thrive academically as well as taking an active part in activism. As Walker herself recalls in a letter written to a publisher.[124] shortly after arriving to Atlanta she suffered from first-hand segregation and racism, an experience that boosted Alice's aim to fight segregation:

> I was ordered immediately to the back of the bus because a white woman complained to the white bus driver. I had been writing poetry since I was nine, but I realized I would never have the luxury of only writing poetry; that I would have to be politically active in order to achieve enough freedom to write at all.

During her time in Atlanta, Alice Walker found a "kindred spirit" (Donnelly, 17) Howard Zinn, her history professor at Spellman. A white intellectual that, as White describes him, was "attentive, and always bearing a warm and welcoming smile" and "stood in unshakable solidarity with black people" (69). However, the ambiance at Spellman did not promote activism nor enhance their students' eagerness to become active individuals in the civil rights movement—a fact that Zinn himself was aware of it. There was a sort of an implicit consent between the white power structure and the black colleges that Zinn describes in detail in his book[125]:

> We white folk will let you colored folk have your nice little college. You can educate your colored girls to service the Negro community,

[124] Letter written by Alice Walker to Publishers at Yediot Books, it was published on June 2021.

[125] Zinn, Howard. *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times*. Beacon Press. 1994

> to become teachers and social workers, maybe even doctors or lawyers. We won't bother you. You can even have a few white faculties. At Christmas some of our white citizens may come to the Spelman campus to hear the famous Spelman choir. And in return, you will not interfere with our way of life. (19)

This time of segregation and duality in Atlanta really left and imprint on Walker, and was instrumental in molding the activist she has become today. She found the support she needed thanks to a white colleague of hers named David DeMoss, an exchange young man she met in Morehouse College. This bond was rather complicated as, at this time in the United States, interracial relationships were very rare. However, Walker found that she could count on Professor Howard Zinn's support.

Unfortunately, everything changed as Zinn was dismissed from Spellman. At the age of nineteen, Alice wrote a letter to Zinn where she exteriorized her inner feelings about his leaving: "I've tried to imagine Spellman without you–and I can't at all" (White 80). Life turned sour to Walker after Zinn's dismissal, but she received a full scholarship and moved north in the spring of 1964.

Sarah Lawrence College was totally opposite to Spellman. Here Alice Walker's classmates did not share anything with her; their wealthy and white backgrounds opposed Walker's humble childhood and black skin color. At Lawrence, Walker met Muriel Rukeyser, a prominent American poet who saw poetry as a valid form of activism, an angle that had deep impact on young Walker (Donnelly, 21). After her time in Bronxville, she went to the South and followed along to reach Africa. Kenia and Uganda were her destinations and, in

1965, she rekindled a past relationship with David DeMoss. However, Walker had not travel light from Africa. It soon turned out that she was pregnant with her first child.

Her situation was complicated as an unmarried pregnant woman and as part of an interracial relationship. This could mean the end of her scholarship and her identity being tainted by social reprobation. Her college education was in peril. Thus, no matter the consequences, Walker was determined to seek an illegal abortion. During this difficult time, pregnant Walker grew apart from her family and she started showing signs of depression. Nevertheless, having an abortion did not stop her from writing. On the contrary. This experience left Alice with an overflow of poems. Alice's inner thoughts are expressed in her poetry book *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthing Poems 1965-1990* where she openly confesses: "Abortion, for many women, is more than an experience of suffering beyond anything most men will ever know, it is an act of mercy, and an act of self-defense." This chapter in Alice's life ended in 1966 when she graduated from Sarah Lawrence.

As the artist she was at the time, she decided to move to New York City–Lower East Side. Here, despite the lure of the big city, she was witness to the existing poverty of black people and she connected with her own roots from her sharecropping background. For her, these surroundings were the inspiration she needed to write *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* where she portrays the violence and delusion in both the rural South and the urban North—as its main focus—at the same time she denounces the racial and economic injustices people were facing at the time.

The next step in Walker's life was Mississippi where she started working with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP). Coming from New York, Mississippi struck her as it was the center for the fight of the Civil Rights Movement where she experienced the rage and violence of the struggle for equality. It was to be in Mississippi where Alice Walker would meet Melvyn Leventhal, a young white Jewish law student from New York and a freedom fighter too who would become the father to her only child. By March 1967, Alice Walker married Leventhal in New York in a civil ceremony.

The differences between them were obvious and even Alice's family was unsure about his intentions since he was not only white but also Jewish. When they returned to Mississippi, their marriage was deemed illegal due to their racial differences and their role as activists. This difference is described by Walker herself in the preface to her book *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart*: "I met, loved and married a man from a part of the country foreign to me. He was of a culture, as well, that was foreign to me. As for his race, because of racial segregation or American apartheid, that too was foreign to me" (xi). But, despite the disparities that would later lay them apart, she found someone who filled her life, as she continues:

> Humor and affection joined us, more than anything. And a bone-deep, instinctive belief that we owed it to our ancestors and ourselves to live exactly the life we found on our paths. Or the life that found us. It was a magical marriage. Completely unexpected and unforeseen. (xi)

Through this blissful period, Alice found a new joy in her life; she was pregnant by Spring 1968. At this time, both Mel and Alice were ecstatic about the news

although at the beginning they were concerned about the impact that a child would have on Alice's writing (White 164). Unfortunately, their world would crumble as they lost the baby shortly after Martin Luther King was assassinated. In her words, she felt numbed by the national tragedy more than by the loss of her baby:

> The week after that long, four hour-mile walk across Atlanta, and after the tears and anger and the feeling of turning gradually to stone, I lost the child I had been carrying. I did not even care. It seemed to me, at the time, that if 'he' [King] must die no one deserved to live, not even my own child" (White 165).

After this tragic experience their baby girl Rebecca was born on November 1969. Walker was able to complete *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* just days before going into labor. Soon, Walker would experience the impact that motherhood made on her writing career as she now saw her time would be divided. As Donnelly comments, with time, Leventhal started to travel more and more helping at the NAACP office (34). Thus, she was left all by herself with a very young infant and her writing to continue. Ironically, it was at this time of helplessness, in 1970, when Walker was first acclaimed as a major writer with the publication of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Although the novel received good reviews, it was also criticized. According to Donnelly, "[w]hile the literary merit of her work was recognized, she would be attacked for placing her sympathies primarily with black women as victims of both white culture and, more immediately and personally, […] of black men" (35).

With Leventhal working away from home, Alice felt isolated in Jackson and the monotony of a small-town life made a dent in her vivid personality due to the

lack of intellectual stimulation: “Alice was unhappy in Mississippi and it was not just because of the pressures of being part of an interracial couple. […] She felt stifled because they were living in a barren, cultureless, unsophisticated part of the county” (Donnelly 209). As a way of balancing her life, Alice applied and later received a fellowship at Radcliffe University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. By then, the couple have already been planning on living apart after five years of marriage, and Rebecca was left with her mother in Cambridge. However, hopeful she was, the fellowship limited the time Walker would devote to her writing.

More life changes were made when Walker fired her agent and hired Wendy Weil who introduced her to the *Ms*. Magazine with Walker’s story “Roselily.” During the 1960s, the *Ms*. Magazine was central for the women’s movement and it included renown feminist celebrities such as Gloria Steinem who will become Walker’s influence for years to come. By the end of her fellowship in 1973, Walker’s life takes a swift turn bot at a personal and at a professional level. On the one hand, she suffers the passing of her father; on the other hand, she became deeply interested in reviving the reputation of a black woman writer who had been left into oblivion: Zora Neale Hurston.

Hurston was rescued and she made an enormous impact on both Walker and her future writing. Walker set herself on a journey back to the South, located Zora’s unnamed gravesite, and gave her a decent rest. Walter felt a connection with her origins and decided to honor them in her future writings. Not only that, by 1973 Walker had pursued a personal journey and rediscovered Hurston—a long-forgotten legend of the African American literature.

It was also in 1973 when Leventhal and Alice suffered a crisis and decided to give their marriage a final opportunity. For their marriage to thrive, they decided

that a change of scenery would suit them and they eventually moved to New York City where Walker started to work for the *Ms*. Magazine. Not only was she determined to keep on writing but also her new job allowed her to balance her personal life with a young daughter and her passion for writing. Unfortunately, any effort that could have been made on their behalf was not enough and only three years later, in 1976, Walker's and Leventhal's partnership came to an end. According to Donnelly, "Walker simply felt unsuited for marriage" (38). They both have tried hard, but, as Walker herself confesses in her preface to *The Way Forward is with a Broken Heart*: "ten years after we met, we parted, in exhaustion and despair" (xi). Mixed-race Rebecca will suffer the consequences of her parents' divorce as well as the effects of her split personality—half black and half white and Jewish. Notwithstanding, Walker started a connection with a longtime friend from Atlanta named Robert Allen, and she became alienated from her own daughter. It will be in 1978 when the lives of mother and daughter part, and Rebecca moves to live with her father and his second wife Judith Goldsmith.

This estrangement between mother and daughter has been recently argued and discussed by the protagonists themselves. In the case of Rebecca, in her autobiography *Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*, she provides serious and compelling arguments where she painfully and graphically describes how the mother-daughter relationship has been shifting throughout the years. In the absence of and the neglect of her own mother, Rebecca found in Judith a symbol of motherhood she desperately craved. Rebecca Walker's mixed and confusing feelings are shown when she refers to Judith as 'Mom':

> I feel the same feelings I have every time I [Rebecca] call her [Judith] Mom and she answers. I feel giddy and excited, like I am

> doing something new and fun and dangerous; and I feel duplicitous, shameful, and bad, like I am betraying my mother [Walker], like I am choosing this shiny white version over her. (130)

Over the years, Rebecca's relationship with her biological mother has suffered to the point that it is almost non-existent. Overall, Rebecca blames Walker for abandoning her daughter while she has become a "mother" figure for feminist women all over the world. As an example of this never ending toxic relationship, Rebecca Walker publishes online the article "How My Mother's Fanatical Views Tore Us Apart"[126] (2008) were she offers serious accusations regarding Walker's sense of motherhood and the role of women.: "You see, my mum taught me that children enslave women. I grew up believing that children are millstones around your neck, and the idea that motherhood can make you blissfully happy is a complete fairytale". Not only did Rebecca receive a distorted view about what motherhood is, but she also was confused about the feminist ideology. In this vein, Rebecca Walker recalls some key moments during her upbringing: "As a little girl, I wasn't even allowed to play with dolls or stuffed toys in case they brought out a maternal instinct. It was drummed into me that being a mother, raising children and running a home were a form of slavery".

Maybe their views were different, maybe their times were too, but what really caused them to drift apart was the continuous neglect from a mother toward her child. Both of them have been mothers but, as Rebecca recalls in her autobiography, their attitudes differed most of the times. In this sense, the idea of

---

[126] Accessed July 4th 2021: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1021293/How-mothers-fanatical-feminist-views-tore-apart-daughter-The-Color-Purple-author.html

motherhood and what a burden it could be for a woman continued until Rebecca's own pregnancy: "When I [Rebecca] tell her [Walker], Mom, I think I am pregnant, she responds without too long a hesitation. Find a doctor to get a test, she says. Once you know for sure, we'll schedule an abortion" (347).

No matter how difficult her personal life became, Alice Walker managed to keep on writing even at the worst moments of her life. She continued fighting for civil rights at the same time that feminism was a central issue in her poems and writings. Some of her most renowned works are a collection of stories *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1971), *Once*, a collection of poems published in 1976, and *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983), a provocative and personal anthology of articles, speeches, reviews and stories that transports us to her deepest thoughts on the Civil Rights Movement, "Womanism," or even her thoughts on Zora Neale Hurston's discovery in Eatonville. In this vein, Walker also published an anthology of Miss Hurston's work entitled *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing… And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive*, a work that truly honors Zora's wit and superb writing.

No matter how fruitful her writing career had been up, a milestone in her career was on the horizon. In 1982, Alice gave birth to a work of art that will make her the first African American writer to win a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Alice Walker made history when she birthed *The Color Purple*, a novel that became a symbol of womanism and freedom. As Britney Cooper[127] reviews in Salamishah Tillet's book "In Search of the Color Purple" in her front cover, "we need reminders of the

[127] Britney Cooper is the author of *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers her Superpower (2018).*

stories that have brought us over, the hymns and spirituals and freedom songs our people sang. *The Color Purple* is such a hymn. Alice Walker is its composer". Walker's famous novel received mixed reviews. However, readers should take into account the underlying debates and conversations about race, gender, womanism, violence and oppression that still lingers in today's society—whether black or white. A mirror to which we look and examine to what extent our world has changed and what still remains.

As her biographer Evelyn C. White says: "[Alice] has lived in full possession of herself" (xv).

7. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

"No writer has made the intimate hurt of racism

more palpable than Walker."

(Dinitia Smith*, The Nation*, Sept 4. 1982)

7.1. Critical Reception: Past and Present

It was in 1982 when Alice Walker birthed her majestical novel *The Color Purple.* This epistolary tale of racism, sexism and poverty–told in a series of letters–takes place in the rural Georgia during the twentieth century. The protagonist, and narrator of the story is Celie; a black and uneducated fourteen-year-old girl who has a sister named Nettie, with whom she has a very special connection. The story revolves around Celie and her journey of abuse and violence through her life.

From a very young age, she had to endure being abused and raped on multiple times by her father with whom she birthed two children. After being repeatedly violated–both mentally and physically–by her sole father figure, she continues to be mistreated by her husband. In this sense, the only connection with men that Celie has ever had involves abuse and that makes her feel unworthy. Only after she meets Shug Avery, a blues singer, she will be able to break free of those patriarchal and racist chains that have been imposed to her from birth. This is a story of liberation from abusive relationships and imposed racist attitudes, a story of empowerment and regaining one's self.

A key focus for Celie's development is the role that sisterhood plays in her "emancipation" from the patriarchal society she lives in. After being object of rape

and a target of male oppression, she finds her place and evolves into an independent asserting woman.

Taking this self-development as the main focus of the story, it could be stated that *The Color Purple* is a womanist *Bildungsroman*. As Hader defines the term herself: "[a] *Bildungsroman* is, most generally, the story of a single individual's growth and development within the context of a defined social order". Celie has grown and the relationships she has been with have made the difference. Mel Watkins delves into this idea as she states that on the most prominent theme is "the estrangement and violence that mark the relationships between Miss Walker's black men and women" (17)[128]. In the same sense, Dinitia Smith follows along and claims the importance of *The Color Purple*'s relationships:

> *The Color Purple* is about the struggle between redemption and revenge. And the chief agency of redemption Walker is saying, is the strength of the relationships between women: their friendships, their love, their shared oppression. (20)

There is no denying that *The Color Purple* is Walker's response to the oppression and silencing where women had been the center of it all. Needless to say, this portrayal of empowering African-American women was not well welcomed by some of its audience.

This epistolary tale portrays many aspects dealing with sexism, racism and poverty and, ever since 1984 it has been object and target of criticism and even removed and banned from many libraries across the United States. Despite of the fact that *The Color Purple*–and therefore Walker's brilliance–was awarded in

[128] In *Critical Perspectives: Past and Present Alice Walker*

1983 the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book award for Fiction, the novel's worth has been challenged ever since. It will be in 1984 when siege starts in Oakland, CA as the novel is flagged as an inappropriate reading in a high school due to its sexual explicitness. After months of inquiry, the Oakland Board of Education eventually approved the novel. Notwithstanding the harassment at the time, only one year later the novel was adapted to the cinema in 1985.

The film received as much criticism if not more. Steven Spielberg's adaptation motivated an instant controversy and debate due to the portrayal and image that Walker has "created" of Black people in America. It was described by Tony Brown as "the most racist depiction of Black men since *The Birth of a Nation* and the most-anti Black family film of the modern film era". Jacqueline Bobo includes in her article "Black Women's Responses to The Color Purple"[129] a series of reviews that have tried to undermine the film's–and therefore the novel itself–important message. There is no denying that Alice Walker's story has aroused an important conflict between Black male reviewers and Black Feminist critics.

While Black Feminists defended Alice's work and her views of racism withing the novel, Black Male critics argued that *The Color Purple* was filled with stereotypical representations where men were depicted as harsh, perverse and abusive individuals. This dualism of opinion left the novel–and its cinematic representation–in a place of high criticism and uncertainty. As a consequence, critics started to take part in this discussion, whether to defend Alice Walker's

[129] From: *Black Women as Cultural Readers*. "The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers" (90-109)

right to portray those injustices on Black Women or to highly condemn it as a distorted perspective on Black Men.

From the very start of the premiere of its cinematic adaptation, Alice Walker's story was not fairly welcomed by the audience. A good example of it was an activist group that marched against the premiere of the film arguing that the portrayal of Black men in the film was rather barbaric and cruel. Other examples such as representatives of the NAACP or Black male writers were determined to undermine Walker's power of speech. In wholesome, the response of black male critics was pretty consensual arguing how demeaning the story was. On top of this, there was a statement made by Courtland Milloy who stated that how tired he was of "white people publishing books by Black women about how screwed up Black men are"[130] (5). In the end, male critics were eager to give a piece of their mind which no matter how incredible it may sound, they were determined to undermine Walker's heroine.

On the other hand, there was a different position with Black female critics and reviewers, they had a dual opinion and assertively they outspoke it. Some Black female reviewers, as Bobo recalls, asserted their opinion surrounding the film and how it–both the film and the story itself–portrayed gender issues. A case worth mentioning is Barbara Smith's, as she publicly attacked Walker's story for its class distortions, arguing that "sexual politics and sexual violence in the Black community were affairs that needed to be confronted and changed (*Color Purple Distorts Class*, 1986)[131]. In the same sense, Michele Wallace–writer of *Black*

---

[130] From: Courtland Milloy, "A 'Purple' Rage Over a Rip-Off, Washington Post, 24 December 1985, p.A13

[131] Barbara Smith, "*Color Purple* Distorts Class, Lesbian Issues," *Guardian* 19 Feb. 1986

Macho: The Myth of the Superwoman–arguably stated dualism her of opinion regarding *The Color Purple* in her review "Blues for Mr. Spielberg*"*.

