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ISBN 0-315-56053-3

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Getting the Man Off Your Eyeball: Womanist  
Aesthetics and Narrative Voice  
in Alice Walker's  
The Color Purple

Martine Leprince

A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
Montréal, Québec, Canada

February, 1990

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## ABSTRACT

Getting the Man Off Your Eyeball: Womanist  
Aesthetics and Narrative Voice  
in Alice Walker's  
The Color Purple

Martine Leprince

Alice Walker's The Color Purple is a representative Afro-centric womanist text that explores the relationship between voice, sexuality, spirituality, and female empowerment. The terms "Afro-centric" and "womanist" are derived from the world view of contemporary African-American women writers of Walker's generation, who, like Walker, incorporate a sense of difference into their work as a central thematic concern.

Walker's womanist project is, thus, an attempt to foreground a relatively new voice in American and African-American literature: the voice of the black woman as social critic. This narrative voice is created by drawing upon narrative strategies and themes from two separate traditions, the African-American literary tradition that goes back to the nineteenth century slave narratives, and a twentieth century tradition of female revisionary mythopoesis.

This thesis will focus on how Walker's womanist aesthetics, based on both an Afro-centric vision and a sense of black female difference, shapes not only the themes and narrative strategies of The Color Purple, but

also constructs an autobiographical voice based on black female discourse as a vehicle of literary self-representation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all those who have been supportive during the writing of this thesis, but most especially, my daughter, Gala, to whom the thesis is dedicated.

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Who did this novelist think she could get to read her book by centering on a crazy, semi-literate, black, Georgia woman who writes letters to God? She's got to be kidding!

(The Crisis June/July 1983)



## INTRODUCTION

You want me to tell yer 'bout  
slavery days? Well, I kin tell  
yer, but I ain't. S'all past  
now; so I say let 'er rest;  
's too awful to tell anyway.  
Yer're too young to know all  
that talk anyway. Well, I'll  
tell yer some to put in yer book,  
but I ain'ta goin' tell yer the  
worse.<sup>1</sup>

Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, The Color Purple (1982), gained immediate notoriety for its controversial depiction of black female culture and its unapologetic celebration of female desire and female sexuality. The focus on female culture is probably the major contributing factor to the novel's rapid elevation to the status of a cultural artifact. This focus on female non-conformity within the black community is also, undoubtedly, the primary reason for the polarization of critical and scholarly response to this deceptively simplified tale of incest, rape, and female empowerment. Those critics who take issue with Walker for what is perceived by many as a one-sided dramatization and sentimentalization of the victim's story do so, however, without objecting to Walker's masterful use of black folk language. Like her predecessor, Zora Neale Hurston, Walker is universally praised for her ability to capture the speech

of Southern rural blacks. Yet, in Walker's narrative (even more so than in Hurston's) it is this folk language, more than any other device, that constitutes the most profoundly female feature of the text.

The exploration of the relationship between language and self is a central thematic concern for many contemporary black women fictionalists. Walker's choice of black female folk discourse as the narrative voice in The Color Purple can be understood as a reflection of this questioning of the historical relationship between black women, literary authority, and language. Indeed, Walker's use of black female discourse serves a dual purpose: it allows the narrator to appropriate the signifying voice of the ex-slave narratives recorded in the nineteen thirties by the Federal Writers' Project, as well as enabling her to rewrite the history of the black woman without having to "tell it slant."

The innovative use of this signifying voice through the adaptation of folk strategies to a black female aesthetic which Walker terms "womanist" constitutes the genius of Walker's novel: through the use of black female discourse, Walker has both rewritten what Christine Froula terms the "paradigmatic father-daughter dialogue," and reaffirmed what Lauren Berlant describes as "the tradition of cultural self-exemplification" typical of the African-American autobiographical voice.<sup>2</sup> What is remarkable about this is that in locating The Color Purple in a female, African-

American context, Walker has written a novel that appeals to a very broad range of readers.

This appeal to a broad readership (by broad I mean a readership which is neither exclusively black, nor exclusively female) is characteristic of contemporary black women writers of Walker's generation. Such has not always been the case. In contrast to nineteenth and early twentieth century black women writers who either went out of print or were forgotten by both public and critics alike, writers of the seventies and eighties - Ntozake Shange, Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, Maya Angelou, Gloria Naylor and Alice Walker - have been catapulted to the center of public attention. This change of fortune is dependent on a host of factors, all of which, however, denote a changed relationship between the writer and her readership.

Scholars of African-American literature point out that historically, the relationship between black writers (male or female) and their readership has constituted a major factor in the writing of the text itself. The ever-present reality of racial hostility has had an important effect on African-American writers, dictating to them what they could and could not write. It has also granted them an awareness of their audience of readers that is qualitatively different from that of other American writers. In a letter to Douglas Gilbert, Hurston comments upon the constraint

under which black writers were forced to write, and the relationship between style and censorship. With characteristic cynicism she refers to the "sentence" and the manipulation of syntactical patterns, but does so in a very different way than, for example, Virginia Woolf. Hurston, in contrast to Woolf, discusses the use of syntax within the context of racial, rather than sexual, oppression:

It looks as if a Negro shall not be permitted to depart from a standard pattern. As I said, the nation is too sentimental about us to know us. It has a cut-and-dried formula for us which must not be violated. Either there is no interest in knowing us, or a determination not to destroy the pattern made and provided. We are even supposed to use certain sentences at all times, and if we are too stubborn to do so, we must be made to conform to type.<sup>3</sup>

It would be useful to examine the editing process undergone by the ex-slave narratives which have had such an important influence on Walker's writing, particularly the writing of The Color Purple. This editing process clearly illustrates the standardization process referred to above, as well as outlining the difficulties encountered by African-American writers by the existence of racism and reader expectations.

During the late nineteen thirties, the Federal Writers' Project collected and published the stories of thousands of elderly men and women born into slavery in the Southern United States. Interviewed in 1972, Mrs. Eudora Ramsay Richardson, director of the Virginia Writer's Project during that period, is quite explicit about her role as editor of The Negro in Virginia:

A great deal of that material was written too soon after the Civil War, and had too much of a Negro bias to be accurate, so the final writing of that book I had to do. I just went away, took all the material with me, went down to a cottage, shut the door, and stayed down there two weeks without even a telephone. And rewrote the material. Meantime, I had a staff of people in Virginia who had to recheck everything that the Negroes had researched because we wanted to be sure that it wasn't biased one way or the other... We found these ex-slaves, and we had groups of them, and I went with those people to get their stories, and we got them recorded and written up in The Negro in Virginia, which made the Book-of-the Month list for June, 1940. It's still considered to be a good source book, and I'm quite proud of it.<sup>4</sup>

Sealing herself into a hermetic and inviolable space, Mrs. Richardson recreates the text in her own image.

Bowdlerization transforms the subversive and indigestible stories of the ex-slaves (the "Negro bias") into palatable literary fare. The Negro in Virginia, then, found its way onto the bookshelves and booklists of popular culture only on the condition that it present a mirror-like image reflecting back to the white, middle-class reader the familiar contours of his/her society in which the black population can never be seen from its own perspective.

The American of African descent is, Mrs. Richardson insists, "a creature of fine imagination who likes to tell his stories after a manner that will be pleasing to his audience" (xxii). It is for this reason, ironically, that his text must be edited: pleasing the audience is a euphemism for presenting one's lived historical experience in such a way as to invite charges of exaggeration and to

provoke skepticism on the part of the reader/editor. Clearly, pleasing the audience here is equivalent to deceiving the audience. In order for the audience to be undeceived, then, the text must be purged of the unmediated voice of the ex-slave, a voice highly critical of its potential readers.

It is interesting to note that the audience referred to by Mrs. Richardson is Roscoe Lewis, a black man and supervisor of the Negro Studies in Virginia Project. Indeed, it is Mr. Lewis' affinity with the ex-slaves that makes him a suspect and unreliable reader for Mrs. Richardson: "The ex-slaves who are quoted have told interesting stories - yet stories that must be taken with the well-known grain of salt that Mr. Lewis is not administering" (xxii). It is more than obvious that the reader as Roscoe Lewis and the reader as Mrs. Richardson fall into two distinct categories characterized by diametrically opposed levels of expectation. The metaphorical journey from lived historical experience directly translated as oral history, to history as second hand gratuitous entertainment is effected at a great price: the loss of control over the construction of a narrative voice.

Mrs. Richardson's inability to read a text that contradicts her preconceptions of African-American reality in Southern society is only one example among many. It amply illustrates, however, the special relationship between reader expectations, realism, and authenticity

that has helped to shape the development of African-American literature. The popularity of the nineteenth century slave narrative with its standardized sentimental plot catering to the expectations of a white, middle-class readership is another important example of the reader's role in influencing the shaping of the African-American text. Writers such as Harriet Wilson (Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black (1859) ) who did not meet reader expectations simply were not read. Ironically, the rediscovery of Wilson's novel in 1982 by Henry Louis Gates has coincided with the rise in popularity of contemporary black women writers, a phenomenon that has been described by some as "the second renaissance."

The cultural and historical implications of this "second renaissance," or rise to prominence of black women writers has become the subject of much critical and scholarly study. All agree that the disappearance of the dual audience as a major factor in the shaping of the text is one element contributing to the black woman writer's seemingly uncanny ability to respond in a new way to a late twentieth century need for a more profound critique of American society. In the late sixties and early seventies, black women writers began to adopt a self-consciously female and black narrative voice that enabled them to write in a style reflecting the reality of the black woman's experience. It is important to remember, however, that they did so while recognizing the limitations

of expressive realism. While black male writers such as Wright and Ellison have in the past envisioned American society as predominantly a conflict between black and white males, this is no longer, as both Walker and Barbara Christian have pointed out, a primary focus for contemporary black women writers. These writers have chosen, instead, to give renewed emphasis on a number of themes and issues that have preoccupied black women writers since the nineteenth century: female bonding, female sexuality, violence, and the exploration of the black woman's place in both the black community and American society. The most well known examples of contemporary works treating these themes are: Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969), Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye (1970), Gayl Jones' Corregidora (1975), Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place (1980), and Alice Walker's The Color Purple (1982).

Walker's earlier fiction, both her collections of poems and short stories as well as The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970) and Meridian (1976), is already preoccupied with the themes of violence and sexuality. This work incorporates a female point of view that questions the place of black women in the patriarchal society of the South, and clearly foreshadows the central theme of The Color Purple: the relationship between sexuality, spirituality, and the community as a whole. The Color Purple, in turn, is a preliminary step towards the fuller



expression of Walker's aesthetics in her most recent novel The Temple of My Familiar (1989).

Walker's recognition of the importance of putting into new fictional forms the difference implicit in being a black woman in American society is the motive force behind the womanist project of revising and rewriting the history of women, both black and white, in that society. Indeed, the rewriting of the history of the black woman in an African-American literary context is the informing spirit shaping the themes, structures, and narrative voice of The Color Purple. As part of her commitment to telling the black woman's story Walker prefaces her collections of essays in In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (1984) with a definition of womanist. This act announces her break with patriarchal and ethnocentric literary structures. The break, however, was already fully anticipated both by the essays themselves (ranging from the late sixties to the early eighties) and The Color Purple.

In Search opens with a four-part definition of the term womanist. Walker's intention here is to signify in a traditionally African-American gesture, on what has been shown by Robert Stepto and others to have been almost a precondition for the existence of nineteenth century black literature: the ritual of authentication (letters, documents, or prefaces attached to the text) that made the African-American narrative acceptable to a white readership. In In Search, the womanist preface clearly functions as a

repudiation of the need for authentication simply by acknowledging the black woman's double oppression in a racist and sexist society and then announcing Walker's intention of recreating a new, utopian society based on what she identifies as traditional black female values. The strong sense of black, female difference in Walker's definition of womanist recapitulates in condensed form the sense of difference which permeates the text of The Color Purple. This sense of difference, then, fulfills a fundamental purpose of Walker's revisionist agenda in The Color Purple: to rewrite myths and stereotypes about black women whether these stereotypes be found in Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury or Wright's Native Son. The narrative strategy that Walker uses in order to do so is based, as we shall see, on the use of black female discourse.

In short, The Color Purple attempts nothing less than the reorientation of the African-American female self towards an Afro-centric reality which, however, is nevertheless non-exclusive. In order to achieve this fusion of two separate halves of the female self - the African and the American - Walker must first explore the conflict between these two halves ( a conflict reflected in the division in the narrative structure between the African narrative and Celie's narrative). Central to the exploration of the American half of the self, however, is the history of slavery. Indeed, Walker never allows the

reader to forget that the history of slavery constitutes the central factor joining the two halves of the African-American self at the same time as it re-emphasizes the black woman's difference. Yet, despite this emphasis in the text on the history of slavery and the heritage of Africa as central, symbolic motifs of self-transformation from a slave self to a new, womanist self, the importance of the African emphasis in the text has not, for the most part, been sufficiently taken into account. The result is that very little attention has been paid to the way in which Walker's use of what have been acknowledged as traditionally female literary modes (for example, the epistolary novel) is equally derived from narrative strategies that are typically African-American. A critical approach that does not take into account Walker's preoccupation with the history of blacks in American society, as well as Walker's awareness of being a part of a tradition of African-American women writers (signaled by her embracing of Hurston as a literary foremother), overlooks the fact that letters, diaries, and autobiography are also characteristic of African-American literary heritage, as well as indicative of female culture and female modes of expression.

To place The Color Purple in an exclusively female tradition is to miss Walker's point entirely: that acknowledging the differences between the sexes and the races is a necessary step towards bringing about the radical changes envisioned in The Color Purple. Indeed,

it seems clear that it is Walker's intention to make the reader as aware of these historical and cultural differences as possible. It is obvious, then, that critical readings of the text should take this cultural difference into consideration when attempting an analysis of the interrelationship in The Color Purple between narrative voice and characterization.

In her essay "The Daughter's Seduction: Sexual Violence and Literary History," Christine Froula states that both Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings and The Color Purple "...exemplify the breaking of women's forbidden stories into literary history - an event that reverberates far beyond their heroes' individual histories to reshape our sense of our cultural past and its possible future directions."<sup>5</sup> Although Froula's inclusive "our" appears to include all women, the cultural past she refers to is exclusively European: Freud and Homer. This cultural past is "...the hysterical cultural script; the cultural text that dictates to males and females alike the necessity of silencing woman's speech when it threatens the father's power" (623). Although Froula's analysis explains the relationship between gender, power, and literary representation, the fact remains that the lack of cultural diversification in her analysis allows her to misinterpret the role played in The Color Purple by Celie's narrative voice.

Froula inadvertently ignores both the cultural

background of both novels and the different quality of African-American women's silence. There is thus no mention in her essay of African-American cultural strategies which may have influenced the construction of narrative voice in The Color Purple. Froula repeatedly refers, for example, to Celie's silence as "numb allegiance," while describing Celie's psychic state as one of "bewilderment" and "confusion." In Froula's view, then, Celie progresses from self-abnegation to self-esteem; yet it is quite clear that the narrative voice belies such a progression. It is important to understand that we are not simply reading a journal revealing the inner state of the heroine; on the contrary, Celie's narrative voice is a public voice that functions in the text as a kind of communal commentator signifying on events as they happen. Once it is made clear that Celie's narrative voice is a signifying one, then it becomes obvious that her silence is broken not through the gaining of self-confidence, or her development as a character, but rather through the use of verbal commentary as a narrative device reflecting traditional African-American signifying strategies culled from folk culture and oral tradition.

It is not possible to read The Color Purple as Walker intended it to be read without a knowledge of African-American history and literature; neither is it possible to write a study of The Color Purple without exploring the history and development of feminisms in American society.

A critique of narrative voice in The Color Purple obviously demands that one address not only the issue of a female aesthetic, but also of a black female aesthetic as well. The sense of difference that permeates all self-reflexive writings, whether critical or literary, by black women both strengthens the argument for a female aesthetic and belies gynocritical arguments in favor of female unity and a female culture common to all women regardless of race or class.