In this article, Wallace thoroughly analyzed her first impressions on the adaptation as well as criticized some of Walker's portrayal of Black heritage. While Wallace shared her opinion that the film would have some positive feminist influences and that would definitely imprint positive feedback in Black audiences all over the country, she also found imperfections underlying. An object of her critic was its directing, Steven Spielberg and, as she says, how "Spielberg juggles film cliches and racial stereotypes fast and loose, until all sings of a Black feminist agenda are banished, or ridiculed beyond repair" (24). Wallace's review moves on focuses on Walker's story itself and the portrayal of relationships throughout the novel:

> Walker draws from a tradition of black male and female variations on the call-and-response patterns of blues. These patterns set up an exhaustive dialogue about how male-female relations in the black community reflect material conditions, political impotence, and white male supremacy. (23)

Wallace moves on and shares a glimpse into one of the most controversial themes on the novel: lesbianism and her own interpretation of it within the novel. As she follows, "for Walker, lesbianism, which is never called that in the novel, becomes a kind of developmental narcissism, essential to Celie's discovery of orgasm, and so to her accomplishment of self–esteem" (23). Intrinsically, this relation between lesbianism and individual growth will be one of the central points for Celie's emancipation and empowerment.

In deep, the novel itself has shared some heavy criticism as well as praise among the general public and critics. In the end, in my opinion, *The Color Purple* has reached the goal any work of art should, to leave an imprint in its reader and make them question the reality around them.

7.2. Abusive Patterns in *The Color Purple*: The Abuser Within

"Marriage cannot be a job as it has become"

Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*

"You [Celie] better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (3)—that is how Alice Walker decides to start her novel: with a threat. With this rather obscure, but powerful line, Walker introduces us to a story where violence, and its relation with language, will be the center of Celie's journey to emancipation. Although yet unknown to the reader, our protagonist, a fifteen-year-old young black girl, is unable to speak and act freely, but this first warning sets the tone for the entire novel. As it starts, in the form of a letter, the recipient of her message is no other that God, and she secretly resorts to Him for guidance and comfort.

From the very beginning of Celie's journey, she is kept in ignorance of her family situation. Furthermore, and to make things worse, her innocence does not allow her to comprehend to what extent she is being the object of abusive patterns with men of her own family at the center. As Celie writes to God: "I am fourteen years old. I am I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (3). As the answer is embedded in a set of ninety letters, we are witness to Celie's struggle for self-confidence and independence but, how is she finally able to thrive? Throughout this chapter, it is my purpose to analyze Celie's relationship with men, marriage, and violence. Though she has long been immersed in abusive relationships, I will try to highlight how she manages to become a completely different woman—a woman who has been able to gain her own freedom as well as her own self-esteem.

The intertwined relationship between language and violence is the main focus of the novel, as is shown in Koudaio Germain N'Guessan's "*You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy":* The Violence of Language in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple"* (2015). In her article, N'Guessan delves into the underlying aspects that connect violence and language in *The Color Purple* at the same time that the author emphasizes the importance of how the different manifestations of language make a positive impact on the lives of the female characters and how language can also victimize them (73). Thus, she argues that what we witness in *The Color Purple* is "the will to negate the other and prevent him/her form expressing himself/herself, denying his/her freedom of speech" (74). This statement is further developed in the following lines:

> Through the male attitude, the black woman's liberty and freedom of speech and expression are confiscated. As a result, she cannot think and act for herself but conform to what patriarchal culture or patriarchal social order command her to do. (74-5)

Not only are male protagonists negating women's power but they are also exerting their own and trying to subdue women's spirit. As N'Guessan argues, a clear example of this is the fact that a "confiscation" of freedom can be seen in the very first lines of the novel when Celie's stepfather's first orders: "You better shup up and git used to it" (3). With this behavior a clear similarity seems to emerge; a relationship that resembles that of the one between a slave and her master. Her stepfather–referred to as Pa throughout the novel– is an active part of this patriarchal slavery system and Celie is portrayed as the "other" and a subaltern.

Significantly, male supremacy has historically enabled men, bestowing on them immeasurable power to exert over women, and Alice Walker invests most of her black male characters with this damaging and destructive trait of character--from domestic violence in the childhood household to violence in marriage—all painful ways of silencing women and suppressing their self-esteem and exerting power over them. In the end, as Shiva Hemmati claims in her article "Irigarayan Sensible Transcendental in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*", Celie's life will take a dramatic turn that will enable her with the power to overcome her long-lived precarious and abusive situation:

> The evolutionary journey of Walker's female protagonist, Celie, is a move from victimization to consciousness, escaping from restrictive existence to an awareness of a new relationship, and breaking away from the defined gender roles of the oppressive society to self-knowledge through her feminine body. (2-3)

As is made clear throughout the novel, one of Walker's most relevant propositions is to portray the various and painful ways male characters put into practice the subjugation of women with the sole aim of keeping them under their dominant and asphyxiating yoke. This is broadly discussed by Diane R. Follingstad et al. in their article "The Role of Emotional Abuse in Physically Abused Relationships". As they make clear, "abusive patterns often rely on the use of the coercive power (e.g., threats of severe physical harm) to establish dominance over the battered women" (108). Given her personal circumstances, Celie has no other option that submit to this abusive pattern and, as her initial behavior shows, to silently accept her fate. Walker, however, want her black women strong and will try her best to rescue Celie.

7.2.1. *You Gonna Do What You Mammy Wouldn't* (3): Celie's Journey Through Sexual Submission, Incest[132] and Soul Murder[133]

"Bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored

is a metaphysical / dilemma/ i havent conquered yet"

– Ntozake Shange

For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf

Celie's story starts just like that of any oppressed black woman—she has been silenced. She is a mere spectator of her own story and life and she does not have a say. At this early stage, Celie's life is controlled by her stepfather Alphonso. "You gonna do what you mammy wouldn't" (3)—those are the words Celie's stepfather uses to force her to have sexual intercourse with him. It is at this point when we get a very detailed account of Celie's engaging in unwanted sex and suffering the harmful consequences: "First he [Alponsho] put his thing up gainst my hip and sot of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it" (3). In the early stages of the novel, we are witness of sexual submission, a way of men violating the body and mind

[132] As Salamishah Tillet (2021) argues in her book *In Search of The Color Purple*, the topic of incest is included by Walker as a way of breaking multiple taboos: "[w]hen we first encounter Celie's own private thoughts to herself, we believe, as she does, that "Pa" is her actual father and only learn much later in the novel that a white mob lynched her father. Without that knowledge, *The Color Purple* first appears as an incest story" (54).

[133] Term coined by Leonard Shengold when portraying Celie as a traumatized and depressed survivor victim of parent loss, physical and emotional neglect, rape, incest and spousal abuse.

of their female prey. Celie's first private thoughts enable the reader to perceive the state of the violated girl, a state that allows us to think that she may even hold herself accountable for her stepfather's doing. A breaking point for this account is found in her first thought as she changes her "I am" for "I have always been a good girl" (3). As Charles L. Proudfit ponders in her essay, this is included as a way of explaining Celie's inner shame; as "the child victim of rape and incest often blames herself for her trauma; or, worse still, believes that this bad thing has happened to her because she is bad and therefore, she deserves it" (93). The secrecy that Alphonso submits to Celie is definitely an imbedded characteristic within rape and incest.

With Celie's mother bedridden and unable to satisfy Alphonso's "needs," it is now Celie who has to take up the role of Alphonso's "wife." However, this is an act of atrocious cruelty for Celie: "But I don't never git used to it" (3). Although repeatedly abused and constantly threatened and silenced by Alphonso, she would not get used to being oppressed. In Walker's novel, sexual violence is perpetrated whenever Alphonso seeks pleasure out of an abusive act such is that of non-consensual sex intercourse with Celie—her own stepfather—a rather taboo subject within the black community.

The topic of incest within the black community is a taboo that Walker has broken. As Salamishah Tillet (2021) argues in her article "In This Struggle Language is Crucial'", "[…] while Walker was not the first African American novelist to capture that horror, she was the only one at the time to capture this violation from the point of view of the rape victim" (54). Although this type of graphic sexual abuse has been dealt by the writings of other African American women such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Maya Angelou's *I*

Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1971), it is Alice Walker who decided to voice it from Celie's perspective. In Walker's words, "We are used to seeing rape from the rapist's point of view. […] I could have written that Celie enjoyed her abuse and done it in such pretty, distancing language that many readers would have accepted it as normal" (Tillet, 55). Walker follows and gives us her reasons for making Celie the axis of the story as, denying us access to Celie's viewpoint "would have been to betray Celie; not only her experience of rape, but the integrity of her life, her life itself" (Tillet, 55).

Although it is not until the end of Celie's story when it her true lineage is disclosed and therefore the information that Alphonso is not her father, it could be considered incest nonetheless. As Tapia (2003) argues in her article "Symmetry as Conceptual Metaphor in Walker's *The Color Purple*, "the father's violent and incestuous act upsets the biological balance and is the impetus for the novel's beginning" (34).

It is true that it is much later that Celie learns that she does not share any blood relation with Pa but, as Priya K states in her article "Violence in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, "the apparent incest which opens *The Color Purple* sets the aura of sexual violence which permeates the novel" (51). It is at end of the novel when we are confronted with the reality that state that Celie was not raped by her real father but, does it mean we should be rest easier knowing it was not proper *incest*? Calvin C. Hernton answers this very question in his book *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers: Adventures in Sex, Literature and Real Life,* a set of essays and reflections on sexual abuse on women and its social implications. As he argues, "[i]n sexist-intensive situations such as Celie's in *The Color Purple*, it matters not one iota–whether daughters, stepdaughter,

sisters, nieces, wives or whoever–sexual abuse of women, and young girls in particular, is a de facto part of the rights and rites of patriarchy carried on in the household (28).

This intertwined concept of violence within the family nucleus is closely connected fanned with the notion of the family as the very site of oppression. Here, Walker truly exemplifies a case of domestic violence where the perpetrator of the abuse is no other than a member of the family. In Priya K's words, "gender oppression is also a main factor operating in the oppressive paternal ideology in which a father's control of the family's private resources effectively gives him license to violate his women". She follows and argues that this situation "reveals the family's weak internal structures in African-American families where a girl is not safe even in her own family" (52). Not only does she not have trust and safety within her household but one member of it is in charge of inflicting this combination of psychic oppression and physical abuse. This act of incestuous cruelty by the very father is something that a young girl should never even fathom to comprehend nor live in her own flesh and blood.

The patriarchal society Walker portrays through Celie's mirror enables this kind of act where men have the upper hand and can use women as they please. Within this story, Celie is objectified by her "paternal" figure, and this ill-treatment is prologued throughout her story. She is being raped repeatedly, she is in distress and there is no one there to help her. Referring to this same scene, N'Guessan sustains that "[l]ike a slave, he forces her to accept his assaults even when they hurt her in her flesh and soul" (75). As a result, Celie finds herself forced to mature long before her time. Being forced to become a woman has pushed her to see the dark side of life. As Priya K claims, Celie is being

dehumanized by her assailant and, in a way, her mind and body are not in synch: "Celie endures a barrage of rape and brutality that causes her to experience her body as fragmented and as being possessed by her victimizers" (51).

From the very first accounts of Celie's traumatic life, we witness a lack of free will in Celie. She is deprived of her voice as well as of her body. Rape is the ultimate brutal act where women are left powerless and, portraying this kind of acts in literature is sadly a mirror of the patriarchy. As Martha J. Cutter argues, "[r]ape is thus a central trope in these texts for the mechanisms whereby a patriarchal society writes oppressive dictates on women's bodies and minds, destroying both subjectivity and voice" (162). Celie's story could be described within the archetypal rape narrative. She is not in control of her own life and her body does not belong to her anymore, just if she were a slave being subjugated by her master. In this sense, Celie has been victimized and abused from a very early age, and that has led her to become detached from her body and from her abusive surroundings. This is very well exemplified by Deborah Mc Dowell in her essay "Regarding Family Matters"[134] when she analyzes other works, but that can be equally applied to Celie's particular case. McDowell observes that "the body constitutes the site of oppression and becomes the source not of the celebration but of permanent anxiety. […] The body dominates the novel […] through the absence of control she has over it and over her physical environment." Mc Dowell concludes with words that will set the tone for Celie's life from now on: "Victimized from an early age she is the object of perpetual abuse" (21).

[134] Quoted from article "Violence is Alice Walker TCP by Priya K.

Loneliness can be a terrible weapon when someone is being oppressed to the extent to which our protagonist is. She only has God as her confidant, as her safe entity to trust, and as the receiver of her letters. In Celie's eyes, relying on her sister Nettie or on her dying mother would only make everything worse by burdening her loved ones with more despair. It becomes clear that she wants to spare her mother from extra suffering and, as such, obeying her father seems the only course of action for Celie at this time and place. She is fifteen years old and soon pregnant with her second child by Alphonso as her sexual perpetrator. She has been repeatedly assaulted and that will undoubtedly result in her loss of identity and individuality. She is no longer Celie—she feels like a mere object of abuse for Alphonso to take advantage of.

Alongside the domestic violence that Celie experiences on a daily basis, we could also include a new kind of violence—"vicarious violence" or "violence by substitution." This new term refers to the type of violence inflicted on one person with the aim of causing pain to third parties. Unfortunately, more and more cases are reported nowadays where women are the object of abuse by means of killing or abusing their children[135]. If we analyze literacy history, this kind of violence–and violence against women of color and children in general– has been the subject of many artistic representations. One very particular and impressive example is Ntozake Shange's[136] *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Enuf.* This set of lyrical poems were highly criticized for

[135] Nowadays more and more women are being object of vicarious violence and witness of the murdering and abduction of their children. Numerous cases have surfaced in our country. See: https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20210826/violencia-vicaria-agresiones-machistas-hijos/2165720.shtml

[136] African American playwright, poet and Feminist born in Trenton, New Jersey.

the author's usage of African American dialect. In this compilation of poems, Shange portrays the experiences of women–girls–of color where there is an undeniable affirmation of male dominance at the expense of women. Some quotes from her volume of poems play are worth being included as she denounces sexual abuse that young girls are being subject of: "we [women] all submit […] we must have known […] women relinquish all personal rights in the presence of a man who apparently cd be considered a rapist […]" (19-20). As she continues, this prototype of rapist is not always some unknown man to us but, in most cases, "we cd even have em over for dinner & get raped in our own houses by invitation, a friend" (21). This sense of "closeness" to our predator–and rapist–comes as a way of highlighting how unprotected women are even within their own household.

Black women have been portrayed as both the target and the object of domestic violence since the beginning of the feminist movements. Their role in patriarchal society has been broadly discussed by many writers throughout history and Walker is no exception. In this particular case, not only can Celie be considered a victim of domestic violence but, she is also both object and sufferer of the so-called "vicarious violence". Adam–Celie's first born–was taken by Alphonso both as a way of undercovering his doings and also with the sole Machiavellian purpose of causing endless psychological harm to Celie. Her second child–named Olivia–suffers the same fate as she is also taken away from her mother. At this time, Celie feels relieved, which can at first be felt as a shock for some readers, Notwithstanding, if we analyze this case of double separation from Celie's perspective, we might end up by agreeing with her. To her eyes, this catastrophic loss, pales in comparison with the abuse and neglect that this baby

would have had if he had to live under Alphonso's roof. Celie would rather be without her child and spare him the suffering that she is enduring than making her child part of it.

As the result of Celie's second pregnancy, her body changes considerably, and that, too, is the object of abuse and/or ill--treatment by her step-father. Thus, psychological abuse, in particular, also affects Celie's life after giving birth: "He act like he can't stand me no more. […] I got breasts full of milk running down myself. He say Why don't I look decent? Put on something. But what I'm sposed to put on? I don't have nothing" (5). As it is well known, women's post childbirth bodies and minds are extremely vulnerable since it is a time when their bodies are trying to readjust both physically and mentally, as well as start nurturing the new born baby. However, it is quite obvious that Alphonso could not care less about Celie since he deliberately keeps on verbally assaulting her.

Given Alphonso's urgent sexual needs, it is precisely at this time of change for Celie's body when he turns his lust to the younger and more beautiful Nettie. Alphonso's infatuation with Nettie makes Celie worry and, knowing what is at stake for Nettie, she adopts a motherly figure towards her vulnerable sister: "I see him looking at my little sister. She scared. But I say I'll take care of you. With God help" (5). When analyzing Nettie's and Celie's infancy separately, there is a clear differentiation in their upbringing–as if they were born into a different family–; they had to mature at a different pace due to the circumstances at home. As Proudfit argues, "Nettie spends the first several months of her life experiencing severe physical al emotional deprivation and the first several years complying with the emotional needs of a depressed and mentally unstable mother" (106) It is interesting to highlight here the fact that Celie does not pay attention to how

brutally she has been assaulted for years. Instead, she does cares and chooses to protect Nettie from this disastrous and malfunction family. It is clear that, as far as Celie is concerned, she would do her best to prevent her baby sister from facing her abuser's lust.

Sexual attacks seem to cease in Celie's household as Alphonso takes a new wife after the passing of Celie's mother. This new woman will make all the difference in Celie's battered life. Besides, to a certain extent, Celie feels that God has not only finally listened to her prayers, but that Nettie will also be safe now. Note how, once again, Celie is not worried about herself—Nettie comes first—her baby sister is worth protecting from Alphonso's tainted and brutal hands.

Unfortunately, Nettie's suffering is not spared yet. While Alphonso's needs seem to be sufficed by her new sixteen-year-old wife, Nettie is being courted by a much older widower. This new man in Celie's and Nettie's life comes also from violence as it is implied that his wife was murdered at the hands of her husband. This new case of violence does not come as a surprise to Celie who sadly shows that she has irreparably assumed violence as an inherent part of life itself. Given her own experience, not only is Celie determined to keep Nettie out of his suitor's life but she also urges her sister to concentrate on her studies. Celie perceives education as the paved way to Nettie's future and, above all, as a future free of subjugation and oppression at the hands of any man. As far as education is concerned, though, Celie is well aware of the fact that Alphonso himself has made sure Celie wouldn't have it, by making Celie illiterate, she would not think for herself and fight back the abuser. Little did Alphonso know that it would be thanks to education–reading most in particular– and the lives of other independent and

liberated women like Shug Avery, for example, that both Celie and Nettie would be able to open up their own minds and become able to construct their own individual thinking.

Celie's and Nettie's relationship is presented as a true and irreplaceable bond of sisterhood; a beacon of light amongst all of the cruelty and abuse. They both protect one another to the end. Furthermore, it is this connection of deep and mutual love what keeps Celie going, and prevents her sister from ending up like their mother. Walker's portrayal of black male characters has attracted heated animadversion and fueled strong criticism from black male scholars and critics alike.

Some of the harshest criticism came from writers who accused Walker of promoting racist stereotypes, characterizing black men as rapists. Ishmael Reed[137] was one of these critics–if not the most relentless. One of the best-known criticisms he published occurred after Gloria Steinem´s *Ms. Magazine*'s article discussing Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: "there's the kamikaze feminist and the Gloria Steinem Axis, and the Black Feminist Auxiliary. I think Alice Walker's part of this group, which characterizes black men as rapists" (Tillet, 75). Not comfortable with these accusations, Reed proceeded to satirize Walker herself; as Brandon J. Manning recalls in his book *Played Out: The Race Man in The Twentieth-Century Satire* (2022): "he [Reed] extends his anger toward Alice Walker through his fictional character Tremonisha Smarts, a successful Black feminist writer. Smarts gains critical acclaim for her play *Wrongheaded Man*, a drama about a Black man who abuses and rapes women throughout the play"

[137] Literary satirist and author or *Mumbo Jumbo*–novel that was listed by Harold Blood as one of the five hundred most important novels in the Western canon

(15). Coining the novel as a Nazi conspiracy, he satirized not only *The Color Purple* but also Walker herself trying to undermine the fight she is conducting against male dominance.

Men are portrayed as abusive, but what is the purpose of not revealing the name of Celie's future husband and making him *anonymous* by giving him a blank space? In Walker's *The Color Purple* it might take the readers by surprise to discover that the main male character remains mysteriously named Mr _____. However, it seems that for Walker, this namelessness character sends out a rather important message whereby his representation is universal—rather than particular—and his specific identity is not as important as the fact that he represents a recurrent type of violent and abusive male character. This new apparition of a cruel man in Celie's life would play an important role in Celie's new period of subjugation. For Celie, he becomes Mr.____ while for Shug Avery he is simply Albert which might imply some sort of dissociative identity disorder about this character.

Violence is never ending in Celie's life once Mr.____ is introduced into the narrative. He comes at a time when Celie is disposable for Pa. Although he is no longer interested in her, he seizes any opportunity to make her appear small and worthless: "He beat me today cause he say I winked at a boy in church. I may have got somethin in my eye but I didn't wink" (7) As Celie continues, flirting with men is really uncharacteristic with her nature, she is scared of men, and she has a good reason to be so: "I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them" (7). Men have become an object of fear for Celie. She not only is afraid of them but she also abhors the idea of being with them. As Lenore E. Walker argues in her book *The Battered Woman*

Syndrome, women who have been object of this kind of abuse find the psychological degradation and humiliation to be the most painful abuse they suffered (26). As a consequence of this rejection towards men, Celie's mind will only associate men with figures of evil and oppression while, understandably, only women are deserving of her time and interest now.

Celie does not fear women, they have never corrupted her mind or her body, quite the opposite. At this stage in her life, Shug Avery is going to become a beacon of light for Celie's rebirth, a woman who will open her eyes to a whole new and free world. Miss Shug Avery–a jazz blue singer, known mistress of Mr._____– is introduced to Celie's life from a mere image in a photo, as an unspoilt and pure icon that has not been tainted with abuse and oppression. For Celie, Shug appears standing outside this vortex of violence and slavery she has irreparably been thrown in by the men in her family.

Within this never-ending cycle of abuse, Celie feels trapped and with no option other than to put an end to it. Trying to come to terms with the fact that her life is a spinning wheel and that she does not have a say in it, Celie will, for the first time, use her voice with the purpose of preventing Nettie from becoming another battered woman. With the purpose of protecting her sister, she offers to marry Mr _____. She would become a substitute for his sick wife:

> I ask him to take me instead of Nettie while our new mammy sick. […] I tell him I can fix myself up for him. I duck into my room and come out wearing horsehair, feathers, and a pair of our new mammy high hell shoes. He beat me for dressing trampy but he do it to me anyway. (9)

At this time, Celie accepts being used sexually with the purpose of protecting her sister. This sacrifice emphasizes the importance of the bond of sisterhood between battered and abused women. As Sonal Singh and Sushma Gupta argue, “due to the absence of parental protection, Celie actually plays the role of the mother for Nettie. Celie vows to use her help to protect Nettie” (219). She has been deprived of her mother at an early age and, the other family member has betrayed her in the most brutal way. Celie has not *only* been abused but also abandoned. Her only living relative neglected her care, deprived her from affection and even safety. She is just a piece of meat to be traded for, and that precisely is Alphonso’s next step; getting rid of her by marrying her off. Despite Albert’s interest on young Nettie, Alphonso rejects that union: “I can’t let you have Nettie. She too young. Don’t know nothing but what you tell her […] Sides I want her to git some more schooling” (9). One thing becomes clear and that is Alphonso’s purpose to take advantage from his daughters. As Valeria Babb highlights in her article “*The Color Purple:* Writing to Undo What Writing Has Done”, “here her stepfather shows that he not only has the power to barter them into marriage, but should he choose, also the power to decide on the availability of literacy to them” (109). Alphonso’s discourse shifts and tries to "sell” the other product in sale: “But I can let you have Celie. […] she ought to marry first” (9).

Alphonso’s underlying intentions are not that sincere and his way of praising Celie’s attributes are once again abusive and rather offensive. As if she were a bidding product at an action, Fonso *sells* her the best to his abusive standards. His description of Celie’s is one of the hardest moments in the novel—an account that really tells us how little she is considered worth and to what lengths he will go to dispose of Celie. “She [Celie] ain’t fresh tho, but I spect you

know that. She spoilt. Twice. But you don't need a fresh woman no how. […] She ugly. […] But she ain't no stanger to hard work" (9). Alphonso labels Celie as spoilt, as something that has no good use, he raped her so she is no longer worthy, nor she has ever been. In this sense, Alphonso is trying to prove her domestic value as if she were a working mule. As Rosli Talif and Kamelia Talebian (2014) exemplify, "the utterance reflects the patriarchal point of view i.e., a woman is either an angel who cleans, washes, takes her of children, and fulfills her husband's desires, or a witch who disobeys and ignores her husband" (430). His emphasis in attributing Celie as a very hardworking woman is just a way of convincing Mr.___, not as something to be proud of.

Maybe he has not publicly been opened about him being the cause of her "loss" of virginity, but he surely feels proud of it, he has broken her and now is trying to get rid of her. Exerting power over women to the point of even destroying them suffice them to feel superior. He is the one on top, the one with the upper hand to wither and spoilt women. She has been tainted and, to his eyes, she is worthless. She is spoilt and useless to him and wants to continue this pattern of abuse by forcing her into marriage. Not only is she going to be sold as if she were a mule but as an object to be abused: "You can do everything just like you want and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it. But she can work like a man." (9-10) Daniel W. Ross empathizes this idea of her spirit's segmentation as part of her psychological battering. Ross highlights that "Celie's fragmentation is most strongly reinforced by the way her stepfather presents her as less than a whole woman to her future husband convincing him to marry her" (9).

Making Celie her wife would be a good choice bearing in mind what men are looking when getting married, a housekeeper who they can use as they

please and won't complain. Apparently, in the case of Celie's marriage "transaction" intelligence is clearly not needed. If a woman is literate and/or clever enough, she will think for herself and that is exactly what the men in Celie's life do not need from her. She is to remain illiterate for her to be a good wife. The Black woman is, In Zora Neale Hurston's words, "a mule of the world"; the perfect Black woman who would serve blindly the needs of others. As if Celie herself were not enough, Alphonso's offer escalates when he proposes a farming animal in exchange, a cow as a bonus. With this proposal Celie and her cow has an equivalent status, as I said, women are the mules of the world.

Celie's new and terrifying future is signed and sealed when Mr.___ comes to take another look at her, as if she were a product on sale. Celie is sent off with the promise of a new cow, and, surprisingly maybe that was the reason that made Mr.___ *accept* Celie as his wife.: "Mr.___ say, that cow still coming?" (12). As Abbandonato says, "Celie is handed over like a beast of burden, identified with the cow that accompanies her" (1111). This marriage represents the end of a phase for Celie; a phase where she has been imprisoned by her abuser and sold to the next in line—her future husband. This thought is echoed by Priya K when she concludes that "Celie's marriage to Mr.____ is the end of violence on the part of her father but it is a new beginning of violence on the part of her husband" (52). As a battered woman, Celie is trapped in a cycle of violence, in a pattern of abuse that now shifts to marriage. Walker is changing one abuser for the other. Celie is now a woman, and as a battered Black African American woman, her marriage is going to test her spirt and crush it into dust.

7.2.2. Surviving Marriage, Silencing Women: "*I Don't Know How to Fight*"

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (17)

Beauvoir

Domestic violence is described by the United Nations as a "pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner." Violence, extreme suffering and oppression are thoroughly portrayed in Walker's story and have women as their target. Throughout *The Color Purple*, most black women are dispossessed of their freedom of speech, their bodies are repeatedly used and abused to the point that they become objects of domestic violence at the hands of their husbands or partners. Given the abusive relationships shown in *The Color Purple*, it seems clear that Walker's purpose was to condemn gender discrimination and oppression by materializing real women into characters who could tell their stories and would eventually manage to break the cycle of abuse. For this chapter, it is my aim to focus on and analyze the oppressive aspects of marriage present in the novel as well as to pay special attention to how two very different women react towards violence and their respective violent husbands. Concerning domestic violence, Sofia's and Celie's marriages differ and the two female protagonists also show conflicting views about their sense of freedom and individuality.

Walker portrays marital relationships where men have all the power and women tend to comply with their oppressive position. As Courtney George argues in her article "My Man Treats Me Like a Slave": The Triumph of Womanist Blues

Violence in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*", "the intimate violence in *The Color Purple* is aligned with a dominant male perspective as readers watch Pa, Albert and Harpo brutally try to tame their wives and children" (120). While one–man–holds the power, the other–woman–subjects to it. And this is so because, in any kind of domestic abuse, there is an intrinsically connected relationship between power and violence. As Hannah Arendt summarizes in her essay *On Violence (*1970): "power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely the other is absent. Violence appears when power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course, it ends in power's disappearance" (56). Following Arendt's premises, for Mr.____ to abuse his wife, she needs to be stripped away from any trace of power. In a similar thread of thought, Ann Jones ponders over the connection between [male] power and the battering of women in her article "Battering: Who's Going to Stop it?" where she reaches the following conclusion:

> […] the battering man is perfectly in control of himself—and of the woman he batters. That, after all, is the purpose of battering. A man of any age—threatens, intimidates, abuses, and batters a woman to make her do what he wants. It works. He gets his way, and as a bonus he gets a heady rush of experiencing his own power. (713-4)

Before closely analyzing, Mr.____'s[138] relationship with women, it is important to pause and provide some additional information about his background. As the story unfolds, we get the idea that Albert has always longed and desired Shug Avery—a jazz and blues singer who Walker introduces in the novel as Albert's mistress. He was forced to marry Annie Julia–his now dead

[138] From now on, I will refer to Mr.___–Celie's husband–by his name "Albert"

wife–following the advice of his own father. For the readers to understand why Albert acts the way he does, it is essential to pay attention to his family history, and most specifically to unveil the relationship between father and son where we find another cycle of long-life abuse. For Walker, racism and sexism are part and parcel of family violence—and they are also present between father and son, as Walker herself proves it in TCP. Besides, Walker goes at length in her essay "In the Closet of the Soul"–from her collection of essays *Living By the Word*–where she establishes a connection between Albert's sexist and racist attitudes and his own father–Old Mister who, on his part, has learnt all his abusive patterns from the White Old Master himself:

> […] Mister [Albert] learns how to treat women and children from his father. Who did Old Mister [Albert's father] learn from? Well, from Old Master, his slave-owning father, who treated Old Mister's Mother and Old Mister (growing up) as slaves, which they were. Old Mister is so riddled with self-hatred […] that he spent his life repudiating, denigrating, and attempting to dominate anyone blacker than himself, as is, unfortunately his son (81)

In other words, Walker blames slavery for perpetrating and perpetuating a cycle of violence. Erna Kelly also deals with this topic in her analysis of the male characters in Walker's[139] novel when she states that "Albert's father is, in part, the reason Albert acts as he does" (172). One certainly cannot excuse Albert's attitude towards his wife, but one can begin to understand the underlying motive.

[139] Kelly, Erna. 'A Matter of Focus: Men in the Margins of Alice Walker's Fiction', *Critical Essays on Alice Walker*. Ed. Ikenna Dieke. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999.

As Albert turns out to be the son of such racist and sexist individual, it is no surprise that all that paternal anger will be transferred to his own descendants, thus, contributing to an endless cycle of violence. In Walker's novel there is no doubt that Albert is under the influence of his father who dictates the life he lives. As Albert's father holds the power and the right to decide on his child's life, Albert is unable to live from his heart. As Ling Wang argues in her article "Gender Trouble in *The Color Purple*," Albert is forced to live his life by his father's standards—an uncomfortable situation that only helps to infantilize Albert:

> As a father, old Mr. Albert has supreme power and the right to decide what kind of life his son leads. Unable to defy his father, Mr. Albert has no choice but to keep an underground relationship with Shug. He can't live following his heart. He is miserable production of patriarch society. (63)

It is also relevant to bear in mind that Albert's father is the result of a mixed marriage or interracial union where there exists a racial hierarchy: black women and children are placed at the very bottom of the social ladder. Self-hatred is, thus, inherent to this crossing of the color line since, as George argues, "the legacy of self-loathing and powerlessness bequeathed to black men from their white slave owning fathers induced men like Old Mister and his son (Albert) to grasp at power wherever they could" (132). There is absolutely no scenario where we could blame Albert's actions on his own family—or, most specifically, on his father's but a bleached legacy has pushed a man to exercise his power over his subjects, including wife and children.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Albert's and Celie's marriage is the product of an arrangement on Celie's stepfather's behalf. Without Celie's

consent, she is married off–disposed of–and handed over into another abusive relationship. Right after she gets married, she takes up the responsibility of the household duties which includes taking care of the children as well as satisfying her husband's sexual needs. Tending Albert's children means having to take up the responsibilities of her husband's late wife. Curiously, Celie does not show too much affection towards those children—they are extremely bad mannered. Walker seems to suggest that Celie's rather passive attitude towards her husband's children is simply an extension of her intense hatred for Albert/Mr _____ and the children's abusive behavior:

> Everybody say how good I is to Mr.___ children. I be good to them. But I don't fell nothing for them. Patting Harpo back not even like patting a dog. I more like patting another piece of wood. Not a living tree, but a table, a chiffe robe. Anyhow, they don't love me neither, not matter how good I is. (28-9)

Although they are not her own children, she nevertheless takes up the role of the absent mother, despite the abusive circumstances. She is also forced to take care of the children in view of society's patriarchal system because, as Anne Campbell highlights in her book *Men, Women and Aggression*, "[w]omen are raised to be caretakers" (112). Thus. Celie adopts the role that society has in store for her: to be a maid—if not a slave. By the same token, Priscilla L. Walton draws upon the well-established roles in marriage-- a role that Celie has no escape from—in her article "What She Got to Sing About? Comedy and *The Color Purple*":

> [t]he female role demands that woman be domestic; she must clean her house, cook, tend to the children, and obey her husband.

> […] Marriage, which begins on this restrictive basis, merely perpetuates the stereotyped roles that its members are expected to play and again does not allow for deviation from them. (70)

Closely related to this, Walton concludes arguing that "[b]oth the family and marriage are shown to operate on the assumption of feminine inferiority" (70). Albert is there to boss Celie around and, through Celie, Walker offers quite a good sample of this unbalanced situation: "[h]e tell me, Wash this. Iron that. Look for this. Look for that. Find this. Find that. He groan over holes in his socks" (24). Celie has suffered a long history of cruel racism and brutal violence. As if this were not enough, now she is forced to bear a male-centered system where women are expected to comply with their male superiors and bear with it.

Within this male superiority, Celie is subdued to criticism and the need for validation from third parties. As a newly-wed, Celie gets thoroughly inspected by her sisters-in-law Carrie and Kate. They come and meet Celie just to approve of her attributes as Albert's wife, and she does pass with flying colors: "good housekeeper, good with children, good cook. Brother couldn't have done better if he tried" (20). They assess Celie as a good choice for her brother—that is, a good obedient wife who will abide by the rules and serve her husband blindly.

Her owner is there to control her and, as her slave master, he is there to exact a punishment if he so wishes. Furthermore, for Albert, his wife does not deserve either love or respect and he instills those same principles in his new generations. There is no wonder then that Harpo–Albert's son–is seen to be following very much in his father's footsteps. It is important to note that history repeats itself here. Albert is now the instigator of abuse upon his children. Like his father before him, Albert is now corrupting his child's mind and creating a new

oppressor out of his teaching. Celie is witness to this brief but informative dialogue between father/Albert-Mr. ___ and son/Harpo: "Harpo ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr___ say, Cause she my wife. Plus she stubborn. All women good for– he don't finish. He just tuck his chin over the paper like he do. Remind me of Pa" (22)." Here Celie makes a very interesting connection between his two abusers--her husband and her stepfather—both of whom share the same disregard and despise towards women; an attitude that Albert, once again, encourages his child Harpo to engage in: "[w]ives is like children. You [Harpo] have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating" (34). Albert surely has the upper hand and, consequently, he has positioned himself at the top of the family structure. In order to reclaim his position of power, he has created a pattern of abuse and oppression where he even encourages his children to mistreat and act violently against Celie.

In this state of helplessness, Celie is in no position to fight back; Her forced marriage to Albert has marginalized her and kept her voiceless without the slightest option to stand up for herself. From the early stages of their marriage, Celie describes Albert as a violent man who resorts to physical abuse as a way of regaining power. As Celie confides in God: "He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry" (22).