Although at first glance it might appear that rehearsing the history of the nineteenth century cult of True Womanhood through a comparison of the way in which Stowe's Topsy is constructed as a heroine by both Jane Tompkins and Nina Baym is irrelevant to an analysis of narrative voice in The Color Purple, I have included such an analysis for two reasons. First, Walker has written The Color Purple within the context of African-American women's difference from mainstream representation of American women which has its roots in Victorian ideology on the role of women in American society. Secondly, the differences between black and white women remain in evidence today, not only in black women's fiction, but also in the re-evaluation of the cult of True Womanhood by Anglo-American feminist scholars, influencing the way in which The Color Purple is read by these critics. The divergence between these readings - African-American and Anglo-American - has directly affected this study, making it

impossible to either ignore the debate around the issue of authenticity and literary representation, or to come to any satisfactory conclusion regarding the relevance of both deconstructionist theory and post-structuralist theories of the self to contemporary African-American women's literature. To merely add that race and class must be taken into account along with gender does not seem totally satisfactory and certainly does not, in my mind, shed light on the fundamental presupposition of this study: that Walker's womanist aesthetic, as reflected in the narrative voice of The Color Purple, accurately reflects black women's need for an authentic self-representation that is at the same time non-essentialist.

As this study progressed, it became obvious that an analysis of narrative voice and womanist aesthetics in The Color Purple is not even remotely possible without facing the reality of the critical situation within which the study has been conducted: that the white, middle-class reader (male or female) has very little background with which to approach this novel. It became clear that the history of criticism on The Color Purple is in fact a history of diverse readings, all of which are directly affected by the amount of critical background the reader has had in African-American literature and culture, as well as in women's studies.

It was W.E.B. DuBois who first pointed out that the sense of difference experienced by the African-American

results in a characteristic way of looking at the world that he termed "dual consciousness." Dual consciousness, Dubois explains, allows the black American to be at one and the same time a part of American society, and yet exterior to it. Carried one step further, dual consciousness manifests as strategies of survival, for example, the encoding of double meanings - one for the slave, one for the master - in the Spirituals and the blues. Awareness of the black subject's positioning as the Other in the discourse of white America is reflected in the "anti-canon" of African-American literature and serves, as Henry Louis Gates points out

...not to obliterate the difference of race; rather, the inscription of the black voice in Western literature had preserved those very cultural differences to be repeated, imitated, and revised in a separate Western literary tradition, a tradition of black difference.<sup>6</sup>

It is this sense of difference that propelled Walker to declare in 1979 "I became aware of my need of Zora Neale Hurston's work some time before I knew her work existed."<sup>7</sup> It also explains Gloria Joseph's observation during the Third International Feminist Bookfair held in Montreal during the summer of 1988: "Any theoretical discussion on feminism that does not specifically discuss the racial dimension is incomplete and inadequate." A brief illustration will serve to clarify Joseph's point and explain why twentieth century black women have had to insist that their presence be acknowledged by white feminists.



Anglo-American feminist historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's ground-breaking essay on female relationships in nineteenth century America, published in the first issue of Signs, is an important example of the way in which the gynocritical approach renders race invisible. Smith-Rosenberg states that her study is "scarcely a comprehensive sample of America's increasingly heterogeneous population."<sup>8</sup> Yet, because she goes to great pains to point out that her study is "exhaustive," based on "the diaries and letters of a broad range of the literate middle-class, from hard-pressed pioneer families and orphaned girls to daughters of the intellectual and social elite" (3), the "literate middle class" becomes the norm by omission for all nineteenth century American women, including the slave class women of the South. The title of Rosenberg's essay "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America" effectively reinforces the unintended exclusion of black women's experiences from the world of female love and ritual.

Since the days of Phillis Wheatley, black women have been faced with formidable odds against their survival as storytellers: laws against the acquisition of literacy, a hostile readership, and insufficient economic, cultural, and political power. Indeed, they have had to juggle with two conflicting realities: their own experience in a racist and sexist society as an objectified Other, and the pressures exerted on them to tell their stories slant. As

Mary Helen Washington points out, Reconstruction writers such as Francis E.W. Harper and Pauline Hopkins were pulled in two directions: the need to speak the truth of black female experience and the need to refute negative images of black women.<sup>9</sup> Until quite recently, then, black women's narratives reflected the tension between the pressure to conform to white modes of ladylike behavior and the black woman's transgression of these cultural codes.

Chapter one will explore how expectations about black women's writing have affected the critical response to The Color Purple. The chapter will focus primarily on the critical response of black male critics. Chapter two will discuss how Walker's womanist aesthetic has developed out of the history of African-American difference, in particular, how the womanist aesthetic relates to the black woman's complex relationship to the cult of True Womanhood. Chapter three will then explore the relationship between narrative voice, womanist aesthetics, and the history of difference. Even a cursory glance at the critical and scholarly literature written by black women about black women fictionalists (one need only look at any of Walker's essays) reveals that the representation of the black woman's authentic experience, in her own voice, is of primary concern for these writers and critics. This concern with representation, voice, and authenticity will be touched upon throughout this study. It should be noted

that the question of authenticity and literary representation for black women writers is clearly inseparable from the history of racism, sexism, and the dual readership. Thus, it is clear that the issue of representation should not be mistaken for a critically naive equation of reality and literary realism; rather, it suggests that the way in which dominant cultures read literature by suppressed cultures needs to be re-examined.

In many of the essays collected in In Search, Walker echoes Barbara Smith's suggestion that reading literature that reflects one's cultural realities has a transformative effect on the reader, especially when there has been a history of non-availability of such literature. Both Smith's and Walker's insistence on the importance of reading literature which reflects an African-American female reality is further explicated by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese who points out that

The death of the subject and of the author may accurately reflect the perceived crisis in western culture and the bottomless anxieties of its most privileged subjects - the white male authors who had presumed to define it. Those subjects and those authors may, as it were, be dying. But it remains to be demonstrated that their deaths constitute the collective or generic death of the subject and the author. There remain plenty of subjects and authors who, never having had much opportunity to write in their own names or the names of their kind, much less in the names of the culture as a whole, are eager to seize the abandoned podium. But the white male elite has not, in fact, abandoned the podium. It has merely insisted that the podium cannot be claimed in the name of any particular personal experience.<sup>10</sup>

Fox-Genovese's critique of post-structuralist theories of the subject and their application to non-dominant literatures deserves attention, I would argue, simply because such a critique raises the question of how non-dominant literary voices perceive their relationship to the cultural elite. The fact that Fox-Genovese chooses to focus on this aspect of post-structuralist theory - the death of the author and the subject - reflects the difficulties encountered by contemporary African-American women authors, as well as all writers belonging to non-dominant cultures, in making their voices heard.

Walker's womanist project is a revisionist one; it is a self-conscious attempt to correct what Walker, along with Fox-Genovese and many other contemporary African-American women, perceives as an imbalanced state of affairs. In her essay on Hurston cited earlier in the text, Walker tells of the effect that reading Hurston's Mules and Men had on her relatives: "For what Zora's book did was this: it gave them back all the stories they had forgotten or of which they had been ashamed" (84). Implicit in this desire to both read and write about one's culture is the knowledge that American society is composed of diverse cultural groups producing readers with different expectations and sets of values. As Walker phrases it in yet another essay "One wants to write poetry that is understood by one's people, not by the Queen of England."<sup>11</sup>

The sense of difference that pervades Walker's

theoretical work is found as well in The Color Purple. It has led Walker to successfully portray her utopian vision of a changed society through the adaptation of African-American and female narrative strategies to the novel in order to foreground female presence, female desire, and female language. The Color Purple, then, is a contemporary example of the use of black female discourse as a tool of self-liberation and self-authentication.

## Chapter I

THE COLOR PURPLE AND THE CRITICS

Honey, I don't like to talk about dem times 'cause my mother did suffer misery. You know dar was an overseer who use to tie mother up in de barn wid a rope aroun' her arms up over her head while she stood on a block... I asked mother, "what she done fer 'em to beat and do her so?" She said, "Nothin' 'tother t'dan 'fuse to be wife to dis man." 1

[S]itting with crossed legs and a stern look is a 16-year-old girl. She's wearing a bulky black leather jacket, lime stone-washed jeans, enormous shrimp earrings, and black hightop reeboks. Her hair is piled high on top and cut low, fade style on the sides. She is doing two noteworthy things: furiously chewing gum and reading The Color Purple.<sup>2</sup>

The Color Purple is experiencing the fate of many highly popular fictional works by women writers: after an initial flurry of critical outrage, a grudging acceptance to the will of the majority is now evident in critical attitudes towards Walker's novel. This acceptance implies, however, that the critic is helpless against the double onslaught of popular culture (specifically, adolescent female culture) and a shift in the reading public's taste towards women's novels. As Nelson George remarks, "Spurred by the growth of black female college enrollment, a sales factor that will continue into the 90's, Walker and company have joined if not annexed [the African-American]

canon" (34).

Walker's media-concocted notoriety is deplored by many critics and used as proof that she is catering to a white audience. Trudier Harris is outraged by the fact that The Color Purple has become "...the classic novel by a black woman." This is entirely due, Harris states, to the power of the media: "The Color Purple silences by its dominance, a dominance perpetuated by the popular media." The effects of such popularity are devastating: "While it is not certain how long Alice Walker will be in the limelight for The Color Purple, it is certain that the damaging effects reaped by the excessive media attention given to the novel will plague us as scholars and teachers for years to come."<sup>3</sup> Mel Watkins expands on the same theme as Harris, asserting that the "shift in public interest" that in his view has brought about an unfair "ascendancy of black female writers and an eclipse of black male writers," can be explained not by the prodigious storytelling skills of contemporary black women, but by "...the enthrallment of whites with tales of depravity and violence in the black community."<sup>4</sup>

The most serious charge leveled against Walker is that her depiction of black men reinforces racist stereotypes. As we will see in an analysis of one critic, little distinction is made in this respect between the film and the novel. Walker is only the most recent black female fictionalist to run afoul of the black male critical establishment. In an interview with Roseann P. Bell,

Addison Gayle remarks that the challenge for the Black aesthetic movement of the Sixties was to go "...outside of the established academicians to speak directly to students and Black people and to say, 'There are other images - Faulkner is not the portrayer of images of Black people in this country'."<sup>5</sup> This concern over who should be allowed to put forth the correct image of blacks also leads Gayle to condemn Gayl Jones and Toni Morrison, in whose books

...the women come off very badly because the novels are directed viciously against Black men, and somehow, the writers haven't realized that you can't very well do a hatchet job on Black men without also doing a hatchet job on Black women. Therefore, if you read Sula, and if you read Corregidora, the images of both the men and women are equally nauseating. (213)

Critical response to the black woman writer's allegedly "nauseating" depiction of black male/female relationships intensified after the Broadway production of Ntozake Shange's play For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf (1976). In his article "The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists," Robert Staples gives a scathing indictment of both Shange's play and Michelle Wallace's controversial study, Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman (1978). In Staples' view, the popularity of Shange's play denotes nothing less than a "collective appetite for black male blood."<sup>6</sup> Staples' main line of argument against Shange and Wallace is that they have failed to place sexism in its



proper historical perspective. His critique of Wallace's study, however, is a muddled apology for sexism: black men "...have the right to choose a woman that meets their perceived needs, even if their exercise of that right limits the life options of women" (29). Unable to come up with a truly historical analysis of the interconnectedness of racism and sexism himself, Staples first asserts that "[d]esertion...is the lower-class male's style of exercising his masculine perquisite" (28), and then goes on to charge that "[t]he Shanges-Wallaces put down working-class black culture without really understanding it" (32). It should be noted in passing that when The Black Scholar called for reader response to Staples' article, Alice Walker sent in a memo to the editors which was returned to her with the comment that "...the memo [was] both too 'personal' and too 'hysterical' to publish."<sup>7</sup>

It is clear from all of the above critiques that the differences in point of view between black women writers and black male critics revolve around three key related issues: whether by depicting black society as they see it these women are catering to white misconceptions of black society, whether they are thereby promoting age-old racist stereotypes, and whether they have a firm grasp on the historical roots of the black subject's oppression (which is rarely defined to include sexism). All of the above issues themselves are offshoots of the broader issue of who controls images, and who defines the nature of African-

American literature. One of the major concerns of black critical theory is the need to define the role of African-American letters vis-à-vis American mainstream literature. Obviously, then, the at times heated debate around representation cannot ignore racism and stereotyping as factors that black writers of both sexes must take into consideration.

The complex issue of representation and realism, however, brings to the fore an issue that directly affects contemporary black women writers: the demand for realism (a realism that appears to glorify male violence, rape, and incest) is often a disguised form of homophobia or what Audre Lorde calls "lesbian-baiting." Literary realism has in fact played host to a misogynistic ideology and world view disguised as an "objective" version of events. It should not go unnoticed, for example, that all of the previously mentioned fictional works by African-American women focus, in one way or another, on female sexuality and same-sex female relationships; it is also worth noting that none of the critiques of these same works afford much importance to female sexuality as a central theme beyond a few disparaging remarks on "silly" female friendships. Generally, the thematic emphasis on female sexuality is construed as just another form of "male-bashing."

Before examining the relationship between narrative voice and womanist aesthetics in The Color Purple, it is necessary to review the development of black literature

within the context of nineteenth century white American attitudes towards this literature. None of this can be done adequately without at least a brief look at the history of black literature, in particular, the nineteenth century slave narrative's effect on twentieth century black women writer's sense of history as having developed out of the experience of slavery and the oppression of the black woman.

Walker's roots in the South - she is the daughter of a sharecropper - and her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement during which time she taught elderly black women to write their autobiographies, have contributed to the formation of Walker's sense of black women's history. Indeed, The Color Purple was conceived by Walker as a historical novel. Addison Gayle's remark "...if Alice Walker is writing a good historical novel, then we're in trouble" (215), only proves that even prior to The Color Purple Walker's conception of "historical" and Gayle's were diametrically opposed. Either Walker is a hopelessly incompetent writer and daydreamer who cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality, fairy tale and serious fiction, or, as I propose to show, her sense of history is derived from an entirely different appreciation of the interconnectedness of language and reality, and the novel and history.

Although Gerald Early rails against The Color Purple's "pop-culture status," and Trudier Harris describes Walker

as "...having been waiting in the wings of the feminist movement and the power it generated long enough for her curtain call to come" (155), it would be shortsighted to take Walker for an opportunist. As Harris herself has noted in her article "Folklore in the Fiction of Alice Walker: A Perpetuation of Historical and Literary Traditions" (1977), Walker's fiction has from the start focused on the issues of racism and male/female relationships in the black community, through the narrative use of folk materials and an awareness of black, female history. The difference between Walker's way of relating history to narrative form and Addison Gayle's is, indeed, directly related to the particular experiences of the black woman writer within the larger context of the African-American literary experience. Nevertheless, both male and female African-American writers have had to contend with the reality of a dual audience holding conflicting views on the place of blacks in American society. The effect this has had on narrative form, especially on the use or non-use of folk materials, is directly related to the way these folk forms have been mainly viewed as artistic vehicles for a predominantly masculine literary form. This, as we will see, has greatly contributed to the misreading of black women's narratives by black male critics.

Both Arlene Elder and Jean Fagan Yellin have noted that the central dilemma for the black writer in the nineteenth century was the depiction of the self. In The

Intricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature, 1776-1863 (1972), Yellin points out that in nineteenth century slave narratives the dominant theme was "...a theme classic in our national letters...the struggle for self-realization."<sup>8</sup> This struggle for self-realization, however, differed in kind and manner from that of the white population, and was differently reflected in narratives by nineteenth century blacks.

Depicting the self in a racist, patriarchal society meant that the black writer, male or female, would have to take into account a readership whose only knowledge of blacks was heavily reliant on stereotypes. As Arlene Elder observes in 'The Hindered Hand': Cultural Implications of Early African-American Fiction (1978), there already existed a racist literature based on stereotypes (nineteenth century popular fiction) that reflected the ideology of white intellectual, moral, and aesthetic superiority.<sup>9</sup> Stereotypical images of blacks as simple, happy in their enslaved condition, and somehow subhuman, permeated American literature from Thomas Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia (1781), to what Elder describes as the "melodramatic excesses" of both abolitionist novels such as Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) and the anti-abolitionist response with novels all too transparently titled Uncle Robin in His Cabin in Virginia and Tom Without His in Boston (1853). The most pervasive purveyor of stereotypes, however, was the genre known as plantation

fiction. Beginning with George Tucker's The Valley of the Shenandoah (1824), this fiction reached its apogee during the early twentieth century with the notorious The Clansman (1905) by Thomas Dixon.