Within this vortex of violent abuse and submission, Celie has subdued to her husband and bears the pain of being verbally, sexually and physically corrupted by her master because she has no control whatsoever. She just tries hard to detach herself from reality and acts as she is told. As Padhi (2015) rightly

points out in his essay “A Case Study of Celie’s Emancipation in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*”: “Celie cannot make too much sense of her experiences. She is rather the passive victim of her environment” (2). It is interesting to note that Celie uses the symbol of a tree to describe her own detachment from the world: “I [Celie] make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie you are a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear men” (23). By picturing herself as a tree, Celie closes herself up into a state of numbness where she becomes rather immobile, a sort of statue unable to respond. Celie’s state of mental and physical paralysis is also discussed by Robin E. Field as he argues in his article “Alice Walker’s Revisionary Politics of Rape” that “Celie demonstrates that her method of coping with abuse is to dissociate from her emotions. As the victim of sexual abuse, she is unable to see herself as someone worthy of love and respect, even from herself” (163). It is no wonder, then, that Celie’s arranged marriage—as well as her previous experiences with rape–have left Celie as a lifeless body.

It is clear, too, that with the only purpose of staying alive and surviving, Celie just bears life and subjects herself to the willing of others. Nettie sees the precarious situation her sister is forced to endure, and–while paying a visit–she urges Celie to take action: “[d]on’t let them run over you, Nettie say. You got to let them know who got the upper hand. […] You [Celie] got to fight. You got to fight.” (17). Despite Nettie’s encouragement, Celie’s spirit seems to be slowly dying and leaving behind just a human carcass. Nettie, however, is able to see and understand her sister behind Celie’s sadness and desperation: “I sure hate to leave you here with these rotten children, [Nettie] says. Not to mention with Mr.___ It’s like seeing you buried” (18). Nettie needs Celie to pull herself together and confront Albert’s abuse of power but, alas, she is powerless and is just trying

to survive: “But I[Celie] don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive” (17). Staying alive is not the same as living, but Celie is slowly coming to terms with that realization although she is still powerless to change it.

It has become clear that Celie and Albert’s marriage resembles a relationship of ownership; it is not based on love nor does it have much to do with respect. In any marriage–or relationship–sex between the spouses forms an important part, a part that both should be able to enjoy and share lovingly. That is not the case here since Celie does not see her husband as an intimate partner but as the perpetrator of constant abuse. Most importantly, from Celie’s own words it is clear that there is neither tenderness nor affection in bed:

> I don’t like it [sexual intercourse] at all. What is it to like? He git up on you, heist you 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).

This rather explicit description of Celie’s abuse tells us that she is not satisfied nor is he interested in having sexual relationships with him making it happen. She is just like a vessel for him to “plunge into” and ejaculate his inner and raw desires. Contrary to Celie’s nauseating description of her sexual experience with her husband, we have Shug Avery’s. As Albert’s mistress, she gets to experience the best moments in their relationship. Shug enjoys sex as well Albert’s company. For her, he is not Mr.___, he is Albert, her lover. As for Celie, she keeps on being forced into having marital sex and, at the same time, she develops a true fascination for Miss Avery. It is interesting to highlight that both women experience sexual intercourse with Albert/Mr. ___ in totally different ways. While exuberant and sexually liberated Shug enjoys it and finds carnal

relations to be pleasurable, the shy and sexually abused Celie is repulsed by sexual intercourse.

Experiencing this level of forced sex has made Celie numb and detached from her body. This idea is reiterated and expanded by Field who asserts that "[t]he lack of feeling Celie expresses demonstrates her belief in her powerlessness. Psychologist Judith Herman[140] explains that the victim of trauma 'escapes from her situation not by action in the real world but rather by altering her state of consciousness'" (162). For Celie, sexual intercourse is associated with a brutal and violent act that lacks affection and mutual pleasure. Celie does not even know what pleasure is, as she just lies there, trying to become small and disengaged from that horrific moment. Prika K dwells also on Celie's sexual ignorance, process of "transference," and lack of a pleasurable sexuality when she states that "Celie endures a barrage of rape and brutality that causes her to experience her body as fragmented and as being possessed by her victimizers" (51).

Contrary to the idea of women's submission to their husbands, we have Sofia, Harpo's wife who refuses to be dominated by her husband. She is a strong-willed and independent woman who falls head over heels with Harpo—as opposed to Celie's arranged and unsatisfactory marriage. Sofia's character is portrayed as the personification of resistance to patriarchy. Celie describes her as "solid" (32), very different from any woman she has even known. From the beginning, Sofia was not the woman Albert pictured marrying his son. She is tempered and resilient. One could interpret that Albert is intruding in this marriage

---

[140] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence–from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 42.

as he suffered in his flesh his father's interference when trying to marry Shug Avery. Wang discusses this aspect in his article:

> He does the same thing as his father does when his son Harpo is going to marry Sofia. He tries to intervene Harpo's marriage but failed. He has suffered this kind of pain of being unable to marry the one he loved in his early life. But he continues to suppress the patriarchy ideology on his son. (63)

Although at first Harpo does not have his father's blessing to marry Sofia, they eventually get married. Rather than confront his father about it and fight for his beliefs and for Sofia, it is only after she is pregnant that they are "allowed" to get married.

Celie herself describes Harpo's personality and highlights his lack of self-assurance and singularity: "Harpo nearly big as his daddy. He strong in body but weak in will. He scared" (27). Candice Maria Jenkins pauses to analyze Celie's opinion in her article "Queering Black Patriarchy: The Salvific Wish and Masculine Possibility in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" and sustains "[t]hat Harpo is "nearly as big" as Mr. ____ reminds the reader that his father's ability to dominate him does not stem from sheer physical prowess. Instead, Harpo is "weak in will," controlled by fear of his father's power" (978-9). Undoubtedly, Harpo is scared and that sentiment is further described by Celie when she adds: "[h]is eyes be sad and thoughtful. His face begin to look like a woman face" (27). By describing his physical and emotional features as "sad and thoughtful," Walker seems to invest Harpo with some of the stereotypical traits that characterize women. Jenkins pays close attention to Celie's words when she chooses to delve into this same topic:

> The narrative's juxtaposition of Harpo's "sad," "thoughtful" eyes with the claim that he has begun to resemble a woman reminds readers of the rigidity of conventional gender norms. Clearly, neither melancholy nor reflection are behaviors expected of men, so much so that when a man exhibits them, he is immediately feminized (979).

As Jenkins argues, Walker introduces a character that adds fuel to the controversy on how rigid gender norms are; a man with sad eyes will be described as a feminized one. Jenkins concludes by reasoning that “while [Harpo] is feminized by his father's control, he maintains a conventionally masculine determination to control the subjects of his own patriarchal domain” (979). Therefore, as Walker’s novel shows, despite Harpo’s weakness to confront his father he will exert his own power towards his wife as part of his domineering stereotyped patriarchy.

From the start, Sofia is portrayed as very independent young woman and, at times, she is the one who takes the lead in their relationship. Take, for example, the scene where Sofia is about to meet Mr. ____ narrated by Celie: “Harpo bring her over to meet his daddy. Mr.___ say he want to have a look at her. I see ‘em coming way off up the road. They be just marching, hand in hand, like going to war. She is front a little” (29). Apparently, the couple is introduced as a united front, but Sofia seems to be leading. Even from the distance, Celie can reckon that this young couple’s determination totally differs from hers.

When Albert catches Sofia giving orders to Harpo, he instantly infers that Sofia’s character is not as compliant as Celie’s. Thus, he warns his son Harpo: “[s]he [Sofia] going to switch the traces on you” (33). Albert is coming to the

realization that there is a reversal of roles in their marriage; Harpo is no longer in charge while Sofia does remain in control. As Andreia Thaxton-Simmons argues in her dissertation "Rewriting the Mother Figure in Selected Novels by Contemporary African American Women:" "Sofia takes on a masculine role in the marriage" (57). In Walker's novel, it is clear that the author offers a gender role reversal when Sofia is portrayed as the dominant partner part in their marriage.

In Walker's inversion of gender roles, it is Sofia who gets tired of her husband's attitude. He has become a controlling man, just like her father Albert. In a sisterly conversation with Celie, Sofia openly confesses: "I'm gitting 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" (58) As Sofia's bitterly complains, Harpo aims to force her into a role that she is not fit to handle: the submissive wife. Contrary to Celie's, blindly following her husband is not in Sofia's DNA. She is persistent and will not be tamed.

For Harpo, Sofia has become a real problem, become she needs to be domesticated and molded into submission: "He [Harpo] say, I tell her [Sofia] one thing, she do another. Never do what I say, Always backtalk" (34). Although he marries Sofia out of love, Harpo's marriage is troubled because society has taught him that this is not the way a woman should behave (Walton, 72). The more independent she becomes the more Harpo needs Sofia to act as submissive as Celie does: "I want her to do what I say, like you [Celie] do for Pa… But no Sofia. She do what she want, don't pay me no mind at all. I try to beat her, she black my eyes, Oh boohoo, he cry" (56). But, once again, Sofia refuses to accept Harpo's marital demands of subservience.

The honeymoon phase appears to have ended–if it ever started–and Sofia begins to understand the reality in which she finds herself. As for Harpo, he feels he has failed as a man, he is not able to control his wife like his father does and, as a result, he will eventually develop a deep sense of resentment and self-pity. As Calvin C. Hernton analyzes in his article "Who's Afraid of Alice Walker? *The Color Purple* as Slave Narrative"[141]: "[…] Harpo is put to instructive use. He is presented as an alternative contrast to the other men. Although he aspires to be the "boss", he is simply fated not to assume the role" (13). As Celie has anticipated, Harpo turns out to be "weak in will" (27).

Although Sophia and Harpo's marriage differs from that of Celie 's and Mr.__'s, Sofia also starts experiencing violence in her sexual life with Harpo. For Sofia, sex equals love and affection; for Harpo is just another way of exerting power over his wife as he submits her. Sofia's lack of sexual satisfaction is clearly verbalized when she describes how she feels when having sex with her husband:

> I don't like to go to bed with him [Harpo] no more, she say. Used to be when he he touch me I'd go all out my head. Now when he touch me I just don't want to be bothered Once he git on top of me I think bout how that's where he Always want to be. […] I use to love that part of it, she say. I use to chase him home from the fiel. Git all hot just watching him put the children to bed. But no more. Now I feels tired all the time. No interest (59)

Sexual attraction is no longer part of Sophia's marriage, and her confession parallels Celie's unsatisfactory experience with sex. Sofia feels like

[141]Article included in Calvin C. Hernton's book *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers: Adventures in Sex, Literature and Real Life.*

she is forced to make love to her husband. It could be inferred from Sofia's speech that she is not having consensual sexual intercourse with Harpo and, therefore, she is the victim of marital rape.

However, no matter how hard it gets for Sofia, or how much the patriarchal system she lives in tries to drag her into this vortex of abuse, she always finds strength enough to fight back. It can be affirmed that Sofia's survival depends on her constant perseverance and her strong will—these are treats of character that Celie lacks and envies. Unlike Sofia, Celie has not been able to stand up for herself, she has remained passively submissive and detached from her surroundings while Sofia irradiates power and assertiveness: "I [Celie] like Sofia, but she don't act like me at all" (34).

In addition, there is a clear difference between them: while Celie conforms to her oppression, Sophie rebels against it. A turning point in Celie's life occurs when she becomes the abuser and instigates Harpo to use violence against Sophie. This unexpected case of sudden abusive behavior is thoroughly dealt with by Proudfit when he claims that "[a]s a survivor of deprivation in childhood and of overstimulation in adolescence and young adulthood, Celie exhibits several characteristics of those who have experienced 'soul murder' (96). When asked how to make Sofia more *manageable*, Celie identifies with her male aggressor (Mr. ____/Albert), becomes one with him, and urges Harpo to beat Sophie: "I think bout how every time I jump when Mr.__ call me, she [Sophie] look surprise, and like she pity me. Beat her. I say" (34). One could say that it is at this point when Celie becomes a gender traitor. By encouraging Harpo to beat his wife, Celie finds herself betraying the unspoken system of black sisterhood.

Walker herself comments on this strikingly painful scene in *The World Has Changed: Conversations with Alice Walker*:

> You remember how Celie said to Harpo at some point that he should beat Sofia, that he should beat his wife, well, that was a low point, but she was still struggling to be someone who would outgrow that kind of thinking. And so, what you learn is that life can be really hard. People can abuse you, people can take advantage of you in terrible ways, but there is something in the human spirit that's actually equal to that and can overcome that, and that is the teaching of *The Color Purple* (346)

Although Celie does not physically harm Sofia, she commits a violent transgression by encouraging Harpo to beat his wife. However, far from making Sofia submit, she fights back, confronts her husband, places herself in Harpo's shoes, and finally dares to beat him: "[t]hey [Sofia and Harpo] fighting like men. […] He try to slap her. […] She reach down and grab a piece of stove wood and what him cross the eyes. […] She stand there in her slip. She never blink an eye." (36). In the end, Harpo's attempt to crush Sofia is not what hurts her more, Celie's betrayal is.

Due to Celie's treason, she aligns herself with the enemy–an abusive patriarchal system–and, for a brief moment, she becomes the oppressor. As Jeannine Thyreen highlights in her article "Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: Redefining God and (Re)Claiming the Spirit Woman," "[a]t this point Celie uses the vocabulary and ideology of her oppressor, rather than protecting a fellow black woman in the patriarchal South, and she, in turn, causes Sofia to be physically, emotionally, and spiritually harmed by the man she loves" (54). Karma

strikes back and, as a consequence, Celie starts to have problems with sleep until she finally becomes conscious of her unspeakable misdemeanor and the harsh reality crushes her: “A little voice say. Something you done wrong. Somebody spirit you sin against. […] I sin against Sofia spirit” (38). Her inner voice show how ashamed Celie is of herself: “I say it [beat Sofia] 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 is that? She say. Fight, I say” (38). To put it briefly, Sofia does what Celie can’t: fighting back and confronting her abuser.

Later, though, Celie learns a lesson from Sofia, since under that façade of strength lies a woman who has also been fighting from a very early age: “All my life 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” (38). she has taken it by force. It is at this point where Sofia voices what has hurt her the most: “I never thought I’d have to fight in my own house. […] I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I’ll kill him dead before I let him beat me” (38). Sofia’s strength comes as a shock to Celie whose mind and self are still under the influence of oppression: “[s]ometime Mr.___ git on me [Celie] pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say” (39). Here, Celie hides her pain behind her silence--a common response for battered women.

At least temporarily, Celie remains silent in her marriage while Sofia does not. Note also the difference between the two women; while Celie feels threatened by Sofia’s independence and encourages Harpo to beat her, Sofia does the opposite—she encourages Celie to get rid of her passivity: “You ought to bash Mr.___ head open, she [Sofia] say. Think about heaven later” (39). Sofia’s powerful speech challenges male domination and enables her self-preservation.

Thus, in Walker's novel, the author puts into practice the theory behind antagonistic characters such as Celie and Sofia because, as Patricia Hill Collins defends in her article "The Social Construct of Black Feminist Thought," "[f]or 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" (763).

It goes without saying that sisterhood plays a crucial role in opening women's eyes and freeing them from captivity. Walker's Sofia is finally in charge of her own life when she decides to leave her husband behind and take their children with her. Escaping from the site of oppression is not what battered women were doing at the time Walker's novel takes place–this act of courage is not even generalized nowadays. Besides, Sofia becomes the matriarch of her family. It is not Sofia who has changed, it is her marriage's dynamics and Harpo's urge to control her wife through violence. It is also clear that Sophia does not envision a marriage based on the dynamics of a slave-master relationship, but one where husband and wife become equal partners. Here there is a clear differentiation between Celie's and Sofia's attitude towards marital violence. While Sofia choses to rebel, Celie remains stuck in the site of oppression—at least for now.

7.3. Soul Sisters: Discovering the Meaning of Love through Female Friendships

"*Love is big. Love can hold anger;*

love can even hold hatred […]

But pain too, is part of the love"

–Alice Walker

One of the most important topics to be analyzed in *The Color Purple* is the bond of *sisterhood* and the power that female friendships hold in freeing themselves. In a world dominated by men where women are the object of violence and oppression, Alice Walker conveys the importance of *sorority*—that is, the power and impact of women from all walks of life coming together. As Pousali Das observes in her article "Exploring Womanhood through Female Consciousness in Alice Walker's *Color Purple*", "[a]s a womanist, Alice Walker asserts that black women derive strength and inspiration from women-bonding and female consciousness" (443). In my reading of Walker's novel, it appears undeniable that some secondary female characters play an essential role in helping Celie get the assertiveness and independence that she has been deprived of. Her own awakening could not be fully analyzed or understood without delving into Celie's female friendships.

To start with, it is my contention that Celie's rebirth would not have thrived had it not been for Shug Avery, Nettie, Sofia and Squeak among others. Audre Lorde delves into this idea of coming together in her book *Sister Outsider*, and assertively defends that traditionally "Black women have always bonded together in support of each other, however uneasily and in the face of whatever other

allegiances which militated against that bonding (57). According to Lorde, the freedom some women are unable to attain individually can be achieved by relying on each other. This is the case with Walker's novel since throughout the text women reach each other's shoulder to cry on. As for Celie, she would have remained under the burden of male superiority and abuse had she not found and enjoyed the sympathy of other women.

Within the next chapters I will take a journey through some of the most important moments in Celie's rediscovery of herself as a woman, and the path she takes to reclaim her own sexuality. it is also my intention to discuss how Black women friendships have helped each other and to what extent the collective fighting of the abuser makes their bond unbreakable.

7.3.1. Towards Sexual Identity: Celie and Shug Avery.

"I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying"

(The Color Purple, 45)

Traditionally, African-American women have been deprived of the knowledge of their bodies and, in particular, the awareness of their own sexuality. Alice Walker shows no shyness in writing about sexualized and objectified black women's bodies—such as that of Celie's who has been oblivious to her own body and sexual preferences while it becomes a site of oppression up until the time her eyes are opened and her sexuality awakened. With this in mind, it is important to highlight the remark that Lorde makes in *Sister Outsider* where she argues that "rape is not aggressive sexuality, it is sexualized aggression" (128). Celie is the victim of this type of aggression—unwanted sex—and she remains silent until she will eventually be able to escape from it thanks to Shug Avery's help and friendship.