The proliferation of stereotypes gave early black writers little choice but to create counterstereotypes of their own. As Elder points out, this influence extended beyond content, to form. Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, William Wells Brown, Martin Delaney, Frances E.W. Harper, Ida B. Wells, Harriet E. Wilson and others all wrote to a greater or lesser extent under the influence of popular fictional forms. The didactic, propagandistic bent of their narratives precluded any purely aesthetic intentions the writer might have had, contributing greatly to the adaptation of sentimental forms to the slave narratives.

Elder stresses that the overriding factor in determining the nature of early black fiction's narrative structure was the dual audience and its expectations. Elder's first chapter is appropriately titled "Popular Myths and the Audience," indicating that the central paradox of early African-American narrative was to show "...the "true" nature of Blacks and to reveal the actual conditions of their lives." Yet, Elder notes, "[t]his "true self" was precisely what the early African-American writers found almost impossible to define and reveal" (xiii). As Elder observes:

It would have been difficult indeed, if not

impossible, for middle class Black writers of the nineteenth century to have overcome their own collective insecurities, those of their black-white audiences, their collective literary training and their publishers' pragmatism to produce works that would not betray the African-American experience. Only one force was available to counter the tendency toward fantasy: the Black tradition of realistic and satiric oratory, autobiography, and oral narrative. (35)

It is to these forms that Walker will turn in an attempt to rewrite African-American female history through the use of black female discourse as a narrative device.

By the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the use of traditional folk materials as narrative devices was viewed by black writers as a form of protest against the constraints of a dual audience; black writers who used these forms were, in essence, defying the artistic and ideological dictates of white readers and publishers. The case of Charles Chesnutt, however, well illustrates the difficulties of using folklore while addressing a dual audience. Chesnutt was able to publish The Conjure Woman (1899) only under the condition that his racial identity be kept a secret; his publishers contended that no white reader would accept his dramatization of Uncle Julius (a non-stereotypical Uncle Remus who tells stories in order to trick his white employer into doing his bidding) if he were known to be the creation of a black man. As Henry Louis Gates was to observe in 1984, "Jeremiah could speak only to the Jews; we, however, must address two audiences, the Jews and the Babylonians, whose interests are

distinct yet overlapping in the manner of interlocking sets."<sup>10</sup>

For black women the reality of the dual audience was rendered even more complex by the pervasive ideology of True Womanhood. Black women writing since the nineteenth century had been constrained to write within the parameters of both black and white mores reflecting the values of the cult of True Womanhood. Forced to adopt both ladylike heroines and the genre of sentimental romance, these writers were caught in the dilemma of having to distort the actual day-to-day conditions under which the black woman lived. As Barbara Christian points out, Frances E.W. Harper's use of the romance genre and the mulatta heroine in Iola Leroy (1892) was possible only if "...she discard[ed] her knowledge of black women's lives in 1892."<sup>11</sup> By the time of the Harlem Renaissance, the debate over the relationship between art and ideology, form and content was focused on the rejection of "racial uplift" literature and assimilation in favor of a black aesthetic, Africa, and the use of folk materials. This soon came to mean, however, that black women writing in this period - Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen, among others - were now at a critical disadvantage not shared by black male writers such as Langston Hughes who incorporated folk materials in their work. Thus, early twentieth century black women's fiction, obliged by the prevailing mores on women's place in society and in literature to focus on "feminine" issues, was judged



by male critics - both black and white - as too "feminine"; that is, concerned with inferior themes such as uplift and the theme of the tragic mulatta.

Although Harper's Iola Leroi makes use of the folk voice in its narrative, it was Hurston, writing at the same time as Langston Hughes, who first discarded the sentimental genre in favor of a female folk voice. The use of folk forms, however, was clearly a transgression of the boundaries set for the black female fictionalist.

It seems ironic that Richard Wright criticized Hurston for her "misuse" of folk narrative when he himself advocated a return to the use of folk forms as a cure for what ailed black writing in the twenties and thirties. Wright's attitude towards Hurston illustrates beyond question that the use of folk materials in black literature was conceived as a purely masculine prerogative. Indeed, it is obvious that Wright's objections to Hurston's use of the folk voice in Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) centers around her depiction of female sexuality and female desire. Clearly, Wright was objecting not to Hurston's use of the "minstrel technique," but rather to her appropriation and adaptation of folk materials to a female point of view. Wright's 1937 manifesto, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," although in many ways outdated, is still useful in an attempt to understand not only Wright's critique of Hurston, but also the black male conception of the relationship between folk forms and historical realism in African-American literature. Wright's

critique of Hurston contains all the elements still used in critiques of what is perceived as Walker's ahistorical use of female folk aesthetic in The Color Purple.

Wright begins by addressing the issue of the dual audience. Black writers, Wright states, have acted as "...artistic ambassadors [who] were received as though they were French poodles who do clever tricks."<sup>12</sup> The voice of the black writer, Wright continues, "...became the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice... Rarely was the best of this writing addressed to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, his aspirations" (395). Wright then calls for a new Negro writing addressed to "the masses," a writing that would depict the struggles of the black man. Speaking of the black writer's failure to use folk traditions in order to speak not to the white man but to the black masses, Wright observes

One would have thought that Negro writing of the last century in striving at expression would have continued and deepened this folk tradition, would have tried to create a more intimate and yet a more profoundly social system of artistic communication between them and their people. But the illusion that they could escape through individual achievement the harsh lot of their race swung Negro writers away from any such path (396).

Clearly, Wright's Marxist adherence to the use of folk culture as a measuring stick with which to judge the historical accuracy of black writing, is in evidence here. His artistic and political agenda advocating that the black writer has a "serious responsibility" to "create values by which his race is to struggle, live, and die"

(399) harks back to the writers of the nineteenth century slave narratives. However, Wright makes a clear distinction between these earlier writers and the modern-day black writer who need no longer be concerned primarily with the white reader. Instead, he (meaning the black male writer) will now take care to treat his literary subject with "complex simplicity," which for Wright meant keeping one foot in the Western literary tradition of Proust and Joyce, and the other in the realm of the "simple folk."

According to Wright, complex simplicity is what Hurston lacks in Their Eyes. There can be little doubt that had The Color Purple been published in the nineteen thirties, Wright would have advanced the same argument against Walker's "oversimplification" of historical issues. In his rather hostile critique, Wright appears to take issue with Hurston mainly because, as he states, she caters to a white audience through her alleged use of the "minstrel technique." However, it is important to note that Wright has already decided that Their Eyes contains "no theme, no message, no thought."<sup>13</sup> This lack of message and thought, Wright insists, is due to the fact that Their Eyes is the story of an over-sexed sixteen year old who leaves a series of husbands only to end up a "frustrated" widow of forty who eventually latches onto a young male.

It is obvious here that female sexuality and female desire are the real culprits; the "facile sensuality" of the "minstrel technique" that depicts blacks as laughing

and carefree (according to Wright) is really only a convenient critical manoeuver masking the androcentric critic's inability to recognize female desire as a valid and serious literary theme. Hurston's failure to incorporate complex simplicity in her narrative is quite obviously, more than anything else, a failure to adopt a masculine point of view; her "mistake" was to have adapted the folk forms of signifying and storytelling to a female agenda.<sup>14</sup>

In "Blueprint," Wright states that "theme" for black writers means that these writers

...must have in their consciousness the foreshortened picture of the whole, nourishing culture from which they were torn in Africa, and of the long complex (and for the most part, unconscious) struggle to regain in some form and under alien conditions of life a whole culture again (401).

In Wright's view, Hurston has failed to draw from this nourishing, African heritage and has thereby betrayed her peoples' most precious literary and cultural inheritance: folk forms. As Wright declares, "[Hurston's] dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that's as far as it goes" ("Between Laughter and Tears" 25). Yet, as a brief look at Wright's analysis of Teacake's demise will show, this is far from being the case. In fact, Wright's reading of Teacake's demise clearly illustrates his failure to place Hurston's narrative within the context of a female African-American folk culture rather than a

sentimentalized "feminine" love story. As Wright explains, "For more than two years [Janie and Teacake] lived happily; but Teacake was bitten by a mad dog and was infected with rabies. One night in a canine rage Teacake tried to murder Janie, thereby forcing her to shoot the only man she had ever loved" (25). What Wright has done here is to substitute a melodramatic love plot for a narrative that equates female values with folk values. A careful reading of the text will reveal that Teacake is bitten, not, as Wright suggests, because of his entrapment within a sentimental love plot, but because he has failed to heed the warnings of his African cultural heritage symbolized by nature, the Bahamians, the Indians, and the animals who, in contrast to the white bosses, know when to leave the swamp. In misreading the centrality of the conflict between the African cultural past and the American present in Their Eyes, Wright overlooks one of the dominant themes in the novel: the dangers inherent in forgetting one's cultural heritage of difference. Far from using folk language as a means of catering to whites, then, Hurston used the folk tradition to emphasize the oppression of the black population at the hands of the white bosses. That this is accomplished through focusing the narrative on black female oppression is made clear early on in the novel with the recounting of Janie's grandmother's history - a female history of rape and enslavement.

In "I Thought I Knew These People: Richard Wright and

the Afro-American Literary Tradition," Robert Stepto points to Wright's notion of the hero as the most problematical aspect of trying to place him in the African-American literary tradition. Stepto writes

If we assume, as I do, that the primary voice in the tradition...is a personal, heroic voice delineating the dimensions of heroism by either aspiring to a heroic posture, as do the voice of Douglass and DuBois, or expressing an awareness of what they ought to be, as we see Johnson's Ex-Colored Man and Ellison's Invisible Man doing, then the mystery of what is unsettling about Wright's voice (and protagonists) begin to unfold. Bigger Thomas is hardly the only maimed, stunted, or confused figure in Afro-American literature; this is not what makes him different. What does is his unawareness of what he ought to be, especially as it is defined not by the vague dictates of the American Dream but by the rather specific mandates of a racial heritage.<sup>15</sup>

The question of whether Bigger Thomas knew or did not know what he ought to do is, for contemporary black women writers, emblematic of Wright's apparent blindness to black women's oppression as women, not only in white society, but also within the black community. Stepto concedes that it is to black women to whom we must turn "...to find types of Mrs. Thomas and both Bessies leading richer lives and having more going for them than a false church, a whiskey bottle, and, as Wright says of the Bessie in Black Boy, a peasant mentality" (209). The concerns of contemporary black women writers with the representation of black women in African-American literature has, as Stepto notes, changed the way that these writers regard the representation of black women in that

literature:

All in all, the black women novelists of our age seem to be agreeing with Alice Walker that 'Black women are the most fascinating creatures in the world!'. . . Thus, out of necessity, they are turning to Toomer, Hurston, Brooks, and Petry, and not to the majority of black male writers for their models and encouragement. (209)

It is not by chance that all of the writers cited above are mentioned by Walker as having had a great deal of influence on her work. Like Walker, they incorporate in their work both folk materials and "ahistorical" settings (except for Ann Petry's The Street (1946)). They have all produced works whose female protagonists are now viewed by writers such as Walker as authentic representations of the black woman's voice. This includes Toomer's Cane (1923), a novel that does not reflect, quite obviously, the majority of black male writers' attitudes towards their female characters.

It cannot be over-emphasized how central to both a critical analysis of narrative voice in The Color Purple and a study of critical response to Walker's novel, is the issue of self-representation and authenticity. A close examination of the need for authentic self-representation in African-American female fiction, however, reveals the paradoxical fact that self-representation continues to be a double-edged sword that repeats the on-going debate within African-American literary circles about the relationship between this literature and its audience of readers. Even more disturbing, for the purposes of this

study, is the fact that although the need for authentic representation voiced by Barbara Smith in her 1977 manifesto Toward a Black Feminist Criticism in which she states "...how much easier both my waking and my sleeping hours would be if there were one book in existence that would tell me something about my life,"<sup>16</sup> is a valid one, it also allows critics to express their thinly-veiled misogyny and homophobia by charging that the men in women's novels are "unrealistic." As we will see, the demand for realistic, non-stereotypical portraits of black women permits Gerald Early and Keith Byerman to cloak their discomfort behind charges of sentimentality and historical transcendence, in much the same way as Wright. Ironically, the need for authentic self-representation also leads a prominent black woman scholar, Trudier Harris, to condemn The Color Purple as non-representative of black women's experience.

An insistence on realistic images that reflect a particular version of reality quite different from Walker's initial intention is evident in some critiques of The Color Purple by black women scholars. Trudier Harris, for example, takes issue with the feminized world of The Color Purple, focusing her entire analysis around the fact that as a black woman, she rejects Celie as an authentic character simply because her life is not representative of the majority of black women's lives. This objection, of course, goes back to the debate over who controls images of



blacks, and how the white population reads literature by black men and women. Harris' arguments against The Color Purple resemble those of black male critics Watkins, Early, and Byerman, except that for Harris, however, the question of ahistoricity, oversimplification, unreality, and stereotypes refers specifically to Walker's depiction of black women, more than to her depiction of black men.

Throughout her essay, Harris articulates her anger as a black woman reader who, unlike white women, is unable to identify with Celie. Harris states that she went into "... a fit of cursing for several days after reading the novel" (155), while the white women she knew "loved" it. Indeed, it is Harris' professed inability to identify with Celie that leads her to detect a polarization between black and white women readers. It is of crucial importance to Harris for the reader to be able to identify or "imagine" Celie as a real-life character:

Plowing a man's fields for twenty years and letting him use her body as a sperm depository leaves Celie so buried away from herself that it is hard to imagine anything stirring her to life - just as it is equally hard to imagine her being so deadened. (158)

Seeing Celie as "deadened" means that she is, for Harris, inauthentic and unreal, a character who does not reflect Harris' experience:

I couldn't imagine a Celie existing in any black community I knew or any that I could conceive of. What sane black woman, I asked, would sit around and take that crock of shit from all those folks? How long would it take her before she reached the

stage of stabbing somebody to death, blowing somebody's head off, or at least going upside somebody's head? But the woman just sat there, like a bale of cotton with a vagina, taking stuff from kids even and waiting for someone to come along and rescue her. I had problems with that. And so did other black women. By contrast, most of the white women with whom I talked loved the novel. (155)

Not only does Harris misread the plot as a realistic depiction of a black woman's life that fails in its attempt to be authentic, but she also defeats her argument by unwittingly proposing to replace one stereotypical image of the black woman (the patient mule of the world) with another: the enraged Sapphire.

According to Harris, every device in The Color Purple rings false: the epistolary form, the letters from Africa, the depiction of Africans, the lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug, and, most importantly, the characterization of Celie which, among other things, is "...unrealistic for the time in which the novel was set" (157). Indeed, literary realism is the order of the day. However, it is quite clear that Harris' demand for literary realism ignores the fact that each of the themes and devices mentioned by Harris as a betrayal of black women's culture forms a crucial part of Walker's womanist plot, whose purpose is not to mimic a reality that could never accurately reflect the totality of anyone's experience, but to rewrite a specific, patriarchal definition of woman by replacing patriarchal representations of black women with a womanist vision of the transformative nature of female

desire.

Celie's voice - based on the signifying speech of black female discourse - acts as both the disrupter of patriarchal reality and the carrier of female desire. Yet, it is primarily with Celie's voice that Harris takes issue, her demand for literary realism blinding her to the potentially disruptive force of this voice. Although Harris praises Walker's skill in transcribing the speech of Southern, rural blacks, she immediately retracts this by stating that the fundamental flaw in the novel is "...the war between form and content" (156), or, between voice, character, and event:

The form of the book, as it relates to folk speech, the pattern and nuances of Celie's voice, is absolutely wonderful. The clash between Celie's conception and her writing ability, however, is another issue. I can imagine a black woman of Celie's background and education talking with God...but writing letters to God is altogether another matter. (156)

Again, Harris' insistence on literary realism and cultural authenticity prevents her from treating letter writing within the context of a narrative device intended to signify on absence and desire, rather than to convince the reader that a real person is actually writing letters. We must give Walker the benefit of the doubt and assume that she has not underestimated the capabilities of her readers, as many of them seem to underestimate hers. If one wants a realistic character who is true to life, then of course one will not be happy with Celie, or with the novel as a

whole.

Harris' obvious displeasure over the way Celie's voice dominates the novel - so much so as to divorce form from content - is clearly linked to a barely verbalized repulsion with the narrativization of female desire: "The lesbian relationship in the book represents the height of silly romanticism" (157), Harris writes. It is this unwillingness to acknowledge female same-sex relationships as serious thematic material, however, that constitutes the real reason why the womanist plot is viewed as a "fairy tale" plot that divorces form from content. As we will soon see, Celie as a Cinderella/Snow White/Ugly Duckling figure is a staple of both Byerman's and Early's critique of The Color Purple. Harris writes:

With its mixture of message, form, and character, The Color Purple reads like a political shopping list of all the IOU's Walker felt that it was time to repay. She pays homage to the feminists by portraying a woman who struggles through adversity to assert herself against almost impossible odds. She pays homage to the lesbians by portraying a relationship between two women that reads like a schoolgirl fairy tale in its ultimate adherence to the convention of the happy resolution. (160)

Rather than reducing her critique of The Color Purple to nothing short of an accusation of opportunism, Harris would do better to ask why it is that The Color Purple addresses so many of these timely issues; it would also be useful to examine why it is that Walker's novel is able to articulate and represent, for many of its readers, the contradictions of contemporary American society.

In "The Color Purple as Everybody's Protest Art" and Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction (1985), Gerald Early and Keith Byerman develop their analyses around the same arguments as Harris. The Color Purple, in their view, is an ahistorical, utopian fairy tale that promotes negative images of black men. Indeed, both critics charge that Walker's novel is nothing more than a fairy tale romance masquerading as a traditional folk narrative. Yet, as previously noted, it is precisely this divergence in critical attitudes towards the novel, represented by the gap between what is perceived as womanist and fairy tale, that is worth exploring.

Their critiques go much further than Harris' in labeling The Color Purple as a suspect female narrative, or, as Byerman phrases it "...a womanist fairy tale." Yet these critics' reluctance to read the novel from any other perspective than that of the hero/heroine's quest for self-knowledge only reveals their unwillingness to imagine a plot in which the object of female desire is another woman. Thus, in both critiques Walker's dramatization of a female same-sex relationship becomes, ironically, the center around which an analysis of the relationship between plot, characterization, and literary realism is centered.

In Byerman's view, the depiction of female sexuality leads to an opposition between male and female folk wisdom. This opposition, he argues, is the cause of Walker's "historical transcendence" reflected in the novel's

"...neutraliz[ation of] the historical conditions of the very folk life she values." In Early's critique, female sexuality and female friendship lead to a "revisionist salvation history" ineptly sprinkled with clichés of Victorian sentimental fiction that reflect the novel's lack of "real theological or intellectual rigor or coherence." 17

Let us first examine Early's critique of what he describes as Walker's "blatant 'feel-good' novel, just the sort of book that is promoted among the non-literary" (271). It should be noted that Early's critique, like that of Nelson George cited at the beginning of this chapter, is directly aimed at the emergence of a black, female readership of black women's fiction.

The Color Purple, Early states, is not really a "radical feminist novel" for it is replete with Victorian clichés, which he then proceeds to enumerate. It would be worthwhile to cite the list in full:

...the ultimate aim of the restoration of a gynocentric non-patriarchal family; the reunion of lost sisters; the reunion of mother and children; the glorification of cottage industry in the establishment of the pants business; bequests of money and land to the heroine at novel's end; Celie's discovery that her father/rapist is really a cruel stepfather; the change of heart or moral conversion of Mr. Albert who becomes a feminized man by the end; the friendship between Shug Avery and Celie, which, despite its overlay of lesbianism (a tribute to James Baldwin's untenable thesis that non-standard sex is the indication of a free, holy, thoroughly unsquare heterosexual heart), is nothing more than the typical relationship

between a shy ugly duckling and her more aggressive, beautiful counterpart, a relationship not unlike that between Topsy and Little Eva. (271)

Early's first mistake is to have failed to place Walker within the tradition of black women's literature. It is obvious that by singling out these Victorian clichés in order to explain both The Color Purple's popularity and its narrative purpose, Early has entirely missed the point. Reducing Walker's novel to a list of clichés taken out of context only serves to emphasize the fact that Early has misconstrued the narrative function and thematic significance of Walker's adaptation of these nineteenth century clichés of women's literature. Early then adds

For Walker, these clichés are not simply those of the Victorian novel but of the woman's Victorian novel. This indicates recognition of a tradition paying homage to a tradition; but the use of these clichés in The Color Purple is a great deal more sterile and undemanding than their use in, say, Uncle Tom's Cabin. (271)

What Early has mistakenly identified as "paying homage to a tradition" is, in actual fact, Walker's adaptation and transformation of clichés derived from American sentimental fiction in the nineteenth century. Clearly, she does so in order to signify on black women's place within that literature. Indeed, as we will see, this adaptation of clichés forms part of her narrative strategy. Like her nineteenth century predecessors Harriet E. Wilson and Harriet Jacobs, Walker rewrites these clichés in terms of black women's experience; like Hurston, she does so

through the use of African-American folk techniques.

Placing The Color Purple within the genre of sentimental women's fiction serves two strategic purposes: first, it situates Early's argument within the black male tradition of protest fiction à la Richard Wright, more specifically, James Baldwin's ground-breaking essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" in Notes of a Native Son (1955); second, it appears to be a fairly transparent attempt to situate himself within the context of contemporary women's studies, in particular, nineteenth century American women's studies of Stowe and other long-neglected women writers. Early's opening paragraph to the second half of his essay refers to Elizabeth Shultz, who first gave him the idea of comparing Walker's novel to Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, by pointing out that "...both novels have suffered from the popularity they have had to endure" (270). Early, a wolf in sheep's clothing, attacks The Color Purple from within the feminist camp at the same time as he retains his critical manhood by stealing the cloak of protest from Baldwin. That both theoretical positions cancel each other out is apparently irrelevant. By adhering to these two lines of argument simultaneously, Early only defeats his argument and reveals the homophobia, lesbian-baiting, and misogyny at the heart of his unwillingness to accept the revisionist womanist plot.

Indeed, one is astonished to read Early's ingenious comparison of The Color Purple to Uncle Tom's Cabin; more



specifically, Walker's "...fairly dim-witted pantheistic acknowledgement of the wonders of human potential" (272) to Stowe's Calvinist theology of good and evil. One is equally astonished to note that the comparison of the two novels is carried out without any awareness of the fundamental difference between both authors' conception of the roles women will play as agents of transformation within American society. Nothing could be further removed from Walker's womanist aesthetics than Stowe's conservative ideology of the new matriarchy.

In praising what Baldwin has termed Stowe's "theological terror" at the expense of Walker's Afrocentric "anti-theology," Early has fallen into the untenable position of upholding the social protest and sense of history of a novel Baldwin termed a failure for "...leav[ing] unanswered and unnoticed the only important question: what it was, after all, that moved [Stowe's] people to such deeds," and further joining forces with gynocritical theorists such as Jane Tompkins who lauds the novel's dubious matriarchal ideology.<sup>18</sup>

What Early seems to forget is that despite Stowe's sense of history, which led her (in contrast to Walker) to know "...that events like the Revolution of 1848, the abolitionist movement, the Fugitive Slave Act, and African emigration are the result of large social and political trends that affect all citizens" (275), her new Christian matriarchy denied blacks full participation on an equal

footing with whites in the redeemed matriarchy established after the eradication of slavery. In contrast to Walker's womanist plot that brings blacks to the center of a feminized utopian space, Stowe's matriarchal narrative relegates blacks to the margins of society, either as dead martyrs or immigrants awaiting passage back to Africa.

Only a willful misreading of Walker's plot (as well as Stowe's) and a blind adherence to the intellectual rigours of Western theology could lead Early to make the following statement:

Stowe pleads just as strenuously and far more effectively [than Walker] for the humanity and protection of women and children and for the assertion of the values of the marketplace that have dehumanized and debased all human relationships. (274)

Stowe's sense of history, in other words, is far more successful than what Early disparagingly terms Walker's "rhetoric of virtue," because in Stowe's more complex vision the battle between good and evil goes on forever. However, as will be made obvious in the following chapters, Walker's world view does not assume that evil is overcome in some magical way; it is the critic's willingness to relegate female desire and sexuality to the status of the fairy tale that compels him to assume that this is so. It is really rather ironic to find a black critic praising Uncle Tom's Cabin, when one remembers that it was this novel that created one of the most enduring stereotypes of blacks in American literature: the "Uncle Tom." One

must ask if it is even possible to compare two novels so radically different in style and purpose as are The Color Purple and Uncle Tom's Cabin, even though, as Early points out, they are both written by women and both espouse a female utopian vision. However, it is more than obvious that this fact alone - female authorship - is the main issue, for, as in Wright's 1937 review of Their Eyes, the critic's main objection is to female sexuality and desire as a central thematic concern and major shaper of narrative movement. Early, by focusing on the alleged use of Victorian clichés is doing exactly what Wright did: to read a female-authored text as primarily a sentimental love plot. In this way Early is able to minimize the centrality of the womanist vision of a reordered, feminized world.

Early's choice of vocabulary when discussing Celie's relationship with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is indicative of a particular set of assumptions about male/female relationships that do not reflect Walker's world view. These assumptions are derived from the misogynist and homophobic bent in discussions of fiction depicting female same-sex relationships. The rhetoric of conflict pervades Early's essay : "Celie lives as the victor, ultimately being the source of change for the evil Mr. Albert" (274). This discourse of winners and losers, of good and evil indeed reflects that of the fairy tale as well as Uncle Tom's Cabin; it does not reflect that of The Color Purple.

This same misogynistic discourse is evident in Early's

enumeration of the Victorian clichés. What starts out as a list of Victorian/fairy tale motifs suddenly veers off onto the topic of female same-sex relationships, ending on an unmistakably homophobic note: "...the friendship between Shug Avery and Celie...despite the overlay of lesbianism... is nothing more than the typical relationship between a shy ugly duckling and her more aggressive, beautiful counterpart" (271). Early's visible anger at being denied entry into the female text is just as apparent here as it was in the first half of his essay in which he critiques the "Cinderella" plot of the film. Early situates himself as a reader and viewer in opposition to this female world by, first, railing against the allegedly negative depiction of black men, and then identifying himself as a male reader who seeks refuge in a reassuring and familiar definition of manhood as unfeminized, by claiming that in Hurston's Their Eyes (as opposed to The Color Purple), "...the male reader slowly but surely grows to know that [Joe] Starks is really himself" (267).

Shug Avery and Celie, we are told, have a relationship "...not unlike that between Topsy and Little Eva" (271). Such a statement only serves to reveal the extent to which Early both misreads Walker's womanist plot and the lengths to which he is willing to go to trivialize and ridicule female friendship. As we will see in chapters two and three, both the Shug/Celie and the Sofia/Eleanor Jane relationships revise and rewrite the dynamics at work

between Topsy and Little Eva, between the slave and the mistress, the devil and the saint.

So all-pervasive is Early's hostility towards a feminized narrative in which men presumably are denied access to the female, and so deep-seated is his homophobia, that we read with astonishment that the "overlay of lesbianism" is Walker's "...tribute to James Baldwin's untenable thesis that nonstandard sex is the indication of a free, holy, thoroughly unsquare heterosexual heart" (271). Besides the ironic fact that the reference to Baldwin serves to convey an authority invoked through the Bloomian ritual of struggle with the father at the same time as it re-establishes the context of homosexuality that Early tries to banish from his essay, Early's invoking of Baldwin here exhibits an inexcusable failure to place Walker within a tradition of African-American women writers such as Audre Lorde, among others.

The correspondences between the critiques of Harris, Early, and Byerman, to whom we now turn, are numerous and not without significance. All three make disparaging remarks about the novel's popularity; all three assume that Celie develops as a character from a downtrodden victim to a self-confident "victor" over her enemies; all three point to the "fairy tale" nature of the plot, always in connection with the lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug; all three accuse Walker of stereotyping black men and inviting racist readings of the text, and all

three draw a connection between female sexuality, ahistoricity, and the happy ending. However, it is to Byerman's critique to which we must look for an analysis of Walker's alleged misuse of the folk tradition, occasioned by what Byerman defines as Walker's distinction between male and female folk wisdom.

In contrast to Early who erred in placing Walker within the tradition of nineteenth century sentimental fiction, Keith Byerman in Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction places Walker squarely within the boundaries of an African-American female folk tradition. However, this is done only in order to prove that The Color Purple betrays the folk forms it uses by being "historically transcendent." Byerman states that Walker's use of folk materials

...enhance[s] the sense of a faerie world where curses, coincidences, and transformations are possible. The power of healing and change latent in folk arts and practices important to black women - quilting, mothering, blues singing, "craziness," and conjure - fit the pattern of the female character in the fairy tale who is victimized but then saved through love and magic. (162)

It is important to note that Byerman's distinction between folk forms and what he describes as Walker's fairy tale motifs implies a pejorative use of the term "fairy tale." His intention, quite clearly, is to invalidate not just Victorian clichés, but Walker's exploration through the literary vehicle of womanist aesthetics, the connections between African-American female forms of spirituality and

female desire. It should be clear by now that the "faerie world" to which Byerman refers becomes such, not because it is historically transcendent, but because it is a female world.

That Walker's narrative should be required to pass the test of historicity and authenticity at all is the real issue here, not whether it is "ahistorical" or not. The irony is that the very historical conditions under which black literature first took shape - the stereotypical depiction of blacks, the pressures of a dual audience, the rejection and acceptance of folk forms in lieu of white literary forms - continue to have an effect on the androcentric critic's assessment of the effect Walker's novel is having on the way African-American literature is read by a wide variety of readers. Again, what is really at issue here is to what extent women's ways of being and knowing, as exemplified in Walker's definition of womanist and in her distinction between male and female folk wisdom, are taken seriously.

As in Early's critique, the key to deconstructing Byerman's argument is in his choice of vocabulary, in this instance, the words "superior" and "triumph." Byerman states

In The Color Purple, she has in effect moved to allegorical form in order to transcend history and envision the triumph of those principles she espouses. But in doing so, she has neutralized the historical conditions of the very folk life she values. (170)

Neutralizing the historical conditions of the folk here means, in effect, making a distinction between male and female folk values; this is what Walker has done, Byerman points out, since The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970). The key word here, however, is "triumph." This denotes a misreading based on a refusal to take female ways of knowing as seriously as masculine ones.

Because the male folk view relegates women to inferior status within folk culture, Byerman assumes that the female folk view inscribed in the narrative structure of The Color Purple does the reverse and posits the female as superior to the male: "One of the things that mark Walker's text as womanist is her insistence that these female capabilities are a superior way of bringing about change" (162).

Walker's use of a range of female folk motifs as devices in the text - quilting, the blues singer, conjuring and signifying - is set by Byerman within the context of Celie's trajectory as a Cinderella figure who goes through a "rehumanization" process marked by a metaphorical journey from a "cipher" to "self-esteem" which is found by Celie through the "physical embrace of the regal Shug Avery" (161). It is more than obvious that the unwillingness to recognize the role played by female desire as a disruptive element in Celie's self-transformation - at the same time as he gives it a prominent place by ridiculing it - plays a major part in Byerman's



interpretation (as it did in Harris' and Early's) of the narrative function of female folk motifs. One must question how Byerman's alleged Cinderella/Sleeping Beauty/Snow White plot can resemble that of The Color Purple when the central figure - the prince - around whom these plots inevitably revolve is , quite intentionally, missing.

In vain, one must read and re-read The Color Purple for the prince and the royal wedding. Indeed, it is precisely the absence of a masculine figure as the love object that constitutes a major innovation in the narrative. Nevertheless, Byerman claims "[l]ike Sleeping Beauty, [Celie] is awakened from her death-in-life by the kiss of a beloved; and like them all, she and her companions, after great travails, live happily ever after" (161). It is important to note here that not only is the open-endedness of the text ignored, but also, through the judicious use of analogy the "kiss of the beloved" is censored of its lesb<sup>an</sup> content. Quite clearly, the removal of the prince figure does not strike Byerman as a major narrative and thematic innovation. That Byerman glides so easily over this important innovation leads us to to conclude that, first, the "prince" figure or masculine love object is so fundamental a concept that his presence is simply assumed; and second, that the misogynist and homophobic underpinnings of an analysis that renders same-sex female relationships invisible is what really transforms the womanist plot into what is mistakenly

perceived as a triumph over men.