The character of Shug Avery is the key to comprehending Celie's personal rebirth as well as her sexual awareness. Women's repressed sexuality is one of the main topics in this novel, but Shug Avery is portrayed as someone who transcends this. While it is true that Walker's purpose is to give voice to these women who are in pursuit of their own identity, in the case of Celie and Shug the goal is only accomplished thanks to their solidarity. As Monica S. Udoette argues in her article "Female Consciousness in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple,*" Black female writers "[…] project women in their fiction whose process of development show a rejection of the constraining demands of a former order and such promote female consciousness" (75). This bond of sisterhood between Celie and Shug

Avery is fundamental to Celie's awakening; their relationship could be described as a turning point in Celie's liberation and realization of herself as an individual. Udoette also argues that the construction of female consciousness in *The Color Purple* "follows a form of consciousness awakening through female friendships. Basically, the victim of oppression needs a kind of consciousness-raising move to realize that 'the personal is political' like Shug does for Celie" (76). Therefore, with the purpose of understanding Celie's process of self-discovery, it is imperative to provide a thorough account of Celie's relationship with Shug Avery; a female bonding that helps Celie's transformation.

The first time that Shug Avery is introduced in the story is in a photo that her husband Mr. Albert had left behind. Celie finds it by accident and becomes instantly attracted to this fascinating woman who leaves her in awe of her. Within the vortex of oppression that Celie experiences at this time, the sole thought of Shug Avery finds her in heaven. She craves for her company and her desire for Shug Avery is portrayed as an itching that needs to be fulfilled. Celie's fascination becomes clear here: "Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier then me. I see her there in fus. Her face rouge" (8). It is at this point that there is an instant connection between them, but, for Celie, she has just fallen in love.

The meaning of *love* in *The Color Purple* is a notion that Walker herself deals with in her book *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens* when describing the term of *womanist.* One of her definitions reads as follows: "a woman who loves other women sexually, and/or non sexually, appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of

laughter), and women's strength." (xi). Closely related to this meaning of love is the notion of *body*. As we will see later, the recognition of Celie's own body and coming to terms with it is the first step to assert her need for freedom. Also, being aware of one's body is related to desire, as it is the case with Celie. In this vein, in "Celie in the Looking Glass," Daniel W. Ross's asserts that "[t]he process of discovering or developing desire begins, for Celie in the reappropriation of her own body" (3). Reappropriating one's body can be seen as the first assertion of power and freedom as it is the most abused object of male aggression. An assertion that Celie will be able to achieve with Shug's support.

The journey towards the attainment of freedom through the recognition of one's own body is portrayed by Walker through the figure of Shug Avery. For Celie, desire has been built up with the sole image of Shug while at this time Celie's understanding of love is not mature enough. However, she feels a connection to this woman, a blues singer whom she has not met in person yet but she nevertheless begins to long for her companion. After developing a rather intense curiosity around the character of Shug Avery, Celie's first impressions which do not correspond to the reality. As a matter of fact, Walker's portrayal of Shug's first appearance in the flesh does not correspond with Celie's idea of perfection. Nevertheless, while Shug is sick and craves for attention and care, what Celie first notices is her unarguable beauty: "First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth, I thought I had turned into a man" (45). For the very first time in her life, Celie does feel a connection with a woman and she is utterly attracted to a beautiful captivating blues singer. This instant magnetism makes sense because Shug Avery is the personification of what Celie is not--Shug is sexy, bold and confident.

Therefore, it can be reckoned that Celie is first dazzled by Shug's appealing physical appearance and strong personality to later verbalize her unmistakably admiration and respect.

Interestingly enough, Alice Walker is not shy about making use of a highly sensual discourse peppered with sly sexual innuendoes that clearly portrait Celie's devotion for Shug until the descriptions reach her sexual climax. To do so, Walker starts with a detailed depiction of Shug's appearance as perceived by Celie who identifies Shug with a "queen honeybee." Celie's initial intimate description anticipates her subsequent connection with the blues singer: "My heart begin to beat like furry, and the first thing I try to do is change my dress" (41). This example is illustrative because for the first time, Celie seems to care about her physical appearance and feels the urge to make a good impression on Shug. However, Celie is self-conscious about her shortcomings, and shockingly realizes that nothing would improve her complexion: "[…] a new dress won't help none with my notty hair and dusty headrag, my old everyday shoes and the way I smell. I don't know what to do, I'm so beside myself" (41). As if Walker would have chosen to use slow motion writing, readers get a glimpse of Shug's fragmented body parts turned into pieces through Celie's fantasies: "I think my heart gon fly out of my mouth when I see one of her foots come poking out" (41). Furthermore, once Celie finds the strength to face Shug's presence, she becomes physically and psychologically paralyzed from head to toe: "I [Celie] don't move at once, cause I can't. I need to see her [Shug's] eyes. I feel like once I see her eyes my feets can let go of the spot where they stuck." (42).

It is interesting to note that, in contrast with Celie's starstruck perception of Shug, Walker's literary introduction could be described as anticlimactic. To

start with, Shug's life of excess has taken her to bed, unwashed, soaked in sweat, hair undone, messy makeup, naked, confused and unable to speak coherently, Walker's depiction of Shug seems far from perfection when the author writes: "she weak as a kitten. But her mouth just pack with claws" (45). It is nevertheless relevant to point out that although her body is weak, her free spirt makes up for it. As a battered wife and servant, Celie will be in charge to bring the beautiful blues singer back to life. In turn—though unwittingly—Shug will be responsible for enlightening Celie's path of oppression and allow her to express her*self* individually and to be in charge of her own life. As Gloria Steinem introduces in her foreword for *In Search of The Color Purple*, written by Salamishah Tillet, "Shug became an agent of that freedom as well as a miracle of strength, sensuality, and a new freedom within herself" (11).

Despite the fact that Shug seems to adopt a rather detached and bossy attitude towards Celie, this does not prevent Celie's to get to know Shug and fall in love. Celie craves every part of Shug's, as Walker clearly exemplifies in Celie's sort of stream of consciousness: "She [Shug] got the nottiest, shortest, kinkiest hair I ever saw, and I loves every strand of it. The hair that come out in my comb I kept. Maybe one day I'll get a net, make me a rat to pomp up my hair" (48). As it is clear from the above quotation, even in the worst situations Shug looks lovely to Celie, and keeping mementos of Shug's hair could be described as the ultimate proof of infatuation.

But Walker makes it clear that Celie's fascination for the blues singer and her husband's lover is rooted in a long-lived lack of a female role model plus her loveless marriage and her excruciating life experience. As Walker tries to prove, up until Shug Avery's arrival, Celie's life has never experienced love or affection,

nor has she felt a tender connection beyond the fraternal she cultivated while her sister Nettie was allowed to remain by her side. In the same sense, as Walker insists, Celie ignores the power of her mind as well as she appears ignorant of her own body and sexuality. This last statement can be proven true from the beginning of Walker's novel since Celie's body is depicted as the site of sexual oppression, as the target of male violent dominance and repetitive brutal abuse, but it is thanks to Shug's free and empowered life-style that Celie finds the strength to transcend her submissive relationship and finds joy in her own sexuality. As it could not be otherwise, the first instance when Celie experiences her sexual awakening occurs when she bathes Shug: "I wash her body, I feel it like I'm praying. My hands tremble and my breath short" (45). This moment is portrayed as sacred—and clearly shows Celie awareness of the full potential of her used and abused body.

As exemplified above, Celie's body is in awe of Shug's presence and, at times, she openly confesses that it is hard to hold her desire back: "I feel like something pushing me forward. If I don't watch out I'll have hold of her hand, tasting her fingers in my mouth" (45). It is undeniable that the sole sight of Shug's nakedness leaves Celie sexually aroused. As Christopher S. Lewis argues in his article "From Cultivating Black Lesbian Shameless: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" "Celie's articulation of sexual pleasure is also the articulation of her very body and presence" (162-3). As part of her road to freedom and awakening, sexuality plays an essential role.

Celie has never experienced a healthy sexual life but, by listening to Shug's conversations, she manages to find the beauty that she has been deprived of for so long. Also, it is no wonder that Celie's association of sex with

violence is hard to overcome given the constant sexual assaults suffered from her step-father and the marital rape episodes while living with her husband. Nevertheless, Shug's lessons on one's self love and satisfaction go further when she shows Celie ways to reach her climax without the help of a male lover: "[r]ight 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" (69). Lewis follows up and argues that "Walker positions Celie's woman-directed masturbation and vulnerability as the means through which her burgeoning self-awareness and self-love are experienced" (162-3).

As we have argued before, Celie's suppressed self has been muted since childhood, but Shug Avery teaches her how to liberate herself from the claws of male dominance. This is thoroughly argued by Terrence Musanga and Theoplilus Mukhuba in their article "Towards the Survival and Wholeness of the African American Community: A Womanist Reading of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" when they state that "Walker represents black women's sexual relationships with and tutelage of one another as an alternative to being subjected to masculinist and dominative ideas of sex" (396). Echoing Musanga and Mukhuba's words, Shug's "tutelage" enables Celie to take control of her own body and shamelessly looking at her sexuality for the first time: "Yank down my bloomers. Stick the looking glass tween my legs. Ugh. All the hair. Then my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose" (69). Celie's first response is revulsion, Celie abhors the hair that covers her genitalia but, after this aversion, she is able to see her feminine beauty symbolized by a rose. The beauty has always been here, it has only been shielded by all the hatred and violence exerted on her sexuality and that is symbolized in a way by her pubic hair.

After seeing her inner self, she becomes more adventurous and starts to touch herself. This sexual act can be analyzed as the opening of her eyes, as a moment of realization and taking control of her life: “I look at her and touch it [clitoris] with my finger. A little shiver go through me. Nothing much. But just enough to tell me this is the right button to mash. Maybe” (70). That hidden button has never been touched just as she has never been touched lovingly. Sexual experimentation helps Celie see her true self and take control of her own body. As I stated previously, for her to take control of her life she needs to first take control of her own body and what it represents. A similar thought is discussed by Lewis in a footnote when he argues that “Celie's sexual exploration with Shug helps to heal the wounds caused by Albert and Alphonso 's violations” (163).

Up until now, Celie has associated sexual intercourse with duty and violence on the part of her *partners*, but it is this precise instant of sef-recognition when she welcomes her sexualized body and her sexual needs. That is, Celie ends up accepting her body and initiates an emotional journey that includes the desire for selfhood. From my point of view, Walker seems to suggest that the very moment that Celie reaches her climax and enjoys her own pleasure, she is choosing to live and love her body and, in doing so, she starts the path towards liberation and self-assertion.

7.3.2. Towards Independence: Leaving the Site of Oppression

"But all things look brighter

because I have a loving soul to share them with"

The Color Purple

As I have previously discussed in the previous chapters, Celie's journey towards independence and self-discovery has taken place progressively throughout her life. We have been witness to Celie's process of transformation from the early stages of her life in which she had been object of repetitive abuse–both physical and psychological–towards a path of self-discovery and personal fulfillment. Along this journey, female friendships have been essential to Celie's character growth and her liberation from the claws of patriarchy. In Brenda R. Smith's words: "[b]y privileging sororal love as the primary emotional bond in the novel, Walker subverts marriage as the telos of the female protagonist's quest and facilitates the success of Celie's journey to heroic selfhood." (11) Women coming together and their unbreakable bond of friendship is definitely a great summary of Celie's process of transformation towards independence.

Celie's emancipation from her oppressive background comes as a response of a process of liberation where women have played a key role, as Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope argue in their book *The Female Hero*: "[w]omen friends often serve, individually or collectively, as rescuers, who help the hero to value herself and other women." (188). In the same sense, they follow and provide a very thorough definition of what "sisterhood entails:" [t]he sisterhood characteristic of the commune enables women to work, to have relationships with women or men, and to raise children without sacrificing either

independence or nurturance." (188). Throughout this chapter it is my sole intention to provide a general account of Celie's key moments towards her liberation, moments where women have stayed by her side.

Any process of liberation and self-discovery comes with obstacles and Celie is no exception. As Joseph Campbell sheds light in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* about "the difficult, dangerous task of self-discovery and self-development" (23). As part of the restrictive society in which she lives, any step towards independence or self-realization is difficult to take, and because of this, Alice Walker has created the perfect examples of womanhood on which Celie can rely. This is discussed by Brenda R. Smith in her article "We Need a Hero: African American Female Bildungsroman and Celie's Journey to Heroic Female Selfhood". As she stresses, "[a]s Celie embarks on her journey to voice and selfhood, she encounters several women who model alternate ways of being female within her environment" (8). From the early stages of Celie's life, she has never encounter powerful and independent women. As time passes by, Celie becomes aware of her diminished situation and for this, her female friendships become essential, a Daniel W. Ross acknowledges her liberation comes only after women come together:

> [s]he [Celie] begins to find an identity through a network of female relationships with Shug, Nettie, Sofia and Mary Agnes. With her new found identity, Celie is able to break free from the masculine prohibition against speech and to join a community of women, thus feeling herself from dependence on a subjection to male brutality. (5-6)

Celie will acknowledge the power of female friendships through Nettie's letters, Shug's love and sexual awakening and through Sofia's fearlessness and courage. As Turgay Bayindi illustrates in the article "A House of Her Own: Alice Walker's Readjustment of Virginal Woof's A Room of One's Own in The Color Purple": "[t]hrough the example of her female protagonists, Alice Walker demonstrates that a room of one's own is not sufficient for African American women to truly free themselves from the stifling influence of patriarchy." (210)

'Nettie the clever one in this bunch'

As I have previously discussed, the first woman that crosses path with Celie is her very own sister Nettie. She is the first guide in Celie's life and the one who sets her on the right track. She loves Celie unconditionally and selflessly. Despite their physical separation through many years, their love for each other remains unspoilt. Nettie is many things Celie is not; she is an independent woman who has received education and in great deal due to Celie's protectiveness attitude. Nettie's intellectual and education is something that Celie has not been able to pursue; she has been subjugated by male patriarchy and in Nettie she sees a free-spirited woman that craves new horizons.

Other important symbols are the letters Nettie writes to Celie. Salamishah Tillet argues their importance on Celie's liberation: "Nettie's letters serve to awaken Celie, help her fully realize the authority of her own voice, and empower her to leave Albert for good" (63). The process of leaving the site of oppression–Albert's household–is a long one but one that will enable Celie's resurface.

Nettie's letters serve as a connection between two worlds apart that come together to liberate Celie's self.

In the same sense, in those letters Nettie is sharing with her sister her experiences in Africa at the same time that she is trying to enlarge Celie's understanding of the world from her very restrictive point of view. With this in mind, another aspect worth mentioning is Nettie's status; she is an unmarried woman most part of the story and totally self-sufficient. Not only does Nettie choose the moment in which to tie her life to another person but she does this when her own self is seen to be complete. As a consequence, her marriage bond with her partner is one based on respect, love and equal understanding, very different from Celie's marital experience with Albert. For Celie to leave Albert, she needs the support women will grant. At this time, it is very difficult for her to have the predisposition to make her life her own. With Nettie far from Celie's reach, she needs to rely on women who are closest to her. In this case Sofia and Shug Avery–and specially their bond–play a vital role in Celie's liberation.

"kill him dead before I let him beat me" / "hell no"

Sofia is relentless and fearless, and as such, in no way resembles Celie. She appears from the start of the novel as a strong, fierce and bold woman who will not let any man crush her. Not only does she confront her husband but she resists any type of violence inflicted upon her. Not even the mayor's wife tyranny can hold her back; she fights back with everything in her will. As Koyel Dasgupta argues in the article "The Color Purple: Reflections of *The Second Sex* and

Gender Issues" (2022), "Sofia epitomizes strength, resoluteness, indomitableness and intrepidity" (221).

It is Sofia who starts Celie's process of liberation; Celie sees Sofia as the resistance, as an active woman capable of speaking her mind no matter the consequences. Celie admires that powerful attitude in Sofia and that leads to the creation of a powerful bond of sisterhood between them. From Sofia, Celie learns how to fight, how to how to speak her mind and impose her thinking on anyone. They forge an unbreakable bond and that sorority linkage is a step towards leaving her husband. Sofia and Celie's friendship is based on mutual comprehension and, in a way, on Celie's admiration of Sofia's resoluteness.

While Nettie is the embodiment of knowledge and wisdom and Sofia provides a shoulder to rely on; it is Shug Avery who enables Celie to rediscover her body and spirit. Shug Avery is the last linkage in the awakening of Celie's sexuality, self-esteem, independence and ultimate liberation. For Celie to liberate herself from her oppressive reality she first needs to love her own body and acknowledge it. This is precisely connected with Bealer's ideas as she argues that "Celie is radically alienated from her body's capacity to engage with the world sensuously." (29).

Up until this point, Celie has not been able to happily engage physically with another individual. With Shug Avery's arrival, she discovers her body and her mind in a way that had not been possible. The fact that the person that enables Celie's resurface is a woman, is an aspect that many authors, including Tracy Bealer, have discussed in depth. As she states, the introduction of lesbianism by Walker sets the basis of a sexual gratification and equitable

partnership. She moves on and explains how this relationship led our protagonist to combat oppression:

> Celie experiences her sexual awakening because her lesbian desires led her to Shug, a woman uniquely suited to help her combat and defeat the masculinist oppression preventing her liberation. Walker casts lesbian desire as a privilege rather than an obstacle. The novel demonstrates that Celie's love for and with a Black woman is literally and conceptually capable of healing physical abuse and undoing the previous oppression" (28-9)

The relationship between Celie and Shug Avery sets the basis for her rebellion. Bealer acknowledges the importance that for Celie to leave her husband, she first needs to find the capacity to love other Black women (29). Loving Shug is a step towards liberation.

It becomes clear that Walker's purpose is to enable freedom and autonomy of the protagonists through the relationship with others. Alice Walker has turned her focus on the importance of sorority and sisterhood for the awakening of female consciousness through the creation of a powerful group that will fight against the patriarchy. The bond that Celie, Nettie, Sofia and Shug Avery have created is the spark of the revolution.