Rewriting the heroine's trajectory through the use of female folk motifs and the narrativization of female desire is, as I will show, Walker's strategy for incorporating black female history as a mythological sub-stratum within her text. Reading Celie's story either as a transformation from victim to triumphant fairy tale figure, or from a sexually abused teenager whose struggle against all odds transforms her into a role model, is to overlook the role played by the signifying force of black female discourse in rewriting the heroine's plot. The anger, pain, and desire inscribed within Walker's womanist aesthetics and Celie's letters erupts throughout the text of The Color Purple, not as the voice of a downtrodden Cinderella figure, but as the echo of the voice of the ex-slave woman recorded in the nineteen thirties:

It was de sadder' thing dat ever happen to me. Ma's Marsa tole my sister Marie Robinson, "Git yo' things together, I'm goin' to take you to Richmond today. I'm goin' to sell you. Ben offered a good price." Lawd, chile, I cried. ...I ain't never seen 'dat pretty sister of mine no more since de day she was sol'. Chile, it nearly broke my heart too, 'cause I love dat sister mo'n any of de others.<sup>19</sup>

The act of narration, used by Hurston as a framing device in Their Eyes, emerges as an autobiographical act in Walker's text. Indeed, The Color Purple quite clearly derives its themes and strategies from the tradition of African-American literature, in particular, black women's narrative and the slave narrative genre. By combining

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these two in the late twentieth century, Walker attempts to create a new genre, the womanist novel, by adapting the autobiographical/confessional impulse in order to make a narrative statement about the history of the African-American woman's place in American society.

## Chapter II

WOMANIST AESTHETICS AND REVISIONARY MYTHOPOESIS:A HISTORY OF DIFFERENCE

He want mama fer his 'oman an' he knowed ole Marsa done drunk us up an' had to sell us. Mama jes' sits roun' jes' as sad an' cried all de time. She was always nice lookin' an' we all knew what de ole Marse Greene want. But ole Marsa Berry swear he be damn if he sell her. He say if old man Greene take de chillun he kin have mama. Ole man Greene say he don' want de chillun, so ole Marse Berry sell him nuffin. Well, ole Marse Greene, he buy a nigger 'oman name Betsy f'om some whar an' use her. He was a bachluh you know an' he need a 'oman.<sup>1</sup>

The way in which Walker's womanist aesthetic shapes the narrative voice of The Color Purple has been misunderstood, due in part to the lack of a clear understanding of how this aesthetic is derived from female difference and black female history. In this chapter, I will examine the interconnectedness between the historical roots of womanist aesthetics and the role of female bonding and the construction of the self in The Color Purple. This will be done in order to trace the evolution of womanist aesthetics out of Walker's sense of difference from a white, female literary tradition, primarily by showing how womanist aesthetics is antithetical to the female values inscribed in the nineteenth century cult of True Womanhood.

The self-reflexive voice of the black female "victim" - hitherto silenced, marginalized, and relegated to the background of mainstream American literature - constitutes the dominant narrative voice in The Color Purple. It is this voice that most annoys critics who look for a realistic fiction, prompting them to place The Color Purple in the category of popular fiction of a self-conscious "feminine" variety that most closely resembles nineteenth century sentimental literature addressed primarily to a female audience. However, as we shall see, the womanist plot's emphasis on female bonding and female sexuality bears very little resemblance to the sentimental concept of female moral superiority found in women's domestic fiction.

The "overplot" of nineteenth century women's domestic fiction identified by Nina Baym in Women's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and About Women in America, 1820-1870 (1978) obliged the heroine "...to make her success in life entirely a function of her own efforts and character," reflecting what Baym terms "the middle-class ethics of merit."<sup>2</sup> The womanist plot of The Color Purple, however, abandons the notion that the heroine must progress through a series of adventures that teach her self-reliance and the moral superiority of Christianity and domesticity. Walker's text displaces the middle-class ethos of merit and the assertion of the middle-class feminine ego in favor of a communal ethos inscribed within a black female discourse

of anger, desire, and change. This requires telling the other side of the story: not Little Eva's, but Topsy's. Indeed, womanist aesthetics requires that the heroine repudiate the ethos of a patriarchal system in which women are oppressed. As Celie explains, "[y]ou have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything at all."<sup>3</sup> The ethos of difference leads immediately to the telling of the other side of the story. As Walker states

...if I had written of Celie's rape from the point of view of the rapist or that of the voyeur, very few people - other than feminists - would have been offended. We have been brainwashed to identify with the person who receives pleasure, no matter how perverted; we are used to viewing rape from the rapist's point of view.<sup>4</sup>

Walker's preoccupation with presenting the black woman's story is focused around the issue of point of view. Indeed, Walker is careful to point out that not only must the reader be made aware of the androcentric bent of a particular fictional voice, but also of the inaccuracies inherent in generalizations about female culture. It is important to note that the connections made by both Jane Tompkins and Nina Baym between female modes of being characteristic of nineteenth century women's culture and the narrative strategies and literary themes of nineteenth century women's fiction permit them to guide the black women reader who may view the representation of black women in nineteenth century domestic fiction as less than adequate. The pitfalls of analyzing women's literature from a gynocritical, Anglo-American point of view (which

defines women's fiction as conservative yet covertly feminist, despite the poetics of domestic nurturance) will be evident throughout Walker's rewriting of Topsy's trajectory from heathen to missionary.

Although Walker does situate herself within a folk aesthetic derived from black women's historical difference from Angle-American women, the womanist agenda outlined in In Search does share some aspects of female narrative strategies typical of many twentieth century female writers, black or white, who have adopted a self-consciously female narrative voice. In Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth Century Women Writers (1985), Rachel Blau DuPlessis explains that an acute sense of "the untold story" leads these writers (as it has Walker) towards a search for "...another kind of narrative [that] must be invented - the multivocal, palimpsestic, personal, autobiographical, documentary, analytical, essayistic diary-novel."<sup>5</sup> These female-authored narratives are further characterized by a "...poetics of domestic value - nurturance, community building, inclusiveness, and empathetic care" (103). It must be pointed out, however, that this poetics of domestic nurturing is vastly different from that of the nineteenth century.

It is immediately apparent that Walker's definition of womanist in In Search seems to suggest that "female" is an essential quality residing in the female body:

"Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional



flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter) and women's strength" (xi). In addition, the word "prefers" seems to imply that these female qualities are superior to whichever "male" qualities they stand in opposition to. The ongoing debate over the impossibility of defining "woman" as an essential category of being, and the relationship of "woman" to the dynamics of a female aesthetics - Woolf's famous woman's sentence - is beyond the scope of this study. However, it is obvious that Walker clearly relates these female qualities not to any essentialist definition of woman, but to the historical conditions under which the black woman lived. Womanist, Walker tells us, is a neologism coined from "...the black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting womanish' i.e. like a woman" (xi). These female qualities are therefore defined as historically acquired through the material conditions of black women's lives which required them, unlike their white, middle-class sisters, to grow up quickly.

The qualities specific to the womanist self are in direct opposition to the qualities eulogized by the sentimental cult of True Womanhood. Barbara Welter defines these as the four cardinal virtues of "...piety, purity, submissiveness, domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife-woman."<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the womanist self is characterized by "...outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful

behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one" (xi). Clearly, this definition of the adolescent female self bears little resemblance to the same trajectory seen from a masculinist point of view, in which the crossover from girlhood to the sexuality and femininity of adolescence is described as an entry into a passive state characterized by loss of intellect and will. A notorious example which more than adequately illustrates the gap between the androcentric point of view and the womanist is found, for example, in Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!. While Henry goes off to university, Judith enters

...that state where, though visible, young girls appear as though seen through glass and where even the voice cannot reach them; where they exist...in a pearly lambence without shadows and themselves partaking of it; in nebulous suspension...without substance...merely waiting, parasitic and potent and serene, drawing to themselves without effort the post-genitive upon and about which to shape, flow into back, breast; bosom, flank, thigh.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to what is perceived from the androcentric perspective as the white, upper-class female's near total state of physical and mental paralysis, black female adolescence is characterized by Walker as outrageous, courageous, audacious and willful. Indeed, it is through the adoption of these qualities that the plot of The Color Purple - working itself out through the medium of an "autobiographical personal diary-novel" - is reoriented towards what DuPlessis described as the poetics of domestic value.

DuPlessis suggests that twentieth century women writers are engaged in

...the examination and deligitimation of cultural conventions about male and female, romance and quest, hero and heroine, public and private, individual and collective, but especially conventions of romance as a trope for the sex-gender system. (ix)

As we have already seen, the questioning of the nature of female sexuality and spirituality through female same-sex relationships is the central thematic concern of The Color Purple. In her definition of womanist, Walker states that the womanist is "...a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually"; and, "[s]ometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually" (xi). The power of female same-sex relationships to release a spiritual and erotic energy capable of transforming the community is then made clear as Walker adds: "Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (xi). In "Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson," Walker signals the difference between black and white women's history in relation to the use of the word lesbian to describe female same-sex relationships, or even female bonding. Walker, in a very different gesture from Richard Wright's rejection of duality and call for "wholeness," proposes the substitution of a new word implying "whole" or "round" women:

A word that said more than that they choose women over men. More than that they choose to live separate from men. In fact, to be

consistent with black cultural values (which, whatever their shortcomings, still have considerable worth) it would have to be a word that affirmed connectedness to the entire community and the world, rather than separation, regardless of who worked and slept with whom.<sup>8</sup>

The "word" is womanist, denoting the communal, female self that puts courageousness and audaciousness to work by becoming "[t]raditionally capable, as in: 'Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.'" (xi). The reference to slavery, of course, clearly situates the womanist within African-American history and folk culture. The Color Purple's obvious implication in the history of slavery is echoed by Eliabeth Fox-Genovese who states "The autobiographies of twentieth century black women are inescapably grounded in the experience of slavery and the literary tradition of the slave narrative" (161). As will be made more obvious in chapter three, Celie's narrative is indeed strikingly similar in theme and voice to that of the ex-slave narratives.

The construction of the non-conformist, womanist self through female bonding in all its various manifestations - celibacy, heterosexuality, lesbianism, and bisexuality - is foreshadowed in "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View," by Walker's recreation of three near mythical "foremothers" into one communal self: Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, and Zora Neale Hurston join forces in a fictional family characterized by DuPlessis' poetics

of domestic value. The "unholy trinity" resurfaces in The Color Purple as the communal self created by Celie, Shug, and Sofia.

The reconstruction of the female self as a womanist self is carried out not only through the sexual relationship between Celie and Shug, but also through the African narrative as well. Before the African-American woman can become "whole," she must first redefine her relationship to the myth of Africa.

In Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1859), Africa is a motif that performs a dual function, symbolizing both "good" - the feminine, Christian virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity - and "evil" - the wicked, uncivilized attributes possessed by the pre-Christian Topsy. In The Color Purple, however, Africa symbolizes neither good nor evil, but rather the unknown half of the African-American self which must be assimilated in order for wholeness to occur. Africa in The Color Purple is not the source of myth, but of history, both Celie and Nettie's personal history as well as the collective history of the Olinka. Nettie, portrayed as a reader in much the same way that the nineteenth century slave narratives included a scene of the gaining of literacy as a prerequisite to self-transformation, reclaims the "Dark Continent" as a symbol of traditional strengths and beliefs. In order to do so, she rewrites Topsy's history of slavery as one of emigration.

Nettie's displacement to Africa serves two functions in the plot. First, her letters intentionally disrupt the narrative sequence of events, mimicking the fortuitous rupture and separation effected through the physical displacement of slavery. These letters - over half the text - perform a narrative function that DuPlessis calls narrative deligitimation, or "...a critique even unto sequence and priorities of narration...ruptur[ing] conventional morality, politics, and narration" (108). Nettie's journey has struck not a few critics as preposterous, unconvincing, and artificial. The African letters are deemed overly didactic in tone, unduly demanding of the reader, and as extraneous to the plot as Melville's chapters on the history and description of the whale in Moby Dick. Yet, just as Melville's seemingly obsessive digression on whaling history is of primary importance to his narrative strategy as well as his didactic purpose, so do Nettie's letters perform a revisionary function in instructing the reader on the "true history" of the African-American self, not only in their content, but also through their disruption of the narrative sequence.

Secondly, Nettie's letters rewrite the nineteenth century heroine's trajectory, not, as Celie's letters do, through a history of desire, but through a rewriting of the myth of Africa in relation to the heroine's trajectory which in this instance, is a rewriting of Topsy, the black

girl trapped within Christian, sentimental definitions of womanhood. DuPlessis terms this second strategy of twentieth century women writers' rewriting of texts narrative displacement, or "...a displacement to the other side of the story" that "...gives voice to the muted," as well as being "...a participant and observer's investigation of the claims of those parts of culture and personality that are taboo, despised, marginalized" (108). In other words, Nettie's African sojourn rewrites the relationship of black women to the cult of True Womanhood by examining the relationship of the African half of the African-American self to the communal, womanist self. These letters intentionally embody a form of sentimentality that Nettie eventually discards.

Rewriting history, or, as DuPlessis terms it "revisionary mythopoesis," is a practice that "...goes against the grain of a major function of myth: the affirmation of dominant culture" (107). It need not be pointed out that struggling with the dominant culture is neither unique to twentieth century women's literature, nor to black women's literature; the recorded history of Western civilization is the history of one dominant group usurping the myths and beliefs of another group to reflect its own system of beliefs. In the case of black folk culture, revisionary mythopoesis reflects the strategies of a non-dominant group. These strategies of double meanings and duplicities are reflected in the

Spirituals that encode a different set of meanings for the initiate and the non-initiate. Hurston's explanation of the psychology of the folk mind clearly attests to these strategies of deception and self-preservation that reflect a power struggle between two opposing ways of life:

The theory behind our tactic: 'The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind...' 9

The same awareness of a tug-of-war between differing interpretations of the same historical event is expressed in The Color Purple by Sofia, in an apparent "answer" to Faulkner's reiterated characterization of "niggers" as "...insolent and slouching and unhurried..." in Flags in the Dust:

Sofia would make a dog laugh, talking about those people she work for. They have the nerve to try and make us think slavery fell through because of us, say Sofia. Like us didn't have sense enough to handle it. All the time breaking hoe handles and letting mules loose in the wheat. But how anything they build can last a day is a wonder to me. They backward, she say. Clumsy and unlucky. (100)

The African journey begins a process of self-transformation that is both historical and personal. Like Malcolm X whose reading of the history of slavery effects a radical and irrevocable change in his conception of his place in American society vis-à-vis whites, Nettie's reading of the history of African civilization begins a process of self-knowledge and an encounter with the African



continent that entails an exploration of the duality of selfhood for the African-American woman. In her fourth letter Nettie writes, "I never thought about it as a real place" (122). The reality of Africa, acquired through reading, divides the old, American self from the newer, African self that is not yet born: "The little I knew about my own self wouldn't have filled a thimble" (123). While Topsy's adoption of the missionary persona at the end of Uncle Tom's Cabin demands her rejection of sin, and by implication, blackness, Nettie's transformation into a missionary is both an embracing of blackness and a coming to terms with the myth of Africa as a precondition to the construction of the womanist self. Nettie's letters, then, reflect the process of struggle between the sentimental Christian self and the African, non-sentimental womanist self.

As I have tried to show in chapter one, a major criticism of The Color Purple is that it is all too transparently a female narrative, in the pejorative sense of the term; it is, by default, too sentimental. It is quite clear, however, that the sentimentality lies not so much in the plot, but in the way in which the text is read by a particular set of readers. Walker's intention, quite clearly, is to abandon sentimentality as a legitimate literary mode that has more often than not perpetuated stereotypical representations of black women. The relationship between sentimentality, cultural difference,

and the reading of The Color Purple is inseparable from, first, the identification of all women's themes (female bonding etc.) as sentimental ones, and second, the problematical issue of the re-evaluation of the role of sentimentality in nineteenth century women's fiction by Anglo-American feminists critics. What is evident, however, is that sentimentality is antithetical to the construction of the womanist self, and to the re-unification of the two separate halves of the African-American female self. Both Celie's narrative voice and Nettie's letters are engaged with the deligitimation of the sentimental, Christian ethos of the romance plot; what needs to be explored is why so many readers fail to read the text in such a way as to become aware of Walker's intention.