For Celie to finally liberate herself from her oppressive life, she needs to find the strength to leave her husband. Loving herself means leaving her husband behind and everything that entails a restrictive attitude. The spark that fills Celie's self with the resoluteness to defy her husband is Mr.____'s betrayal. Withholding Nettie's letters from Celie has created a breach in their already severed marriage.

Not only was Mr.___ keeping Celie from getting in touch with her sister but, he was abusing his position of power and prevent the sisters from maintaining a sisterhood bond, a bond that would have enabled voice to surface. At this point, not only does she find Nettie's letters but Celie discovers the whereabouts of her long-lost children. Bealer acknowledges the importance of this discovery as a turning point in Celie's process of transformation: "Celie's knowledge of and love for Nettie and her children are factors that directly enable her to verbally and physically challenge Mr.__'s domination" (36). For the first time, Celie's blood boils with anger and with a hunger to kill. She acknowledges the betrayal needs retribution:

> All day long I act just like Sofia. I stutter. I mutter to myself. I stumble bout the house crazy for Mr. _____ blood. In my mind, he falling dead every which a way. By time night come I can't even speak. Every time I open my mouth nothing come out but a little burp. (115)

Even in this state of pure hatred, Celie does not choose violence, she diverts her destructive impulses towards a creative one. Instead of destruction, she chooses to create something magnificent that will enhance her transformation into a liberated woman. One of the most freeing actions to take towards empowerment is being financially independent and that is exactly what Celie does. Sewing is cathartic, is a symbolic action of women coming together to save themselves. Celie discovers a passion is sewing and by setting up a business of pants making she is step closer to eradicating gender discrimination. Daniel W. Ross acknowledges the importance of sewing as "[b]y sewing, Celie narrows the gap between the sexes, making pants for both men and women.

More important, sewing links Celie to woman's primordial power that predates patriarchy." (80) It is important to acknowledge that Celie starts a business as a *pantsmaker*, not a *dressmaker*. For this, not only will she acquire personal freedom but also will provide freedom for many other women. The symbol of wearing pants empowers women while being regarded as equals.

"You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say.

It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation."

Leaving for Memphis is Celie's choice and is a decision that left her husband astounded. Celie has exploded, she can no longer hold back her anger towards her husband's actions. Years of build-up wrath, resentment and suppressed silence have taken a toll on Celie's very self and enabled her to become more outspoken about the injustices that have been inflected upon her. As Lauren Berlant argues in her article *Race, Gender and Nation in "The Color Purple":* "Celie adopts a mode of sensual pleasure and power beyond the body that effectively displaces the injustices that have marked her tenure in the quotidian. She heralds her glorious transformation into self-presence by shedding her scarred historical body as she leaves Mr.____" (37)

Celie's words are the most assertive they have even been: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, but I'm here" (187). Berland continues and provides a thought analysis of Celie's words: "[t]his pure embodied voice speaks of its liberation from the disfigured body and enacts, through disembodiment, the utopian scene of self-expression form Celie's point of view." (37) As she leaves her husband behind, she is completely reborn; she has taken control of her imprisonment. This is a step towards wholeness. She leaves her house to move

to Memphis with Shug and by starting a pants-making business with no assistance and depending on no male figure, she starts to assert her own independence and becomes an empowered woman.

"Dear Nettie. I am happy, I got love, I got work,
I got money, friends, and time.
And you alive and be home soon,"

Celie is happy, she has love, she has work, she has money, friends, and time. Celie is at last independent from her marital life. She no longer has to put up with her husband's demands nor she has to play the subversive role. She is able to speak and more importantly to support herself economically. For the first time, she is flourishing and, once again a step towards being fully empowered. Celie's success is something that her husband had not predicted. She is a confident and brave woman with her own business, and is totally independent from her husband.

As she moves towards autonomy and independence, Celie also needs to understand that she does not need to be linked to anyone. At the beginning she was married to Albert, after leaving him, she moved in with Shug Avery. She has never experience solitude, to be by herself and dependent on no one. Shug leaving her for a man left Celie betrayed. She has seen men as painful recollections of the past experiences. She has felt betrayed by men and now, Shug is choosing to leave her. Celie undergoes a period of mourning and returns home, as Charles L. Proudfit highlights in his article "Celie's Search for Identity" "Celie confronts her existential aloneness and struggles to complete both her

mourning process and her final developmental task." (103) Celie does not find purpose in life, nor she does in sewing–her way of living–"I sit here in this big house by myself trying to sew, but what good is sewing gon do? What good is anything? Being alive being to seem like an awful strain." (225) Celie's state of despair and detachment makes her question everything, even Shug's love for her.

> I stand looking at my naked self in the looking glass. What would she love? I ast myself… My bogy just any woman's body going through the changes of age… My heart must be young and fresh though, it feel like it blooming blood… But look at you. When Shug left, happiness desert (*Their Eyes* 229).

While being apart from Shug, Celie starts to take to the company of Albert. Although separated, they begin to spend time together and share recollections of Shug. Missing her deeply is part of this process of mourning and coming to terms with the idea that she is not coming back. If at first Shug's departure could be seen as a step back in her resurfacing, with time it would be safe to say that this will make her more whole. Little by little, as Proudfit declares, "there comes a time when Celie's mourning process has done its work, and she is able consciously acknowledge and unconsciously experience Shug's separateness, uniqueness, and autonomy as well as her own" (104). Celie's profound words accompany Proudfit's words perfectly:

> And then, just when I know I can live content without Shug, just when Mr.__ done ast me to marry him against, this time in the spirit as well as the flesh, and just after I say Naw, I still don't like frogs,

> but let's be friends, Shug write me she coming home. Now. Is this life or not? I be so calm. If she come, I be happy. If she don't I be content. (*Their Eyes* 247-8)

Celie feels a sense of contentment; she has learned how to leave without Shug and nor does she want to link her life to Albert once again. She has regained her power to survive and thrive without the need of a crutch. As Brenda R. Smith argues: "[t]hrough her separation from Shug, Celie ultimately comes to an awareness of herself as an autonomous being" (13).

Celie and Albert's relationship take a turn. After years of repression and abuse, Celie has found the ability to forgive. Time has put everything in their rightful place and Albert's character suffers and important change: "I know you hate me for keeping you from Nettie, he say." (220) Acknowledging his doing in keeping the sisters apart is the first step towards redemption and Celie's forgiveness; "I don't hate him" (220) says Celie. Hatting him was something that she truly did in the past but now, she finds reasons for not doing it: "look like he trying to make something out of himself. […] I mean when you talk to him now he really listen" (221).

Albert and Celie becoming friends is the prelude of Celie's awakening. For Celie to liberate herself, she needs to make amends for the past and avoid being resentful of this. Surviving violence, rape and abuse is something which is difficult to overcome, but it is something that Celie masters. Celie has accepted Albert as an equal and by so doing, he has given up his male dominant ideologies. This is thoroughly discussed by Raphaël Lambert in this article "Womanist Folk and the Capitalist Fairy Tale" when he says that "[b]y the end of the novel, men who are accepted in Celie's world have undergone a significant transformation that

implies, if not their feminization, at least the renunciation of male prerogatives and traditional roles of dominance (48). Patriarchy has been demolished and, by doing so, Celie has enabled Albert to be part of his life, to belong in the newly discovered awaking.

"Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples.
Dear everything. Dear God" (242)

Thirty years have passed and innumerable stories and experiences have kept Celie from Nettie. They embody the meaning of the bond of sisterhood. Walker has created female friendships that enable Celie to comprehend life in a spiritual and collective way. The reunion between Celie and Nettie is the climax of Celie's process of rediscovery. As Tracy L. Bealer writes, [t]he restitution of Celie's family can also be understood as a literalization of Celie's journey as a whole (37). Nettie and Celie's children coming home is the end of the cycle, the end of a process of self-actualization and awakening. Celie's love for Nettie fills her with a source of youth. Like time has never passed, they come together to start leaving their life in harmony, respect and love.

8. *Their Eyes Were Watching Purple*: Janie and Celie

"But this is not the end of the story, for all the young women-- our mothers and grandmothers, ourselves-- have not perished in the wilderness.

And if we ask ourselves why, and search and find the answer, we will know beyond all efforts to erase it from our minds, just exactly who, and of what, we black American women are."

Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*

Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker have created two masterpieces that are undoubtedly intertwined. As Alice Walker writes in her introduction to *Their Eyes*: "[n]o book is more important to me than this one", she is asserting the importance that Hurston's book had had in her own novel *The Color Purple*. Just as she carried out a quest to rediscover long-lost Huston's life, she creates a story that shares unequivocally a meaning of liberation and rediscovery. Their protagonists are a representation of a reality that many Black women share, a life of oppression and violence. Both Janie and Celie thrive in finding their voice, achieving independence and overcoming the obstacles that African American women are subjected to in the South communities.

They are both the object of oppression by their fathers and their husbands and are subjected to racism and domesticity from a very early age. As for Janie Mae Crawford, she is introduced as an attractive and confident

middle-aged woman who has already experienced the cruelty of life, totally opposed to Celie's naiveté and uneducated self. Celie first comes into picture as an innocent, ignorant and illiterate fourteen-year-old girl while Janie has already been married three times and has known pain but also love. Within their family structure, they are both part of dysfunctional families. While Janie is brought up by her grandmother in the absence of her mother, Celie belongs to a household leaded by her stepfather, one that continually abuses her sexually. Both women had to endure violence from their early childhood and both of them had no family to support them emotionally.

Finding their voice within this violent background has been achieved differently by both women. As Ashley Simmons argues in her article "Self-Authorship, Storytelling and Narrative Coaching", in Hurston's work "Janie finds value through the oral storytelling women throughout the book." (21) Janie finds her voice through the power of storytelling and Celie relies on her female relationships. In a way, they are connected but, while Celie has constructed a network of sisterhood; Janie has only one friend to rely on. Janie will have to learn how to cope with her feelings and how to overcome violence and subversion without this sorority bond that characterizes Celie's story.

Marriage is a duty and both women have known it. Janie was forced into marriage by her Nanny and Celie's future was sealed to an older man in order to protect her little sister. Protecting and complying with a "duty" is what made both protagonists part of the institution of marriage. Janie's spirit was crashed from a very early age and so was her hope of loving her husband. In

the case of Celie, she had never known what love was apart from the fraternal one she professed to her sister.

Both Celie and Janie had to endure in their flesh a forced marriage and its consequences. As for Janie, she gets married three times but in very different circumstances. Her first marriage to Logan Killicks was forced on her by her nanny as a way of protecting her financially. At that time, she was discovering her body and her sexuality but, she was coerced into joining her destiny to an older man who treated her like servitude. She was determined to find love in marriage, something she quickly disregarded. “Marriage doesn’t make love” and that was something that Janie learnt the hard way. Janie’s marriage trajectory will alter as she evolves. She chooses who to marry next and, by leaving her husband, she starts gaining personal authority. Joe Starks dazzles her and, with the promise of a new life filled with love, Janie chooses to leave. As she abandons her husband, she becomes the master of her own story and allows herself to make her own decisions.

In connection, Alice Walker writes in *Saving the Life that Is Your Own*: “I love the way Janie Crawford left her husbands” and that undoubtedly sets the tone for *The Color Purple.* Leaving means choosing and having a say in your own future and that is exactly what Walker allows her character to achieve: personal independence. While Janie leaves her marriage to get married again in the hopes of attaining love; Celie leaves her husband to get rid of men altogether. Recalling the story, Celie finds comfort and security being surrounded by women, by powerful female alliances that provide her with a support network. *Sorority* is key in Walker’s story as she allows her

character to be part of a community of women that help each other through calvary and terror.

Connected with marriage is our protagonists' sexuality. They both have been deprived of discovering and reaching their own pleasure. As for Janie, she starts to be aware of her own body under a pear tree in company of a young man. She is on the verge of discovering her body when her life is truncated by her nanny's desire to marry her off. Nanny sees this young man's actions–Johnny Taylor's–as something that will corrupt Janie. She feels the urge to protect her innocence and marriage seems the sole option:

> In the last stages of Nanny's sleep, she dreamed of voices. Voices far-off but persistent, and gradually coming nearer. Janie's voice. Janie talking in whispery snatches with a male voice she couldn't quite place. That brought her wide awake. She bolted upright and peered out of the window and saw Johnny Taylor lacerating her Janie with a kiss. (*Their Eyes*, 14)

As Janie is prevented from discovering the pleasures of her own sexuality, Celie is being raped by her step-father. While Janie was deprived of love by her nanny's intentions to marry her off, Celie is repulsed by the idea of having sexual relationships. She has endured physical and emotional violence since a very early in her childhood home and that together with the abuse she suffered during marriage, she revokes the idea of maintaining sexual interaction with men.

Love is something that both Janie and Celie find but in different scenarios. In the case of Janie, she felt a self-crushing love for Tea Cake, a bond that linked

their lives till death did them apart. After Joe Starks' death, she remarries for love and tries to find peace and love with another partner. She has not given up on the idea of having an equal partner in marriage so, she tries to find one in Tea Cake. In the end Janie has always tried to find the pleasure she was enjoying under the pear tree when she was just a young girl. Tracy L. Bealer discusses this in her article "Making Hurston's Heroine Her Own" as she writes: "Janie understands sexual fulfilment as the most reliable indicator of heterosexual love and searches for a man who can provide her with the same sensual satisfaction, she enjoyed under the blooming pear tree." (27)

As for Celie, she finds love elsewhere. Love in marriage is something that does not go through her mind and, in her case, women are the answer. She has created a network of powerful friendships that filled her with the confidence needed to leave her husband once and for all. Through the symbolism of colors –especially purple–and its lacking of representation until the end of the novel, Walker portrays Celie's process of rediscovery. This idea of attaining individuality and how the color purple is related is something that William Martin discuses in his article "A New Politics of Black Regality: Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker's Monarchical Method" (2022):

> The transition from the unavailability of purple to its overabundance reflects Celie's development from a character lacking an identity to a complex individual. No longer Albert's domestic servant, she achieves a homeownership that parallels her full possession of personhood. (7)

Owning her independence and being in full possession of herself is something that was achieved in great measure due to Celie's powerful female friendships. This women's support group is something that Janie did not have in her life. She did not have friends to turn to as she did not have a shoulder to cry on and tell her worries to. Only at the end of the novel we see Janie confess her story to her friend Phoebe, a story that would have been less traumatic and violent if she had had Celie's female friendships.

The attainment of freedom and independence allows Celie and Janie to leave their lives in the way they want and need. Janie comes back home after her last husband dies tragically. She returns alone with only her clothes hanging on her body. In the end, Janie is financially independent as she has the money that she inherited from her late husband. It becomes clear that Janie comes to be the perfect image of Zora Neale Hurston; she is alone with no support family to help her, pretty similar to Hurston as she passed away alone. Bealer delves into this idea of solitude as she asserts that "Janie ends her narrative not completely reintegrated into her community, with no living family, and without the romantic love she has sought and only briefly enjoyed throughout the novel." (37) The solitude that Miss Crawford experiences contrasts with Celie's powerful support group but in the end, as Bealer continues, "[i]n both Hurston's and Walker's novels, the heroines achieve self-actualization and independence by and through repairing the damage wrought on their minds and bodies by masculinist misogyny." (37)

Both women have personally experienced the inhumanities of male dominance. In the case of Celie, she has redefined herself by fighting the society

she lived in and by owning her destiny. Celie has been able to be financially independent by creating a company of her own and she has grown both sexually and psychologically. She has created a family that cares for her and supports her unconditionally. The end of their stories is intrinsically related. Both have fought tooth and nail to get rid of patriarchal conventions. They are both unmarried and are presumably to be indefinitely. Celie and Janie have known love, have lost it and have regained it. Loving themselves is the first step towards independence, and for them, reaching the horizon is now possible.

9. Conclusions

Throughout this dissertation it has been my purpose to shed some light into violence within marriage and how activists and writers Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston have portrayed marriage conventions in African-American societies in their novels. Intertwined with this purpose of studying the dynamics of marriage, there is a clear focus of depicting the bond of sisterhood and how women coming together plays an essential role in their physical and emotional freedom. Hurston's Janie and Walker's Celie are the depiction of women who have prevailed, women who have endured a life of oppression and have freed themselves from the chains of patriarchy.

Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker have been pioneers in Black Feminist Thought, unarguably bringing to life strong resilient Black women. Their protagonists Janie Mae Crawford and Celie are the embodiment of perseverance and the fight for equality within marriage. Both *Their Eyes* Were *Watching God* and *The Color Purple* portray the dynamics of unequal power relations and male superiority among African American communities. Historically speaking, women have been subjected and subdued for centuries but, by adding the racial and class spectrums, their position in society is even further neglected.

In order to fully understand both works, my primary aim has been to provide a thorough background to the most important and relevant currents within Black Feminist Criticism. Since the times of slavery, women have always been an object of discrimination as well as being unable to voice their concerns. It would be during the 19060s and 1970s in America when Black Women would start to raise their voices. As a response to the limitations of the Civil Rights

Movement and the inability of the mainstream feminist movement to include Black Women, many black women activists and intellectuals resurfaced. Bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis and Kimberlé Crenshaw are only a part of this feminist representation that started to voice a unique perspective into Black Women's lives and how they had been neglected and silenced.

It is at this point where I was enraptured by Kimberlé Crenshaw's term of "Intersectionality". It would be impossible to analyze Janie and Celie's stories without taking into consideration every angle and here, undoubtedly Crenshaw's theory plays an essential role. The theory of intersectional feminism helps us to recognize and analyze how various forms of oppression intersect and overlap and, in the end, they shape our protagonists' experiences. Considering race, gender, class or even sexuality as isolated forms of oppression would not be appropriate as we would not be able to provide a fully coherent picture of the oppression itself and would lack both content and depth. Kimberlé also asserts the importance of understanding these aspects by centering them in the experiences of marginalized groups such as women of color.