In "Sentimental Power: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Politics of Literary History," Jane Tompkins suggests that sentimental fiction by nineteenth century women should be judged by different standards than it has been by the critical establishment for "...the work of the sentimental writers is complex and significant in ways other than those which characterize the established masterpieces."<sup>10</sup> One of the distinguishing features of these "other ways" is the "unprecedented popularity" of Uncle Tom's Cabin. However, if popularity and appeal to mass culture be any criteria for evaluating the effects of a fictional work on its readers, how is it possible for Tompkins to ignore the

the fact that, despite Stowe's intentions, and despite the nineteenth century white middle-class female reader, the epithet "Uncle Tom" has passed into the repertoire of American popular culture? Sadly, Tompkins does not take into account the creation of stereotypes in evaluating the negative effects of sentimental ideology and the popularity of women's culture. For even though, as Tompkins states, Uncle Tom's Cabin is "...a brilliant redaction of the culture's favorite story about itself: the story of salvation through motherly love" (83), it is also a story that ironically created the most stereotypical portraits of blacks - Uncle Tom and Topsy - to have entered popular American culture. It is details such as these that contemporary black women writers take into account when assessing the role of sentimental ideology and women's culture in the perpetuation of stereotypes.

Tompkins calls on the modern-day reader to set aside modernist prejudices. This means, first of all, re-evaluating sentimentality, in particular, the redemptive value of Little Eva's death. It would be useful to examine the way in which Tompkins' line of argument follows closely upon Stowe's, with the purpose of showing that the relationship between Topsy and Little Eva is a model relationship illustrating what Tompkins suggests is the essentially progressive function of sentimentality.

Tompkins states: "If the language of tears seems maudlin and Little Eva's death ineffectual, it is because

both the tears and the redemption they signify belong to a conception of the world that is now generally regarded as naive and unrealistic" (89). Accepting tears as a valid female mode of being also means that we must accept the radical nature of stereotypes, simply because the nineteenth century white middle-class female novelist and reader incorporated them into her scheme of redemption through motherly love:

...what seem from a modernist point of view to be gross stereotypes in characterization and a needless proliferation of incident are essential properties of a narrative aimed at demonstrating that human history is a continual reenactment of the sacred drama of redemption. (91)

Topsy's characterization, and her relationship to Little Eva, according to this understanding of the function of stereotypes, is perfectly acceptable.

Tompkins suggests that the "...trivializing view of [Little Eva's death scene] is grounded in assumptions about power and reality so common that we are not even aware they have been invoked" (85). Yet, it is Tompkins' own assumptions about power and reality that are just as evident in this redefinition of sentimentality in cross-racial female relationships; because Stowe's novel is a woman's novel, we must read as Stowe wanted us to read, and agree with Tompkins that "...dying is the supreme form of heroism...[that] brings an access of power, not a loss of it" (85). Such a reading, of course, depends on how one defines power. Clearly, Tompkins defines power as white,

middle-class, and female.

Tompkins states that the efficacy of Little Eva's death (which proves that women's culture has wrested power from male culture) is evidenced "...not through the sudden collapse of the slave system, but through the conversion of Topsy, a motherless, godless black child who has up until that point successfully resisted all attempts to make her good" (87). It is important to note here that Topsy's conversion is redemptive - for Stowe as well as for Tompkins - because it is brought about through female love:

By giving Topsy her love, Eva initiates a process of redemption whose power, transmuted from heart to heart, can change the entire world. And indeed, the process has begun. From that time on, Topsy is 'different from what she used to be' (eventually she will go to Africa and become a missionary to her entire race). (88)

Female modes of being - the emotion of heart to heart and the redemptive function of tears - is not an instance of feminine naiveté, but the means through which radical change can be effected. Nevertheless, one is compelled to question the very nature of Topsy's difference, as it is defined by both Stowe and Tompkins.

As Tompkins notes, Topsy becomes "good"; she is inscribed into the cult of True Womanhood as the grateful convert. However, in order to do so Topsy must divest herself of her former wickedness, a wickedness that upon close examination is revealed to be identical with Walker's definition of "womanish" qualities; Topsy's wickedness is clearly related in its historical context to the

audacious, courageous, willful and outrageous self celebrated in The Color Purple as well as the ex-slave narratives. Tompkins fails to take into account the fact that "being good" for Topsy means being white; Tompkins seems unaware of the fact that being "wicked" is part and parcel of the survival strategies employed by the slaves during slavery time, constituting a form of rebellion on the part of the slave against her Christian slave master and mistress. Although such a knowledge of African-American strategies for survival may not be expected of Stowe, it is not Stowe's reading that concerns us here, but Tompkins'. Indeed, at issue is the question of reader context, as Tompkins herself takes pains to point out in her study. It is obvious, however, that Topsy's conversion into a missionary is redemptive only if one reads like Tompkins or Stowe; it is not if one reads like Alice Walker or Sonia Sanchez who remarks, in a gesture that repudiates both Nina Baym's and Tompkins' reinscription of Topsy within a sentimental, Christian discourse while reasserting the history of difference rendered invisible by the discourse of good and evil: "You don't come out of a vacuum. We're not like Topsy; we don't just grow." 11

For Tompkins as well as Stowe, Little Eva has the power to help Topsy grow up into a "good Christian girl" (88). It is Topsy's conversion that renders Little Eva's love efficacious. Tompkins' plea for the "modern reader's" acceptance of this conversion is also a plea for the

acceptance of female emotion - Stowe's atmosphere of sympathetic influence - as an inherently transformative and redemptive mode of being:

...it is difficult for [the modern reader] to take seriously a novel that insists on religious conversion as the necessary precondition for sweeping social change. But in Stowe's understanding of what such change requires it is the modern view which is naive. (89)

Nevertheless, the "modern reader," if she is an African-American modern reader, will be quick to note that unlike Walker's conception of the connection between female spirituality and radical change in the society as a whole, both Stowe's and Tompkins' interpretation of Stowe's narrative intentions operates, not within a reappraisal of female desire, and the representation of the Godhead, but within a hierarchical relationship between a white slave mistress and her slave.

The magical and purifying touch of Little Eva's "little white hand" is final proof for Tompkins that Little Eva's love is neither melodramatic nor condescending, but transformative. Yet, the fact remains that for many readers outside the category of nineteenth century white middle-class female readers, Little Eva's touch is merely the obverse of Miss Ophelia's lack of a touch: the lack of the latter transforms Topsy into a "toad," while the presence of the former transforms her into a caricature. Touched by the magic wand of Little Eva's magnanimity, Topsy is transformed into a "good girl."

The important role played by the relationship between the reader and his/her cultural background in the reading of a text is emphasized by Tompkins who states

The power of a sentimental novel to move its audience depends on the audience's being in possession of the conceptual categories that constitute character and event. That storehouse of assumption includes attitudes toward the family and toward social institutions; a definition of power and its relation to individual human feeling; notions of political and social equality; and above all, a set of religious beliefs that organizes and sustains the rest. (85)

It is clear, as Tompkins notes, that a storehouse of assumption must be shared by any given group of readers in order for a text to be interpreted in such a way as to meet that group's conceptual categories. However, as I have tried to show, neither contemporary black women writers nor their nineteenth century foremothers shared these conceptual categories with the white readership who read their narratives. Thus, because of the material and historical difference experienced by black women, and reflected in their literature, the effects of "women's power" is portrayed from an entirely different point of view in The Color Purple than in Uncle Tom's Cabin. What Tompkins had done is to minimize the negative effects of power in the representation of black/white female relationships in Uncle Tom's Cabin; what Walker does in The Color Purple is to bring the conceptual categories of the black, female audience to bear on the question of women's power and the relationship between the sexes and



the races.

It should not be forgotten that what Tompkins praises as the "devastating critique" effected by the literary representation of the myth of women's power on nineteenth century American society cannot be separated from the power of the white slave mistress over her black servant or slave. Little Eva exercises this power over slaves and servants precisely because of the legacy of moral and spiritual superiority endowed on her by both Stowe and readers such as Tompkins, and dramatized in her parting speech to her slaves. The effects of women's power on black slaves, however, is viewed from an entirely different angle by Mrs. Mary Jones:

Mother's mistress tried to teach her the directions North, South, East, and West. So one day she called her, "Liza, Liza, Oh Liza come here!" So when mother got in the room going to her, mistress say, "Liza, what direction is the wind this morning?" Liza's reply was, "De wind is outdoors!" Miss Polly slapped her. Said it was impudence the way mother told her.<sup>12</sup>

Here the relationship between the white slave mistress and her black slave is presented from the conceptual categories of the black slave woman, that is, stripped of its sentimentality.

Women's power is also presented in a non-sentimental fashion in The Color Purple. The scene, for example, of Sofia's first encounter with the mayor's wife is reduced to its bare essentials. One can imagine the same scene rewritten through the pen of a Faulkner or a Stowe, with

vastly different results. The question arises, then, whether these differing versions of the following scene would be due solely to artistic capabilities or to the conceptual categories and storehouse of assumptions of the writers. Walker writes:

All your children so clean, she say, would you  
like to work for me, be my maid?  
Sofia say, Hell no.  
She say, What you say?  
Sofia say, Hell no.  
Mayor look at Sofia, push his wife out the way.  
Stick out his chest. Girl, what you say to Miss  
Millie?  
Sofia say, I say, Hell no.  
He slap her.  
I stop telling it right there. (86)

The mayor's slap is emblematic, among other things, of the fact that women's power has not pushed the male to the periphery of post-slavery society, as both Stowe's narrative and Tompkins' reading of that narrative would have us believe. What the slap does is to propel Sofia into the white woman's kitchen.

The gap between the sentimental ethos of the cult of True Womanhood and the material conditions of black women's lives was a factor to be reckoned with by nineteenth century black women writers. It is, ironically, just as present, if not in its effect on the writing of The Color Purple, then in the reading of the novel. Although The Color Purple may appear, in its outspokenness, to be rid of the constraints of the dual audience, it is this very outspokenness that makes the reader, white or black, male or female, aware of his/her difference.

Writing for a predominantly white female readership, Harriet Jacobs was at pains to allude to her difference as a black woman in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1851). She did so, however, in such a way as to situate herself within the moral code of the cult of True Womanhood. As Hazel Carby notes in Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (1987)

Jacobs attempted to deflect any judgemental response of moral condemnation through consistent narrative reminders to the reader that the material condition of a slave woman's life were different from theirs.<sup>13</sup>

Jacobs' parting words to her reader well illustrates the paradoxical situation of not only nineteenth, but also twentieth century black women writers writing out of a context of difference: "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free!"<sup>14</sup>

The gap between a sentimental ethos and the representation of black women's lives (and thus, the construction of the self as an African-American female self) is evident as well in twentieth century black women's narratives, for example, Hurston's autobiography Dust Tracks on a Road (1942), which Walker describes as "...the most unfortunate thing Zora ever wrote...after the first several chapters, it rings false" ("A Cautionary Tale," 91).<sup>15</sup>

The gap is even more in evidence when one compares the

contents of Just Tracks to Hurston's essays, which sport provocative titles such as "What White Publishers Won't Print," and "My Most Humiliating Jim Crow Experience." As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese suggests, "...the tension at the heart of black women's autobiography derives in large part from the chasm between the autobiographer's instinctive sense of herself, and her attitude towards her probable readers" (169). Extending this to Walker's critique of the use of a sentimental, middle-class ethos in black women's fiction, it becomes obvious that the at times sentimental tone of Nettie's letters functions as a narrative device that is intended to underline the dichotomous relationship not only between Nettie and her readers, but between the two halves of the African-American female self. The sentimental tone of Nettie's letters - Oh Celie! - as well as the change of diction from black English in Celie's narrative to standard English in Nettie's, reflects the narrative split between the two halves of the female self that must come to terms with the "tension" commented upon by Fox-Genovese.

It is more than clear that reading as a nineteenth century white middle-class woman is absolutely crucial if one is to accept the concept of women's culture and women's fiction as separate from social or racial issues. As pointed out earlier, it was this same category of reader that constituted a major factor in the black woman writer's sense of self-division, as well as the uneven depiction of

black women's lives as part sentimental, part "true-to-life."

As Mary Helen Washington explains in Invented Lives

Black women writers at the turn of the century wrote under great pressures: to a white audience whose tastes were shaped by Uncle Tom's Cabin; to a limited black audience who desperately needed positive black role models; and to an audience whose notions of female propriety and female inferiority made it nearly impossible to imagine a complex woman character. (75)

Obviously, reliance on a female reader whose tastes demanded a fictional representation of the romanticized conversion of Topsy is fraught with difficulties.

In Women's Fiction: A Guide to Novels For and About Women (1978), Baym claims that despite their adherence to conservative domestic values and virtues, the best-selling American women novelists of the nineteenth century practiced a "covert" and "pragmatic" feminism, reflected in the heroine's overplot. Baym bases the progressive nature of the sentimental ethos solely on "...the redemptive possibilities of enlightened domesticity" (49). However, this implies that white, middle-class women's culture is in itself inherently redemptive, simply because it is women's culture. Yet, the conflict between white women's interests and those of black men and women is made evident in Almira Hart Phelps's Ida Norman (1846), which Baym quotes: "Let those who are expending their sympathies upon southern slaves, think of the households where the unhappy wife is concealing in her heart's core wrongs known only to her Maker, and to him who inflicts

them" (84). Like Tompkins, Baym's only criteria for evaluating the effect of sentimental ideology on nineteenth century popular domestic fiction is the fact that this fiction is women's fiction, written for, by, and about women. It is to be regretted, however, that placing women's fiction into a category by itself leads Baym to sidestep the issue of pro-slavery novels. As Helen Waite Papashvily has pointed out, a large number of these novels were written by Southern middle-class women who espoused the the ideology of True Womanhood side by side with the ideology of racial purity.<sup>16</sup>

The construction of the non-conformist, womanist self in The Color Purple is dependent on the rejection of sentimentality, and the adoption of a narrative voice based on both African-American folk strategies and on Walker's sense of African-American history as one of difference within a dominant culture. It cannot be over-emphasized how strongly the text of The Color Purple derives its narrative purpose from the desire to narrate the other side of the story. It is this black female perspective that Walker feels has been all but obliterated from the American literary scene, and which she has tried to recapture in The Color Purple. Recapturing this voice, however, means reading not with the storehouse of assumptions of the white, middle-class female, but from the perspective of Little Eva's slaves.

The slaves gathered around Little Eva's bedside are

not readers; they do not read the Bible and therefore make poor Christians. Stripped of its sentimentality, Little Eva's preach is a typical slaveholder's lecture to her slaves: "Many of you, I am afraid, are very careless. You are thinking only about this world..."<sup>17</sup> Here sentimentality works to reinscribe the slave into the dominant Christian domestic economy as a voiceless and obedient subject. In sharp contrast to this re-inscription is the lack of sentimentality in both the ex-slave narratives and Celie's narrative which places obedience and good behavior in an entirely different light. The themes of goodness and obedience are continuously made reference to in the ex-slave narratives, as well as in The Color Purple: "Always took his text from Ephesians, the white preacher did, the part what said, 'Obey your masters, be good servants'...Can' tell you how many times I done heard that text preached on."<sup>18</sup> Again, one hears in the voice of the ex-slave not sentimentality but a semi-cynical and blunt tone that will be adopted by Celie in The Color Purple.

The opening line of Celie's narrative begins the process of revisionary mythopoesis by specifying on the theme of goodness and obedience: "I-am I have always been a good girl" (11). The shift in tense from present to past not only signals a shift in status within the patriarchal family economy - from virgin to sexual object- it also functions as a gesture of reversal, placing Celie

outside of Topsy's trajectory.

While Topsy goes from wickedness to goodness, Celie goes from goodness to wickedness; "wickedness" in The Color Purple is clearly synonymous with the audacious, womanist self that makes its presence felt not only through Shug Avery's reinterpretation of Little Eva's Bible, "... [h]ow come the Bible just like everything else they make, all about them doing one thing and another, and all the colored folks doing is getting cursed?" (177), but also through Celie's narrative voice that reflects the coming into being of the communal, womanist self. In The Color Purple, being a Christian is not a desirable state of being; on the contrary, Christianity encourages conformist and destructive behavior, leading eventually to a loss of self, evidenced in the text by Celie's relationship to the preacher.