Crenshaw's theory was the perfect critical background from which to start to depict Celie and Janie's life. Alongside with Crenshaw's term there was Alice Walker's "womanist". In her 1983's collection of essays entitled "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" there was a term alien to me up until that moment. Walker coined her term "womanism" as a current closely related to Crenshaw's where she portrays a unique dimension where race, gender and class shape the lives and sufferings of black women at the same time that acknowledges their strength and resilience in the face of adversity. At a time where Black women had no voice, these authors spoke for everyone, giving them a place in society.

It was Alice Walker who introduced me to Zora Neale Hurston. The timeless connection that binds both authors, a link that transcends death. It is thanks to Alice Walker that Hurston is brought “back to life” after she had been buried and forgotten in an unmarked grave for years. Alongside Hurston was also buried her literary career. Alice Walker’s article “Looking for Zora” (1975) helped to renew academic interest in her work. For Alice Walker, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was not only Hurston’s masterpiece but a proto-feminist novel. In Walker’s words: “I became aware of my need of Zora Neale Hurston’s works some time before I knew her work existed” (“A Cautionary Tale” 83).

Due to the undeniable bond that connects both authors, I found it crucial to start by examining their personal lives so as to comprehend how their feelings, thoughts, longings and problems have helped create their protagonists. On January 7th 1891 in Alabama Zora Neale Hurston was born. An African American writer, folklorist and anthropologist, she is best known for her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), but her autobiography provides an excellent insight into her life. It would be during the Harlem Renaissance in New York when her literary career reached its peak and when she met prominent scholars such as Alain Locke and Langston Hughes. She was silenced and not taken into the consideration she deserved, only being rediscovered and celebrated posthumously by Alice Walker

Born in 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia, Alice Walker is the epitome of a life dedicated to activism. Even nowadays at 80 years old, she is unceasingly trying to fight for women of color. She grew up in the segregated south of the United States of America and felt in her flesh how poverty and racism shaped her life.

During the 1960s she became an advocate for equality and deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement, experiences that shaped her writing and career as an activist. Her literary career is just as prolific as her activism, with many poems, essays and novels but it was Celie's life of suffering and oppression that swung the balance towards me choosing *The Color Purple* (1982).

After immersing myself into their lives, their novels were the next step. For this dissertation it has been my purpose to analyze both protagonists and how they managed to survive their oppressive husbands and thrive outside the claws of patriarchy. In order to provide a detailed account of her inner thoughts and experiences I found it crucial to provide as many excerpts and quotations as necessary and, if possible, to support these with a critical perspective from renowned scholars and writers. Lillie P. Howard here played an important role as she was a pioneering literary critic who first carried out research into both Hurston and Walker's library career. In Lillie P. Howard's *Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston: The Common Bond* (1993) she brings them together as I have attempted myself.

The organization I decided to carry out started by analyzing the protagonists' relationships with both women and men. Whereas men were the focus of oppression and silencing women; female friendships played a role of sisterhood and comradery wherein they helped each other overcome their difficult and oppressive situations. In this sense, differentiating three main aspects that define both Janie and Celie's life are essential: their oppressive backgrounds where they had been brought up, their lack of agency and voice and their quest for independence and personal fulfilment.

Starting off, both Janie and Celie survived oppressive marriages and violence in marital relationships which is closely related to their socio-cultural backgrounds. Janie comes from a lineage of rape and abusive patterns exerted over the women of her background by the men and Celie has only known poverty from a very early age. Both have been abandoned by their mother figures, with only Janie having her grandmother beside her. This definitely leaves a mark on both young women and serves as the anteroom for their future.

Janie and Celie's introduction to marriage revolves around oppression and violence. Neither of them is given a choice and both of them find themselves in oppressive relationships with husbands who solely want to exert power over them. Janie's first husband is chosen by her grandmother as a means of silencing Janie's awakening and as a means of providing monetary security. Even before she is conscious about her body and desires, her hopes and longings are killed by Killicks. As for Celie, she is married off to a nameless "Mr.__" who intends to keep Celie as a slave and force her to perform her martial duties without question. Their only relationships with men have been limited to abusive patterns. Women do not have power and, in analyzing their stories from a feminist intersectional perspective we get to see a whole new dimension of oppression where their poor backgrounds, their race and sex coexist to create the perfect combination of oppression.

In matrimony, both forced and in the case of Janie's second and third marriages, chosen by her; they lack autonomy and voice. They are secluded to a second place where voicing their opinion is not permitted. Alongside this, traditional gender roles are expected of them; they endure physical as well as emotional violence. They serve as mere bodies for their husbands to violate.

Janie's relationships with her three husbands differ in some cases from Celie's. While Janie is allowed to mature and open her eyes as she grows, Celie is left with Mr.___ to be mistreated and abused.

After being battered and silenced, Janie and Celie's next step is towards liberation. One that is taken in different directions by our protagonists. Janie finds peace after Tea Cake and Celie is able to build a quilt of sisterhood and female friendships. Janie has Phoebe as her anchor, as her storytelling person where she comes to at the end and supports her. Ms. Crawford has known love –even if brief–but only after she is alone, she is able to achieve that path towards freedom. After the death of Janie's second husband–Joe Starks–she feels free and liberated to make a choice. Although this serves as the first step towards reclaiming her voice, Janie is yet to find her place.

Janie's third and last marriage is, for her, the solution, the loving and caring husband that not so long ago she craved under the pear tree. Tea Cake was apparently the solution but, although in her eyes Tea Cake was her whole world, she is destined to become an independent woman who does not need anybody by her side in order to thrive.

Celie's journey differs in many aspects one of them in close connection to the sisterhood bond she forged throughout the novel. It is at time where women find women. The power of sisterhood and female relationships plays a vital role for her liberation and growth. Celie meets her sexuality presented to us by Shug Avery. Their consensual and reciprocated relationship is Celie's first step towards freedom. After only associating intimacy with violence and exerting power, she is introduced to a whole new world where her pleasure and choice is hers to take. Shug Avery helps Celie discover her body and her inner self, one that had been

secluded and long forgotten. Celie learns how to love herself, how to love her body and in the end, develops the self-confidence that men had ripped from her.

Female friendships are in close relation to solidarity in Walker's *The Color Purple*. Not only does Shug Avery forge a connection with Celie but there are other women who have played a very special role into her liberation. Sofia is also relevant as it is she who challenges Celie; she acts as the rebellious female character that does not settle with the life which has been handed to her. Sofia inspires Celie to stand up for her and to challenge her husband's oppression.

The empowerment that Celie is able to achieve is in great measure due to Sofia's intervention. Sexism and racism are undoubtedly argued by Sofia and will eventually influence Celie's self. Alongside Shug Avery and Sofia there is also a place for Mary Agnes (Squeak). She is also on the path of rediscovering and challenging traditional gender roles. They find in each other a support system, a mutual recognition of the sufferings and violence they have endured.

In the same line of thought, Celie's journey towards empowerment could not be described without the figure of Nettie. Celie's bond with Nettie has transcended time and place, only being reinforced by the letters they exchange. These symbolize the eternal power of sisterhood and requited love.

Celie and Janie manage to find the strength needed to navigate a patriarchal world which seeks to marginalize and oppress them. Their bodies are tools to use and their minds objects to manipulate. Their early experiences have taught them strength and resilience. In the end, Janie and Celie are new women who have reclaimed their bodies and their self-integrity.

Throughout this dissertation I have wanted to make a statement. It has been broadly proved that the patriarchal society in which we live nowadays is intertwined with these past stories about battered women. In this time and age, women are advocating for their rights as well as raising awareness to the prevailing sexual harassment and violence that still plagues our societies. The "Me Too" movement has prompted change and provided a platform where women have started to raise their voices. This new era asserts the importance of intersectionality; a place where women from every background are being considered and acknowledged. This ongoing movement has echoed internationally and is still earing its rightful place in history. In this sense, power dynamics are being challenged and gender inequality alongside with domineering behaviors and the silencing of women are the focus of many conversations.

Women have fought unceasingly for our rights, for us to have our bodies back and for our minds to be ours only. There is a long path ahead of us, a journey full of fight and resilience where no is and would still be no; a future where no women will be abused and we could all …jump at the sun.

WORKS CITED

Abbandonato, Linda. “"A View from ‘Elsewhere’": Subversive Sexuality and the Rewriting of the Heroine’s Story in *The Color Purple*.” *PMLA*, vol. 106, no. 5, 1991, pp. 1106–15. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/462683. Accessed 10 Apr. 2024.

Abdur-Rahman, Aliyyah I. “’The Strangest Freaks of Despotism": Queer Sexuality in Antebellum African American Slave Narratives." *African American Review*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2006, pp. 223-237.

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *We Should All Be Feminists*. Fourth Estate, 2014.

Ahmed, Abrar, et al. "Identity Formation: A Study of Conventional Marriages and Structure of African American Families in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Passing*." *Pakistan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2023, pp. 613-623.

Angelou, Maya. *Phenomenal Woman: Four Poems Celebrating Women.* Random, 1994.

Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1970.

Arndt, Susan. “African Gender Trouble and African Womanism: An Interview with Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Wanjira Muthoni.” *Signs*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2000, pp. 709–26. www.jstor.org/stable/3175414/.

Asmelash, Leah. “‘Intersectionality’ Has Become a Hot-button Topic in Recent Years. Here’s What It Means.” *CNN*, 19 Apr. 2023,

www.edition.cnn.com/2023/04/19/us/intersectionality-feminism-explainer-cec/index.html/.

Babb, Valerie. "The Color Purple: Writing to Undo What Writing Has Done." *Phylon (1960-)* 47.2 (1986): 107-116.

Bailey, Amanda. “Necessary Narration in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.” *The Comparatist*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2016, pp. 319–337.

Baker, Houston A. “Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance.” *American Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 1, 1987, pp. 84–97, https://doi.org/10.2307/2712631/.

Baker, Houston A. *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1984.

Bambara, Toni Cade. *The Salt Eaters*. Vintage, 1992.

---. *The Salt Eaters*. Vintage, 1992.

Bayindir, Turgay. "A House of Her Own: Alice Walker’s Readjustment of Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own” in *The Color Purple*." *Alice Walker’s The Color Purple*. Brill, 2009. 209-223.

Bealer, Tracy L. "Making Hurston’s Heroine Her Own: Love and Womanist Resistance in *The Color Purple*." *Alice Walker’s The Color Purple*. Brill, 2009. 23-42.

---. "The Kiss of Memory": The Problem of Love in Hurston's" *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *African American Review*, vol. 43, no. 2/3, 2009, pp. 311.327.

Benjamin, Shanna Greene, and Nellie McKay. “Intimacy and Ephemera: In Search of Our Mother’s Letters.” *MELUS*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2015, pp. 16–27, www.jstor.org/stable/24570160/.

Benrioua, Amira. "Black Feminist Voices and Space in *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker." *Space, Gender, and the Gaze in Literature and Art*, ed, Kovács, Ágnes Zsófia, and László B. Sári, Cambridge Scholars, 2017.

Berlant, Lauren. "Race, Gender, and Nation in The Color Purple." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Alice Walker's The Color Purple* (2008): 21-49.

Blake, Liza. “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichi Speaks Out on Being Featured on Beyonce’s ‘****Flawless’.” *Billboard*, 10 Oct. 2016, www.billboard.com/music/music-news/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-beyonce-flawless-interview-7534428/.

Bobo, Jacqueline. "*The Color Purple*: Black Women as Cultural Readers." *The Black Studies Reader*. Routledge, 2004. 189-204.

Boi, Paola. “Towards a Feminine Auto-Aesthetics: Writing as a Subversive Dance in ‘Drenched in Light’ by Zora Neale Hurston.” *Letterature d’America*, no. 60, 1998, pp. 107-43.

Bond, Cynthia. "Language, Speech, and Difference in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God. Harold Bloom editor,* 2008, pp. 41-56.

Bone, Robert. *Down Home: A History of Afro-American Short Fiction from Its Beginnings to the End-of-Life Harlem Renaissance.* G.P Putnani's, 1975.

Boström, Sally Anderson. “The Vibe Was Silver: Beyoncé Brings Afrofuturistic Feminism to the World Stage.” *Ms. Magazine*, 14 Jun. 2023, www.msmagazine.com/2023/06/14/beyonce-renaissance-afrofuturism-feminism-black-women/.

Boyd, Valerie. *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*. Scribner, 2003.

Brownmiller, Susan. *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. Simon and Schuster, 1975.

Campbell, Anne. *Men, Women, and Aggression*. Harper Collins, 1994.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Vol. 17. New World Library, 2008.

Caputi, Jane. ""Specifying" Fannie Hurst: Langston Hughes's" Limitations of Life," Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* as Answers to Hurst’s *Imitation of Life*." *Black American Literature Forum*. Vol. 24. No. 4. St. Louis University, 1990.

Carby, Hazel, and V. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist. Oxford UP*, 1987.

Cheryl A. Wall, editor. *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*. Rutgers U P, 1989.

Christian, Barbara. "The Highs and Lows of Black Feminist Criticism." *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. Henry Louis Gates editor. Meridian, 1990.

---. “The Race for Theory." *Cultural Critique*, 6, 1987, pp. 51-63.

---. *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*. Teachers College Press, 1985.

---. *Black Women Novelists*. *The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*. Praeger, 1980.

Christian, Barbara, and Cheryl A. Wall. “But What Do We Think We're Doing Anyway: The State of Black Feminist Criticism (s), Or, My Version of a Little Bit of History.” *ProQuest Information and Learning*, 1989.

Christian, Barbara, and Gloria Bowles. “New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985-2000.” *Jhu.edu*, University of Illinois Press, 2013, muse.jhu.edu/book/18544/.

Clarke, Deborah. "’The Porch Couldn’t Talk for Looking’: Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God." Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God. Harold Bloom editor,* 2008*,* pp. 147-166.

Clenora Hudson-Weems. *Africana Womanism*. Routledge, 2019.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 2000.

---. *The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought*. Routledge, 2018.

Courtland Milloy, “A ‘Purple’ Rage Over a Rip-Off, Washington Post, 24 December 1985, p. A13

Coward, Rosalind. *Sacred Cows: Is Feminism Relevant to the New Millennium?* Harper Collins UK, 2012.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *Feminist Legal Theories*. Routledge, 2013. pp. 23-51.

---. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, July 1991, pp. 1241–99, www.jstor.org/stable/1229039/.

Cutter, Martha J. "Philomela speaks: Alice Walker's Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in *The Color Purple*." *Melus* 25.3/4 (2000): 161-180.

Dabee, Vivi J. *The Summons to Behold a Revelation: Femininity and Foliage in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God*. 2009. U of Manitoba, MS Thesis.

Dance, Daryl Cumber. "Zora Neale Hurston." *American Women Writers: Bibliographical Essays*, eds, Maurice Duke, Jackson R. Bryer, and M. Thomas Inge. Greenwood, 1983, pp. 321-51.

Dasgupta, Koyel. "*The Color Purple*: Reflections on *The Second Sex* and Gender Issues." *International Journal of Humanities and Education Development (IJHED)* 4.1 (2022): 219-230.

Davis, Angela Y. *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and The Foundations of a Movement*. Haymarket, 2016.

---. *Women, Race & Class*. *Vintage*, 1983.

Davis, Thulani. "Black Women Writers Reclaim Their Past." *The Village Voice*, 11 Jan. 2020, www.villagevoice.com/2020/01/11/black-women-writers-reclaim-their-past/.

Dickson-Carr, Darryl. *The Columbia Guide to Contemporary African American Fiction*. Columbia UP, 2005.

Donnelly, Mary. *Alice Walker: The Color Purple and Other Works (Writers and Their Work)*. Cavendish Square, 2009.

Du. Bois, W.E.B. T*he Suppression of the African Slave Trade, The Soul of the Black Folk, Dusk of Dawn, Essays and Articles*. Literary Classics of the United States, 1986.

Durán, María del Mar Gallego. *Passing Novels in the Harlem Renaissance: Identity Politics and Textual Strategies*, LIT Verlag, 2003.

Erbland, Kate. "Cynthia Erivo Responds to Harriet Tubman Casting Blacklash: 'I Cannot Tell How Protectice I Am of This Woman." *IndieWire*, 18 Sept. 2018, www.indiewire.com/features/general/cynthia-erivo-responds-harriet-tubman-casting-backlash-1202004874/.

Evans, Robert C. *Critical Insights: Their Eyes Were Watching God.* Salem. 2020

Fairclough, Adam. “Historians and the Civil Rights Movement.” *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1990, pp. 387–398. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/27555365. Accessed 17 Apr. 2021.

Ferguson, Otis. "You Can't Hear Their Voices [Review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*]." Reprinted from “The New Republic”, 13 Oct. 1937. *Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston.* Ed. Gloria L. Cronin. G. K. Hall & Co., 1998. pp. 77-8.

Field, Robin E. "Alice Walker’s Revisionary Politics of Rape." *Alice Walker’s The Color Purple*. Brill, 2009. 149-171.

Follingstad, Diane R., et al. "The Role of Emotional Abuse in Physically Abusive Relationships." *Journal of Family Violence* 5 (1990): 107-120.

Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. “My Statue, Myself: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women.” *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. Henry Louis Gates editor. Meridian, 1990.

Frampton, Emily. "“They All Leaned Over While She Talked”: Storytelling and Community in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*" *The Albatross*, vol. 11, 2021, pp. 49-55.

Franklyn, A. *Celebrity Feminism: Exploring the Influence of a Famous Feminist*. 2016. Oklahoma State U, PhD dissertation.

Frías, María. “El discurso del matrimonio en la obra de Zora Neale Hurston:" *Marriage Doesn't Make Love*. U de Alcalá de Henares, 1998.

García, Ana Belén Pérez. "The Tragic Mulatta and Storytelling in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *The Grove-Working Papers on English Studies* 26 (2019): 71-88.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology.* Meridian, 1990.

George, Courtney. ""My Man Treats Me Like a Slave": The Triumph of Womanist Blues over Blues Violence in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." *Alice Walker's The Color Purple*. Brill, 2009. 119-147.

Ghauri, Qasim Javed, et al. "Description of Subjugated Woman in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: A Feminist Analysis." *Studies in Literature and Language* 15.6 (2017): 1013.

Guy-Sheftall, Beverly, ed. *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. The New Press, 2011.

Hannah, Arendt. "What is Authority?" *Authority*, 1968, pp. 102-04.

Harris, Trudier. *The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan*. U of Georgia P, 1996.