The loss of self incurred by Topsy's conversion is repeated by the loss of audaciousness and outrageousness that results as a consequence of Sofia's imprisonment and forced employment as maid to the mayor's wife. Sofia represses her difference, adopting the conformist strategies used by Celie: "Every time they ast me to do something Miss Celie, I act like I'm you. I jump right up and do just what they say" (88). The self Sofia loses is the same self possessed by Shug Avery, who personifies one aspect of the womanist mode of being, audaciousness. Indeed, the construction of the womanist self begins, not



with Celie's rape, but with the accidental discovery of a photo of the female self as audacious and different.

When Celie looks at the photo of Shug Avery ("What is it," Celie begins by asking, as if Shug Avery were a quality rather than a person), she sees a woman dressed as "...the most beautiful woman I ever saw" (16). Shug's beauty, as opposed to Celie's ugliness - which consists mostly of having "nothing to put on" - resides in the power to visually enthrall: "She be dressed to kill, whirling and laughing" (16). Celie is confronted with not only her visual opposite - the fulfillment of androcentric sexual fantasy - but also with the means to thwart masculine desire for the female object. The photo slips unnoticed through the fingers of Pa and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ as they barter in a mock slave sale for Nettie, providing Celie with her first image of woman as outrageous and audacious. Yet, it is this very outrageousness that, paradoxically, constructs the black woman as a sexualized object while providing her at the same time with the means to free herself from the omnipotence of the male/master's gaze.

Dressing up functions as a trope throughout the novel for the identity exchange between women; it is emblematic of the self-transformation from the divided self to the womanist self. In contrast to Celie who makes unisex pants, "dressing" the entire community into an androgynous whole, Nettie and Corinne in Africa decide not to borrow each other's clothes, thereby keeping separate and distinct

identities. When Celie tries to "fix myself up for him" (17), dressing in horsehair, feathers, and high heels in a parody of a seductress, she is beaten, used as a sex object, and chastised for "dressing trampy." Lacking the requisite womanist qualities, Celie calls down upon herself (as does Squeak) the consequences of "dressing" according to patriarchal dictates. It is significant that Squeak must "dress like a white woman" (92) in order to intercede on Sofia's behalf. Dressing like a white woman implies exchanging communal, womanist modes of being for individualistic, patriarchal values that lead to Squeak's rape. It is these communal, womanist ways of knowing and being that Walker celebrates in The Color Purple. Indeed, it is the autobiographical voice of the black female slave that echoes and re-echoes throughout the text, signifying on the history of difference that has provided the impetus behind Celie's narration of black female desire.

## Chapter III

CELIE'S NARRATION OF DESIRE: "TALKING PROPER"  
AND THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL VOICE

Now jes' lemme tell you how I did. I married when I wuz 14 years old. So help me God, I didn't know what marriage meant. I had an idea when you loved de man, you an' he could be married an' his wife had to cook, clean up, wash, an' iron fer him was all. I slept in bed - he on his side an' I on mine fer three months an' dis ain't no lie. Miss Sue, he never got close to me 'cause muma had sed "Don't let nobody bother yo' principle," 'cause dat wuz all 'yo had.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of The Color Purple, Walker signs off as "A.W. author and medium" (253), thanking all her characters for coming. This apparent relinquishment of authorial control through the juxtaposition of the term medium to that of author is prefigured at the beginning of the text with the dedication

TO THE SPIRIT

Without whose assistance  
 Neither this book  
                   Nor I  
 Would have been  
                   Written.

By relinquishing control to the "Spirit," Walker not only questions her relationship to the text, but in doing so appears to erase the distinction between autobiography and the artistic creation of a text as something extrinsic to

the authorial self. In her essay "Love and Sex in the Afro-American Novel," Gloria Naylor echoes Walker's conception of the relation of the author/creator to her text:

When I am actually within a work I am not black, I am not a woman, and I contend that I am not even a human being. I have given myself over to a force. But the product of that force is always rooted in a specific body politic, both personal and historical. ...the words produced by that mindless state of possession, by that raw imagination, need to be filtered through the mind of the writer in order to attain coherence, and that filter can only be what he or she is.<sup>2</sup>

The "mindless state of possession," for Walker as well as Naylor, includes both the negation of authorial control and the re-establishment of an autobiographical voice that is both black and female. Indeed, Walker's conception of "The Spirit" is intricately related to her sense of folk history and a female continuum that affords her a direct link with her ancestors, the ex-slaves whose collective voices are heard in the ex-slave narratives. This communal ancestral voice furnishes not only the material, but also dictates the form the narration of female desire in The Color Purple will take. By insisting on the link between folk history, mediumship, and authorship, Walker is able to negate the concept of the text as distinct from either history or autobiography, with the result that the author's role is redefined as a mediumistic one, giving voice to a communal personality in which the author herself takes part. Indeed, Walker insists on emphasizing the

relationship between her role as a "medium" and the construction of the communal, autobiographical female voice of The Color Purple. In "Finding Celie's Voice," Walker describes the process through which the matriarchal, ancestral dream becomes a major source of influence on the construction of Celie's voice:

...I started to dream of people I'd never heard of and never knew anything about, except, perhaps, in a general way...Once a dark, heavy-set woman who worked in the fields and had somehow lost the two middle fingers of her right hand took hold of my hand lovingly, called me "daughter," and commented supportively on my work. She was only one of a long line of ancestors who came to visit and take my hand that night, all apparently slaves, fieldworkers, and domestics.... (96)

By publicly situating her narrative within the context of the ancestral dream, Walker is quite clearly drawing attention to the text's reliance on a history of black female difference.

What I would like to examine is how Walker goes about translating the dream into a public narration of female desire that is rooted in the history of black women's experiences in a racist and sexist society. By translating the dream into a private, autobiographical and monological voice through the narrative frame of the letter/diary entry, Walker has, paradoxically, created a public and communal narration that not only reverses the heroine's trajectory through the stages of the love plot, but also explodes time-honored stereotypes of black women.

The ancestral dream is actualized into a concrete

narrative form through the structuring device of what at first glance appear to be a series of disconnected letters addressed, in childlike fashion, to "Dear God." This form of address situates Celie's narrative impulse within an autobiographical, confessional context. The text itself, however, is divided into two distinct sets of letters - Nettie's and Celie's - that represent two separate discourses. As pointed out in chapter two, Nettie's letters adopt a semi-sentimental and publicly didactic voice, while Celie's letters adopt the abrupt, matter-of-fact present tense of the diary entry masquerading as the letter.

The difference between these two separate yet related discourses - one a public struggle between the discourse of Africa and the discourse of colonial Christianity, and the other a private monologue that is the site of a forbidden and taboo desire - reflects the dualism inherent in the condition of being black in North America, a dualism that W.E.B. DuBois termed "dual consciousness." For Walker, this dualism operates chiefly within a set of coordinates that include the difference between a female and a male perspective on desire, sexuality, and spirituality, as well as the difference between the white and the black interpretation of American history. Even more importantly, the difference between the two sets of letters makes clear that Celie's assumption of a public, letter-writing voice such as Nettie's would be impossible within the confines

of the text; rather than permitting Celie to break out of Froula's father/daughter dialogue, the assumption of a public voice would instead resituate Celie's narrative within its boundaries.

Before speaking openly on the subjects of incest and female same-sex desire, Celie's narrative voice must find a way to invalidate and render inoperational the stereotypes depicting female sexuality. In obvious contrast to, for example, Jim Trueblood's narration of desire in Ellison's Invisible Man (which, as many critics have noted, confers trickster status on Trueblood enabling him to "overcome his family and community" precisely because it is a public narration), the assumption of a public persona through which to discuss incest and female same-sex desire would have the opposite effect on Celie's ability to narrate her story.<sup>3</sup> A careful reading of the text of Invisible Man will reveal that Trueblood's narratorial authority as a trickster and blues singer is gained at the expense of the black female, who must keep silent throughout the text. Trueblood narrates only under the condition that male, heterosexual desire, erupting in an incestuous form, becomes a metaphor for social and economic factors that lie at the heart of the race ritual played out between Mr. Norton and Trueblood. It is quite obvious, however, that a public narration of incest and female same-sex desire, far from conferring trickster status on Celie, would exclude her from her community.

The narrative voice adopted by Celie's character must give the appearance of being a private, autobiographical voice, rather than a public, trickster voice, for the obvious reason that in African-American texts such as The Color Purple and Invisible Man that have a didactic purpose, the narrators must appear to reflect social reality (regardless of the genre in which the text is written). This, of course, includes gender roles. The woman who would speak out, in the manner of a Trueblood, about incest and lesbian desire, becomes not a trickster figure but a social outcast.

The use of the letter as a framing device places an inordinate amount of emphasis on the themes of communication and the assumption of voice in The Color Purple. Yet, The Color Purple is distinguished by the fact that, in contrast to most epistolary fiction, there is no exchange of letters. This is a clear indication that The Color Purple does not belong in the category of the epistolary novel as it is defined by Janet Gurkin Altman in Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form (1982). The dialogical nature of epistolary fiction is, as Altman notes, a distinguishing characteristic of this genre: "In no other form of dialogue does the speaker await a reply so breathlessly; in no other type of verbal exchange does the mere fact of receiving or not receiving a response carry such meaning." <sup>4</sup> The fact that Celie neither receives nor expects to receive any response is emblematic



not only of her loss of voice, but even more obviously of her status as a young, black female: it echoes the isolation of Frado in Harriet Wilson's Our Nig (1859), as well as the nineteenth century interdictions against the acquisition of literacy. But even more importantly, it shifts the narrative away from the letter form and into the autobiographical, journal form.

In epistolary fiction the letter functions primarily as as a vehicle of desire. Indeed, as Altman points out

...the letter form seems tailored for the love plot, with its emphasis on separation and reunion. The lover who takes up his pen to write his loved one is conscious of the interrelation of presence and absence. (14)

In The Color Purple, however, the lack of reciprocity between the two sets of letters is the dominant factor in allowing Dear God journal entries to take over from the letter form that implies desire and the need for a reply in order for that desire to be fulfilled. In turn, the journal shifts the thematic emphasis in the plot away from marriage and the fulfillment of heterosexual love, to female desire and female friendship, underscoring the fact that neither Celie's nor Nettie's letters function within the context of the traditional love plot, despite the emphasis on separation, and the eventual reunion of the two sisters.

Both the withholding of the letters and the writing of a diary to God reverse the love plot by emphasizing the fact that Celie's desire has a dual, female object: Shug

Avery and Nettie. And, her desire for these two women is caused, most significantly, by her initiation into the world of female sexuality through the heterosexual male's violation of the love plot: her loss of virginity through rape/incest, her marriage/slave sale to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s imposition of the ménage à trois on his wife, Celie.

The lack of reciprocity between the two sets of letters also entails the loss of another central element of epistolary fiction: the internal reader or addressee. This figure is necessary in order for the play between presence and absence to be effected. As Altman suggests, "...the epistolary form is unique in making the reader (narratee) almost as important an agent in the narrative as the writer (narrator)" (88). In The Color Purple, the displacement of the reading experience to the second half of the text, after the discovery of the cache of letters, isolates the reading experience from the context of the love plot, changing both the role of the internal reader and the letters themselves. While Nettie's letters can be said to be both metaphoric - evoking the lover - and metonymic - standing for the lover - Celie's letters are neither. This metaphoric/metonymic function in Celie's narrative is transferred to the photo of Shug Avery. The lack of reciprocity becomes crucial for changing Celie's letters into journal entries whose real purpose is to record the daily events of her community. It is important

to note, however, that the events recorded are the ones that affect her status as wife and sexual object. In doing so, they focus attention on the gap between Celie's position within the family economy and her desire for Shug Avery. It is this unorthodox desire that diverts thematic attention away from marriage and onto female friendship, same-sex relationships, and the construction of a womanist, i.e. communal self whose narrative equivalent is that of the conjure woman.

The loss of the internal reader/addressee entails the loss of another figure central to the love plot of epistolary fiction, the confidante. The confidante's role is to listen and to at times influence the narrative action, and to further the development of the love plot. In Celie's narrative, this function of confidante is obviously taken over by Shug Avery, who by taking over the role of listener from "God," actively hastens the demise of the patriarchal order. Listening, and the associated activity of instructing, is seen as a female attribute, as well as a specifically female form of interaction: listening, indeed, becomes a distinguishing mark not of desire within the traditional love plot with its objective of marriage, but of female friendship that results in a negation of narrative closure through the return of Nettie which symbolizes the beginning of a new stage in the African-American experience. This return quite clearly signifies on arrival, reversing the history of slavery and

transforming the slave journey into one of immigration.

Shug's role as confidante consists of acting as the initiator into the mysteries of the female body; she is the liberator of female desire, rather than the seductress. As the object of Celie's desire and the liberator of that desire, she becomes the central figure of female non-conformity, explaining to Celie and Mary Agnes the connection between patriarchal society's stereotyping of female sexuality, female creativity, and racism: "That's the reason they call what us sing the devil's music. Devils love to fuck" (111).<sup>5</sup> It is Celie's friendship with and love for Shug that renders the heroine's plot inoperative, replacing the epistolary form with that of the autobiographical journal. The "Dear God" of the journal/autobiography initially signals a complete lack of epistolary reciprocity, however, by doing so it also gives voice to same-sex female desire. "Dear God," then, rather than being the signature of a confession of sins, becomes the expression of desire.

Clearly, the choice of an autobiographical journal frame is not so much an artistic or aesthetic one as it is dictated by the possibilities inherent in the narration of incest and female desire by a black, female narrator who is also woman identified. The use of the journal ensures that Celie will occupy the narrative equivalent of the trickster role, but in a specifically female form: the conjure woman.

The conjure woman is a symbol of black female selfhood as non-separate from the folkloric roots and social otherness of the heritage of slavery. This symbolic figure is widely used by contemporary black women writers to emphasize the difference that exists between black women and white-identified characters. A distinguishing characteristic of the conjure woman is that she speaks the history, not only of her race, but of black women and their unique relationship to sexuality and spirituality. The conjure woman is thus found not only in The Color Purple, but in Hurston's Their Eyes, Gloria Naylor's Mama Day (1988), Morrison's Beloved (1987), and Walker's The Temple of My Familiar (1989).<sup>6</sup> The remainder of this chapter will examine how the journal narrative constructs Celie as a "conjure woman," or, to phrase it differently, a womanist self that takes on the role of a communal voice through the adaptation of ways of speaking or narrating derived from but not identical to the slave and ex-slave's relationship to truth and memory.

In Celie's narrative, the narration of incest does not occur, as it does in Trueblood's story, within the double context of the unconscious eruption of a private dream or fantasy that is then narrated as a very public story. Rather, incest is presented as a deliberate, premeditated, and repeated act of aggression on the part of the father/male. Indeed, the sex act between Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ merely repeats this initial aggression. The reasons why

Celie's narrative does not assume a public stance similar to that of Trueblood's revolve around the fact that it is the narrator's gender, above all else, that dictates what the relationship between desire, victimization, and narration will be. Trueblood's adoption of the public, trickster voice is made possible by his presentation of himself as a passive victim, not only of poverty, but of both the white and the black female. More explicitly, it is his dual status as both aggressor and victim that allows him to narrate his story as public entertainment.

It is quite clear, however, that Celie cannot claim dual status as both aggressor and victim. Obviously, the social status and characterization of the female narrator would be reversed were this female narrator to double as the initiator of an incestuous act; unlike the male narrator, the female narrator would be unable to keep her femininity or purity, let alone dual status as passive/active, victim/aggressor. Celie's self-conscious presentation of herself as a victim, therefore, affects not only her narrative voice, but also the choice of narrative frame within which to tell her story. Indeed, it is most essential that her story be told as a private narration, since the possibility of transforming it into a public, marketable commodity on a scale equal to Trueblood's is not available to her as a female narrator. Were she to narrate her story publicly, her narrative and sexual status would be radically altered; to assume what is essentially a

masculine role of trickster would change Celie's function in the plot from that of a "victim" to that of a seductress.