Hayes, Elizabeth T. "'Like Seeing you Buried': Persephone in *The Bluest Eye*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *The Color Purple*." *Images of Persephone: Feminist Readings in Western Literature*. UP of Florida, 1994.

Hemenway, Robert E. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. U of Illinois P, 1980.

Hemmati, Shiva. "Irigarayan Sensible Transcendental in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 61.5 (2020): 545-553.

Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence–from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Hachette UK, 2015.

Hernton, Calvin C. "Who' s Afraid of Alice Walker? *The Color Purple* as a Slave Narrative." *The sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers. Adventures in Sex, Literature, and Real Life* (1987): 1-36.

Hill-Collins, Patricia. "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought." *Signs*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1989, pp. 745–73. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3174683. Accessed 18 July 2023.

---. "Defining Black Feminist Thought." *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson, Routledge, 1997, pp. 379-394.

Hobson, Janell. "Too Sexy to Be the 'Perfect Feminist'?" *Ms. Magazine*, 15 Feb. 2019, www.msmagazine.com/2014/09/03/too-sexy-to-be-the-perfect-feminist/.

hooks, Bell. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Routledge, 2015.

---. "Feminism Is for Everybody by Bell Hooks." Pluto P, 21 Sept. 2017, www.plutobooks.com/blog/feminism-is-for-everybody-bell-hooks/.

---. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Routledge, 2014.

Hostetler, Karl D. *Seducing Souls: Education and the Experience of Human Well-Being*. Bloomsbury, USA, 2011.

Howard, Lillie P. “Nanny and Janie: Will the Twain Ever Meet? A Look at Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.” *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1982, pp. 403–14, www.jstor.org/stable/2783985/.

Howarth, John. "*Their Eyes Were Watching God*: Janie Crawford and the Attainment of Individuality." *Illuminazioni*, 2011, pp. 3-12.

Hozhabrossadat, Sepideh. "Illuminating Nature and Gender Trouble in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God." International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature,* vol. 4, no. 5, 2015, pp. 124-128.

Hughes, Langston. “Harlem Literati in The Twenties.” *The Langston Hughes Review*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1985, pp. 5–8, www.jstor.org/stable/26432665/.

---. “The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain.” *The Langston Hughes Review*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1985, pp. 1–4, www.jstor.org/stable/26432664/.

---. *The Big Sea*. Hill and Wang, 2015.

Hull, Gloria T., and Akasha Gloria Hull. *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance*. Indiana UP, 1987.

Hull, Gloria T., et al. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies.* The Feminist Press, 1982.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Harper Collins, 2010.

---. "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." *Worlds of Difference. Inequality in The Aging Experience*, 1928.

---. *Mules and Men.* Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1935.

---. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Harper Collins, 2010.

---, and Mary Helen Washington. *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing... and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*. Feminist Press at CUNY, 1979.

Jenkins, Candice Marie. "Queering Black Patriarchy: The salvific wish and masculine possibility in Alice Walker's The Color Purple." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 48.4 (2002): 969-1000.

Johnson, James Weldon. "Harlem: The Culture Capital." *The New Negro*, 1925, pp. 301-11.

Johnson, Yvonne. *The Voices of African-American Women: The Use of Narrative and Authorial Voice in the Works of Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice Walker*. Peter Lang, 1998.

Jones, Ann. "Battering: Who's Going to Stop It?" *Making Sense of Women's Lives: An Introduction to Women's Studies* (2000): 479.

Jordan, June*. "*On Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston: Notes Towards a Balancing of Love and Hatred*", Black World, vol.* 23, no.10, Aug. 1974, p. 6.

Jordan, June. *Civil Wars*. Simon and Schuster, 1995.

Joseph, Gloria I., and Jill Lewis. *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives*. South End, 1986.

June Jordan, "On Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston." *Black World,* 1974.

Kaur, Surinder. “Standing Tall: Mapping Step by Step Metamorphosis of Janie Crawford in Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God”. *International Journal for Intersectional Feminist Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2016, pp.1-18.

Kelly, Erna. ‘A Matter of Focus: Men in the Margins of Alice Walker’s Fiction’, *Critical Essays on Alice Walker*. Ed. Ikenna Dieke. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999.

King Jr, Martin Luther. *Why We Can't Wait*. Penguin, 2000.

King, Lovalerie. *The Cambridge Introduction to Zora Neale Hurston*. Cambridge UP, 2008.

King, Sigrid. "Naming and power in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God. Harold Bloom editor,* 2008, pp. 57-70.

Korstad, Robert, and Nelson Lichtenstein. "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early civil Rights Movement." *The Journal of American History*, 75.3 (1988): pp. 786-811.

Lambert, Raphaël. "Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*: Womanist Folk Tale and Capitalist Fairy Tale." *Alice Walker’s The Color Purple*. Brill, 2009. 43-58.

Lester, Neal A. *Understanding Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, And Historical Documents*. Greenwood, 1999.

Lewis, David Levering. *When Harlem Was in Vogue.* Penguin, 1997.

Ling, Wang. "Gender Trouble in *The Color Purple*." *Studies in Literature and Language* 13.4 (2016): 62-65.

Little, Anita. “Beyonce at the VMAs: Feminist and Flawless.” *Ms. Magazine*, 16 July 2018, www.msmagazine.com/2014/08/25/beyonce-at-the-vmas-feminist-and-flawless/.

Liu, Jiana. "An Analysis of the Narrative Function of the Economic Elements in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *E3S Web of Conferences*, vol. 235, EDP Sciences, 2021.

Locke, Alain, ed. *The New Negro*. Simon and Schuster, 1997.

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. Penguin, 2020.

---. “There is no Hierarchy of Oppressions.” *Bulletin: Homophobia and Education.* Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1983.

Lowe, John. "Laughin’ up a World: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the (Wo)Man of Words." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God. Harold Bloom editor,* 2008*,* pp. 71-115.

Lynn, Denise. "Socialist Feminism and Triple Oppression: Claudia Jones and African American Women in American Communism." *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, 8.2, 2014, pp. 1-20.

Madsen, Deborah L. *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice*. Pluto, 2000.

Magill, Frank N. *The 20th Century A-GI: Dictionary of World Biography,* vol. 7. Routledge, 2013.

Manning, Brandon J. *Played Out: The Race Man in Twenty-First-Century Satire*. Rutgers University Press, 2022.

Maroto, Inés Casas. ""So This Was a Marriage!": Intersections of Natural Imagery And The Semiotics Of Space in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Journal of English Studies*, vol. 11, 2013, pp. 69-82.

Marshall, Paule. "From the Poets in the Kitchen." *Callaloo*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2001, pp. 627–33, www.jstor.org/stable/3300541/.

Martin, William. "A New Politics of Black Regality: Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker's Monarchical Method." *Beyond the Margins: A Journal of Graduate Literary Scholarship* 2.1 (2022): 3.

McDowell, Deborah E. "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism." *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1980, p. 153, https://doi.org/10.2307/2904407.

Meinsenhelder, Susan Edwards. "'Mink Skin or Coon Hide': The Janus-faced Narrative of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. Harold Bloom editor,* 2008, pp. 117-146

Miller, Shawn E. "'Some Other Way to Try': From Defiance to Creative Submission in *Their Eyes Were Watching God." Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. Harold Bloom editor,* 2008, pp. 185-204.

Milloy, Courtland. "A' Purple' Rage Over a Rip-Off." *Washington Post* 24 (1985): B3.

Moraga, Cherrie, and Gloria Anzaldúa, editors. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. State U of New York P, 2022.

Morrison, Toni. "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *Michigan Quarterly Review,* 28.11, 1988, p. 8.

Ms. Magazine. "Black History Month: The Myth of the Black Superwoman, Revisited." *Ms. Magazine*, 2 Aug. 2017, www.msmagazine.com/2011/02/16/black-history-month-the-myth-of-the-black-superwoman-revisited/.

Mulvey, Laura. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Indiana UP, 1989.

Murno, Alice. *Critical Insights: Alice Munro*. Salem Press, 2012.

N'Guessan, Kouadio Germain. "'"You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy": The Violence of Language in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." *Human and Social Studies* 1.4 (2015): 72-87.

Nadasen, Premilla. "Expanding the Boundaries of the Women's Movement: Black Feminism and the Struggle for Welfare Rights." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2002, pp. 271–301. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/3178742. Accessed 22 Jan. 2023.

Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo. "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English." *Signs*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1985, pp. 63–80, www.jstor.org/stable/3174287/.

Padhi, Prasanta Kumar. "A Study of Celie's Emancipation in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention* 4.2 (2015): 1-5.

Pearson, Carol, and Katherine Pope. *The Female Hero in American and British Literature.* Bowker, 1981.

Phillips, Layli. *The Womanist Reader*. Routledge, 2006.

Plant, Deborah G. *Zora Neale Hurston*. Praeger, 2007.

---. *Alice Walker: A Woman of Our Times*. Praeger, 2017.

Porter, A. P. *Jump at de Sun*. First Avenue, 1992.

Pride, Felicia. "Alice and Zora: 'An Interview with Valerie Boyd and Evelyn C. White'." Motion Magazine, 13 Mar. 2015, www.inmotionmagazine.com/ac05/f_pride1.html/

Priya, K. "Violence in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 9.7 (2014): 51-54.

Proudfit, Charles L. "Celie's Search for Identity: A Psychoanalytical Developmental Reading of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Alice Walker's The Color Purple–New Edition* (2008): 89-112.

Qashgari, Sawsan. "Racism, Feminism and Language in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *AWEJ for Translation & Literary Studies* 1.2 (2017).

Rana, Sobia, Imran Ali, and Aneeqa Ansari. "*Their Eyes Were Watching God*: A Literary Progenitor of African American Feminism And American Civil Rights Movement." Journal of Positive School Psychology 6.9 (2022): pp. 34-43.

Rayson, Ann L. "*Dust Tracks on a Road:* Zora Neale Hurston and the Form of Black Autobiography." *Negro American Literature Forum*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1973, pp. 39-45.

---. "The Novels of Zora Neale Hurston." *Studies in Black Literature, vol.* 5, no. 3, 1974, pp. 1-10.

Ribeiro, Orquídea Moreira. "Racial Complexities in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston." *Revista de Letras* 2.6 (2007): pp. 297-304.

Robinson, Marius. "Ain't I A Woman." *The Anti-Slavery Bugle (Salem),* vol. 1, no, 1, 21 Jun 1851, p. 160.

Ross, Daniel W. "Celie in the Looking Glass: The Desire for Selfhood in *The Color Purple.*" *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Alice Walker's The Color Purple* (2008): 3-19.

Salam, Alali. "Multiple Ambivalent Feminine Spaces in Zora Neale Hurston's Feminine Characters." I*nternational Journal of Social Science Research and Review*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2023, pp. 447-452.

Sandoval, Chela. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Vol. 18. U of Minnesota P, 2013.

Shange, Ntozake. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf*. Simon and Schuster, 1997.

Shatema, Threadcraft. "Embodiment." *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*. Disch Lisa, and Hawkesworth Mary editors. Oxford P. 2016, pp. 207-26.

Sigamany, E. S. Sharmila. (2021). "Quest for Identity in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*". *Discourse Analysis: An International Refereed Journal*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2 Jul. 2014, pp. 23-25.

Simmons, Ashley. *Self-Authorship, Storytelling, And Narrative Coaching as A Reformation/Liberation of Individual and Collective Identity*. Diss. University of Pennsylvania, 2021.

Simmons, Ryan. ""The Hierarchy Itself": Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the Sacrifice of Narrative Authority." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God.* Harold Bloom *editor,* 2008, pp.167-184.

Smith, Barbara. "Color Purple Distorts Class, Lesbian Issues." *Guardian, Feb* 19 (1986): 168-85.

---. "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." *The Radical Teacher*, no. 7, 1978, pp. 20–27, www.jstor.org/stable/20709102/.

--- editor. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. Rutgers University Press, 1983.

Smith, Brenda R. "We Need a Hero: African American Female *Bildungsromane* and Celie's Journey to Heroic Female Selfhood in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." *Alice Walker's The Color Purple*. Brill, 2009. 1-21.

Singh, Sonal, and Sushma Gupta. "Celie's Emancipation in the Novel" The Color Purple"." *International Transactions in Humanities & Social Sciences* 2.2 (2010).

Steptoe, Tyina. "“Jody's Got Your Girl and Gone:” Gender, Folklore, and The Black Working Class." *The Journal of African American History,* vol. 99, no. 3, 2014, pp. 251-274.

Sterling A. Brown. “Luck Is a Fortune”. *The Nation*, v. 145, no. 16, 1937, pp. 409-410.

Stewart, Maria W., and Marilyn Richardson. *Maria W. Stewart: Americas First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*. Indiana U P, 1987.

Tapia, Elena. “Symmetry as Conceptual Metaphor in Walker's The Color Purple”. *International Journal of English Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, June 2003, pp. 29-44,

Talif, Rosli, and Kamelia Talebian Sedehi. "Characters in process in The Color Purple." *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*118 (2014): 425-432.

Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta, ed. *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. Haymarket Books, 2017.

Thaxton-Simmons, Andreia. "Rewriting the Mother Figure in Selected Novels by Contemporary African American Women." 2012, Ph.D dissertation

https://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/islandora/object/fsu:183114/datastream/PDF/view

The Washington Bee. 25 Jul, 1896, page 4, image 4. Library of Congress.

Thompson, Becky. "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism." *Feminist Studies* 28.2 (2002): pp. 337-360.

Thyreen, Jeannine. "Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: Redefining God and Reclaiming the Spirit within." *Christianity & Literature* 49.1 (1999): 49-66.

Tillet, Salamishah. *In Search of the Color Purple: The Story of an American Masterpiece*. Abrams, 2021.

Toni Cade Bambara, and Eleanor W. Traylor. *The Black Woman an Anthology*. Ny Washington Square P, 2005.

Vivanco, Sonia Sedano. "Harriet Jacobs: Forerunner of Gender Studies in Slave Narratives and African American Women's Literature." 2009. U Salamanca, PhD dissertation.

Walker, Alice. "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self." *Living With Contradictions*. Routledge, 2018. 257-263.

---. *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems 1965-1990 Complete*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003.

---. "How My Mother's Fanatical Feminist Views Tore Us Apart. Rebecca Walker." *Mail Online*, 23 May 2008, www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1021293/How-mothers-fanatical-feminist-views-tore-apart-daughter-The-Color-Purple-author.html.

---. “In the Closet of the Soul.” *Living by the Word*, Orion, 2011, pp. 78–92.

---. *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose.* Mariner, 2011.

---. “Letter from Alice Walker to Publishers at Yediot Books” "Letter from Alice Walker to Publishers at Yediot Books." *Europe Solidaire San Frontièrs*. June 2012. Retrieved from: www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article25766

---. "Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life." Walker. *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens.* 3: 14

---. “The Black Woman’s Story." *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, 12 Feb. 1984, sec. 6, p. 94.

---. *The Color Purple*. Wadsworth Publishing, 2006.

---. *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart*. 1st Thus., Ballantine, 2001.

---*. The World Has Changed: Conversations with Alice Walker. The New Press, 2010.*

---. *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness*. Reprint, The New Press, 2007.

---. *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down: Stories*. Harvest, 2004.

---. "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View." *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,* Womanist Prose, 1983, pp.83-92.

Walker, Lenore E. A. *The Battered Woman Syndrome*. Springer publishing company, 2016.

Walker, Margaret. *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems*. University of Georgia P, 2013.

Walker, Rebecca. *Black, White & Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*. Later Printing, Riverhead, 2002.

---. "How My Mother's Fanatical Feminist Views Tore Us A part, by the daughter of The Color Purple author*". Mail Online*, April 28th 2008, www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1021293/How-mothers-fanatical-feminist-views-tore-apart-daughter-The-Color-Purple-author.html

Wall, Cheryl A. "*Mules and Men* and Women: Zora Neale Hurston's Strategies of Narration and Visions of Female Empowerment." *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1989.

Wallace, Michele. *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. Verso, 1996.

---. "Blues for Mr. Spielberg." *Village Voice* 31.18 (1986): 21-26.

---. "Michele Wallace on Black Macho and 'the Dream World of Black Power.'" *Verso*, 16 Oct. 2015, www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/2289-michele-wallace-on-black-macho-and-the-dream-world-of-black-power/.

Walton, Priscilla L. "'What She Got to Sing About?': Comedy and *The Color Purple*." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Alice Walker's* (2008): 65-77.

Washington, Mary Helen. "'I Love the Way Janie Crawford Left Her Husbands': Zora Neale Hurston's Emergent Female Hero." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. Harold Bloom editor,* 2008, pp. 9-22.

---. *Midnight Birds: Stories by Contemporary Black Women Writers*. Anchor Books,1980.

---. "New Lives and Lew Letters. Black Women Writers at the End of the Seventies." *College English,* vol. 43, no. 1, 1981, pp. 1-11.

Wells-Barnett, Ida B. "Lynching, Our National Crime." *The Rhetoric of Struggle: Public Address by African American Women,* edited by Robbie Jean Walker, Garland, 19992, pp. 95-102.

Wells, Ida B. *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells,* edited by Alfreda M. Duster, *University of Chicago Press,* 2020.

White, Evelyn C. *Alice Walker: A Life*. WW Norton & Company, 2004.

Whittington, Elizabeth Y., and Mackenzie Jordan. "'Bey Feminism' vs. Black Feminism: A Critical Conversation on Word-of-Mouth Advertisement of Beyoncé's Visual Album." *Black Women and Popular Culture: The Conversation Continues,* 2014, pp. 155-74.

Wilson, Dominique R. "Sexual Exploitation of Black Women from the Years 1619-2020." *Journal of Race, Gender, and Ethnicity*, vol. 10, no.1, 2021, p. 13.

Wright, Richard. "*Their Eyes Were Watching God*" [Review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*]." Reprinted from "*New Masses*", 5 Oct. 1937, *Zora Neale*

Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, K.A. Appiah. New York. 1993, pp. 16-17.

X, Malcom. *Malcom X: The Autobiography of Malcom X.* Penguin, 1968.

Zinn, Howard. *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times*. Beacon P. 1994.