The only narrative act that will not alter Celie's sexual status as a non-objectified, woman-identified-woman is a private, monological one. Celie initially begins to write, as Byerman has noted, within the context of an interdiction: "You better not never tell nobody but God. I'd kill your mammy" (11). Pa's interdiction replicates a societal taboo against the narration of incest from a female point of view. Her letters, consequently, are addressed to God-as-diary. This is, quite clearly, not a public gesture but a private one; as we have seen, this private gesture ironically transgresses the initial interdiction due to the fact that the private, journal narrative allows for the construction of a communal, self-consciously female narrative voice to be heard. The female point of view is sustained throughout the narrative by Celie's desire for Shug Avery, a desire that becomes an increasingly disruptive yet reconstructive force that echews the themes and structures of the heroine's love plot with its narrative closure in marriage or death.

The autobiographical voice represented by "Dear God" is deliberately stripped of metaphor, double meanings, and symbol, allowing actions and events to be narrated in such a way as to leave no room for ambiguity; incest, for example, is just that, and not a metaphor for virility or racial conflict. The reasons for this are several. First,

the narration of Celie's life is founded upon a primordial act of symbolization. The interdiction "You better not never tell nobody but God" is, quite obviously, a metaphor for "shut up." It would appear that Walker singles out the use of figurative language within the context of the relationship between the incest victim and her aggressor, as a verbal strategy that easily lends itself to the retention of power over the female. Thus, Celie's adoption of the abrupt, matter-of-fact tone of the ex-slave narratives can be interpreted as a necessary clarification and rectification. The naming of things for what they are, from the point of view of the female victim, means, in effect, to take a narrative stance that runs counter to that of the father's voice. The irony is that Celie does write to God, but by doing so she not only de-metaphorizes the father's actions while acquiring a voice of her own, but also emphasizes the the female incest victim's inability to speak with a public voice due to her inscription within the patriarchal household.

By having Celie take this interdiction literally, Walker appears to critique the relationship between language and power, and to problematize the relationship between women, the literal, and the figurative. Indeed, Walker signifies upon the use of metaphor as a way of retaining power over the marginalized members of society, in the same way, for example, that Ellison signifies upon Wright.<sup>7</sup> By signifying upon "Dear God," Celie transgresses the initial interdiction, eventually replacing the concept of God as the embodiment of the voice of authority with a communal, genderless "It."



In African-American culture and letters, the term "to signify" describes a variety of verbal strategies that can all be defined under the rubric of some form of parody, revision, and reversal. As Henry Louis Gates points out in "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," "[t]he black rhetorical tropes subsumed under signifying would include 'marking', 'loud-talking', 'specifying', 'testifying', 'calling out' (of one's name), 'sounding', 'rapping' and 'playing the dozens'.<sup>8</sup> In her important study of African-American rhetorical modes of signification, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan stresses that signification is marked by indirection and ambiguity: "[w]ithout the element of indirection, a speech act could not be considered signifying."<sup>9</sup> It is in this sense of the term that Walker signifies on the depiction of black women in American literature. While Celie herself does not use the verbal art of signifying on a one-to-one basis in exactly the same way that Janie Starks does with Joe Starks in Hurston's Their Eyes, the text itself is one long, indirect reversal (or signification) on the role that sexuality plays in either liberating or stereotyping female characters in both American and African-American literature.

What Celie's narrative does do, however, is borrow a form of "backtalking" or repartee in the form of sharp, blunt commentary directly modeled on the ex-slave narratives. This commentary makes clear the differences

between men and women, black and white. As we will see, however, signifying between two parties (which, as Mitchell-Kernan points out, is more of a masculine ritual than an act engaged in between females) is engaged in to a limited yet significant extent in the scene between Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and Celie in which Celie defends her desire to leave, as well as in the scene between Sofia and Eleanor Jane in which Sofia refutes the stereotype of the mammy. It is important to note that signifying does not take place between Celie and Shug; instead, a form of female confidence, or "womanspeak" is used in order to reverse previously held notions about female sexuality.

Clearly, the *mélange* of styles and influences that go into shaping Celie's narrative voice can be seen to include variations on signifying, female confidence or "womanspeak," the narratorial bluntness derived from the ex-slaves, and variations on the form of the letter/journal. Of equal importance is the influence of twentieth century black women such as the oft-mentioned Hurston (for the use of folk idiom) and precursors such as Gwendolyn Brooks, whose 1953 novel Maud Martha recalls the abrupt narrative style of The Color Purple. In her essay "'Taming All That Anger Down': Rage and Silence in Gwendolyn Brooks's Maud Martha," Mary Helen Washington points out that the

...discontinuous and truncated chapters, its short, angry sentences, its lack of ornamentation and freeze-frame endings represent structurally the entrapment of women expressed thematically

in the earlier narratives of black women like Nelle Larsen, Zora Hurston, Ann Petry, Dorothy West and Harriet Jacobs.<sup>10</sup>

Celie's narrative voice clearly shares in both the starkness and the anger of Maud Martha's; both texts use structural abruptness in order to represent female anger and entrapment. However, Walker's use of black female discourse in conjunction with the device of the letter/journal affords a means of release from this anger and entrapment. Black female discourse is unrestrained; it is not contained within the parameters of what James Olney has suggested was a major element in the shaping of the nineteenth century slave narratives, that is, the triangular relationship between the narrator, the sponsor, and the audience of readers. This discourse, as reflected in Celie's narrative, echews both the white and the male, not as readers but as censors. In Celie's narration therefore, the relationship between the narrative voice that uses abruptness and matter-of-factness in order to reverse androcentric obfuscation, and the use of the seemingly abrupt sequence of letter/journal entries (as well as Nettie's interruptive sequence of letters) is clearly intended to fulfill two functions at once: to foreground female anger and entrapment, as well as to provide a release from, and critique of, the traditional romance plot.

In his study "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their

Status as Autobiography and as Literature," James Olney examines the effect that the previously noted triangular relationship between the narrator, the audience, and the sponsor had on the construction of the slave autobiography. This relationship, Olney argues, gave to these narratives a quality of "sameness" rather than the uniqueness normally attributed to the autobiographical act. More specifically, this distinguishing quality of "sameness" was a direct result of the complex relationship between truth and memory in the slave's recounting of the events of his/her life.

As Olney points out, in the slave narrative there is a "...virtual absence of any reference to memory or any sense that memory does anything but make the past facts and events of slavery immediately present to the writer and his reader" (150). The foremost reason for this, Olney argues, is that the slave narrative is primarily concerned with telling the truth. And thus, "...it is the writer's claim, it must be his claim that he is not emplotting, he is not fictionalizing, and he is not performing any act of poesis (= shaping, making)" (150). Indeed, Olney states, to be creative "...would be understood by skeptical readers as a synonym for lying" (150). The dismissal of memory from the text naturally gave rise (along with the influence of the sentimental narrative forms) to the use of the conventions of the slave narrative. This, in turn, helped to create what Olney terms the "episodic" quality of these narratives.

At first glance, it would appear that the journal format in The Color Purple is being used for the same purpose (to convince the reader that what is being narrated is the "truth") as the episodic quality of the nineteenth century slave narratives. However, the abrupt, journalistic tone and episodic quality of Celie's narration do not stem from an equivalent relationship between the narrator, the audience, and the sponsor (and thus between truth and memory) as that which shaped the slave narratives. The difference is that Celie's narrative is not primarily concerned with mediating between a white audience and a black author; the abrupt, episodic narration is emblematic of a mode of perception that is non-metaphoric precisely because, as noted earlier, metaphor in The Color Purple is presented as the verbal equivalent of a weapon used to control the young, black, lesbian female. It is more than obvious that Walker's use of the episodic format of journal entries distinguished by an abruptness of tone, an apparent lack of subtlety, and a self-consciously female voice that shocks with its clarity, its poetry, and its urgency, is primarily geared not towards claiming status as the truth, but towards reversing the balance of power between male and female, black and white.

In order to reverse this unequal balance of power, Celie's voice must become a signifying voice; that is, a voice that continuously comments on events as they occur

in order to repudiate a previously held notion about the status quo. Throughout the text, some form of signification is used, in particular during critical moments that I term moments of confrontation. These moments are all highly charged moments mirroring some form of female desire and/or anger. They are further characterized by narrative restraint and retreat; and yet, it is precisely this restraint that enables Celie as narrator to give meaning to the reader through her commentary.

In her study on Caribbean slave narratives "Crushed Geraniums: Juan Francisco Manzano and the Language of Slavery," Susan Willis suggests that the narrator of these narratives is usually placed "...in a very different relationship to the reader than what normally obtains in the tradition of prose literature; for the narrator often cannot supply the reader with meaning."<sup>12</sup> Willis argues that in Manzano's text, what she calls "nodal moments," or the narrated moments of torture, are narrated in a style characterized by the use of two different levels of language "...one immanent and monological and the other abstract and directed to a reader" (220). The immanent and monological level consists of the use of extreme parataxis, and is directly related to the narrator's inability to provide the reader with meaning; everything happens in a rush, and is narrated without explanatory connectives. The abstract tone takes over at the end of the narration, just before the actual moment of physical

abuse or torture, and at the moment of psychological stress. Coming after the paratactic rush of words leading up to the moment of extreme fear, these "artificial lapses," characterized by sentimentality ("Oh God! let us draw a veil over the rest of this scene..." (210) ) effect a retreat from the painful memory of the nodal moment. It is Willis' thesis that this abstraction and withdrawal, along with the paratactic jumble of words preceding it, combines to withhold from the narrator himself the ability to give meaning to his experience.

It is interesting to compare Manzano's method of narrating nodal moments to Celie's narration of similarly charged moments. An obvious difference is that Celie's abrupt and matter-of-fact narration, especially during moments of confrontation (for example, the moment of incest that is normally portrayed as an intense psychological upheaval), does not withhold meaning from the reader; on the contrary, this abrupt tone and episodic quality is what heightens meaning, emphasizing her ability as a narrator to make clear to the reader the nature of the events transpiring around her, and the effect they have on her status as a female within the patriarchal household.

In strong contrast to both Manzano's use of paratactic bluntness and a lack of explanatory connectives, as well as the episodic quality of the African-American slave narratives that do not leave room for the "uniqueness" attributed to the autobiographical act, the episodic quality

of Celie's narration increases meaning and uniqueness, giving her the ability to name and demystify that which is inimical to her reconstruction of herself as a woman identified woman. For Celie, demystifying means using a narrative voice similar to the voice of the ex-slave narratives which bluntly and categorically refutes any introduction of metaphor.

It is clear, in fact, that although Celie's text is rooted in the history of black women, it is neither an epistolary novel, nor a truly personal, autobiographical narration like Manzano's; neither does it replicate the voice of the nineteenth century slaves or the twentieth century ex-slaves. Celie's narration is a carefully selected and manipulated account of her life that only mimics the ex-slave bluntness in order to signify on their inability to tell all of their stories without at times retreating, as did Manzano, from the memory of the nodal moment. In the words of the Rev. Ishrael Massie:

...and as he set puffin' he stop, call a slave, an' stick dat red hot pipe to dey bare flesh. O Lord! Lord! Ya had to come to him. Feared not to. Mercy! Mercy! Mercy! I ain't gwine tell ya no mo' dis 'cause hit makes us jes' hate..."<sup>13</sup>

In obvious contrast to both the above and Manzano's text, Celie's text does not lapse into silence during the nodal moments or scenes of confrontation. There is thus no obfuscation of meaning. Celie fully understands the significance of Pa's aggression; she also clearly understands the broader implications of the heterosexual



male's attempt to rule over the female, telling Harpo, "If you hadn't tried to rule over Sofia the white folks never would have caught her" (180). I do not wish to imply that the ex-slaves always retreat from supplying the reader with the crucial scene or moment of confrontation; on the contrary, the great majority of them do. However, equally present is a repeated desire to retreat from narrating the event. Often, these ex-slaves must be coaxed into telling their stories. It is also rather obvious that the ex-slaves are well able to supply the reader with meaning; the retreat from narration takes place in order to withhold a too obvious meaning. It is this obvious meaning that Celie takes up and transforms into a rejection of the initial metaphoric interdiction; her commentary on what goes on around her surpasses the journalistic commentary that is intended to be private, and becomes a form of signification; that is, a confrontational narrative act that is adapted to a womanist context and purpose.

In an important confrontational scene between herself and Darlene, Celie's commentary is clearly directed towards the connection she perceives between her use of folk diction and her sense of herself as a woman-identified woman. This scene is obviously a repudiation of what Henry Louis Gates describes in the introduction to The Slave's Narrative (1985) as the "...profound importance of the mastery of literacy" to the slave. Gates suggests that the slave narratives of the nineteenth century referred to

the acquisition of literacy in three ways:

...they recount vividly scenes of instruction in which the narrator learned to read and then to write; they underscore polemical admonishments against statutes forbidding literacy training among black slaves; and they are prefaced by ironic apologia, in which the black author transforms the convention of the author's confession of the faults of his tale, by interweaving into this statement strident denunciations of that system that limited the development of his capacities. (xxviii)

In contrast to the slave narrators for whom the acquisition of literacy meant the acquisition of self in a society that denied selfhood to the black slave (who was legally referred to not as a human being, but as property), Celie comments on the paradoxical situation in which the black subject, male or female, finds him/herself: the acquisition of "literacy" is also a form of subservience to "Whitefolks."

In the following scene between Celie and Darlene, the way one speaks is targeted as the central factor in placing the subject either within or without mainstream culture. The "ironic apologia" of the slave narrators is incorporated directly into Celie's method of response to Darlene's "instruction": but in this case, the "denunciations" also work to repudiate white culture, and to reaffirm the speech act as valid only within a female oriented, or womanist folk culture:

Darlene trying to teach me how to talk. She say US not so hot. A dead country giveaway. You say US where most folks say WE, she say, and peoples think you dumb. Colored peoples think you a hick

and white folks be amuse.

What I care? I ast. I'm happy.

...Bring me a bunch of books. Whitefolks all over them, talking bout apples and dogs.

What I care bout dogs? I think..

...Sometimes I think bout the apples and the dogs sometimes I don't. Look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind. (193-94).

Celie's repetitive use of the phrase "What I care?" signals a rejection of white, patriarchal culture, in favor of a female-identified folk culture. It is important to note that this conversation takes place within the context of an exclusively female environment: Shug Avery's home that has become the center of female industry. "Apples and Dogs" have no place in this new order characterized by innovation based on female creativity and spirituality that reflects a womanist ideal of wholeness. Thus, the use of folk speech denotes the desire to retain a self apart from white, mainstream culture.

It is quite evident, then, that it is the use of the folk voice that permits the adaptation of confrontational narrative acts to a womanist agenda. The commentary that forms a major mode of signification is more than just a commentary; it deliberately sets up two diametrically opposed ways of viewing the world: the patriarchal and the womanist. If we examine the ways in which the actual scenes of confrontation or instruction are narrated, it is easy to see just how this method of narration makes the difference between these two contrasting world views more than obvious.

The scene of instruction between Celie and Shug Avery begins with a repudiation of heterosexual, male desire, redirecting Celie towards a knowledge of her own body that leads to an expression of her sexual desire for Shug. The abrupt, matter-of-fact tone here marks the speech act as a corrective one; the tone of confidence is characteristic of Shug's ability to express herself, and becomes the tone used during all exchanges between the two women.

Both Celie and Shug refer to the gap between heterosexual male and female desire with a dramatic bluntness that, unlike Trueblood's very patriarchal definition of heterosexual coitus as a "fight," is characteristic of a self-consciously womanist point of view. Describing coitus between herself and Mr.\_\_\_\_\_, Celie says, "Just do his business, get off, go to sleep" (79). Shug answers just as bluntly, "Do his business. You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you" (79). Here bluntness and the matter-of-fact tone leave no room for confusion in the mind of the reader: what is being narrated here is the gap between the female point of view and that of the androcentric male.

In the confrontational scene between Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ and Celie in which Celie defends her ability to survive without Mr.\_\_\_\_\_, the female folk voice becomes objectified: "Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in and shape words," and "A dust devil flew up on the porch between us, fill my mouth with dirt. The dirt say, Anything

you do to me, already done to you" (187). In this important scene Walker has adapted signifying to a black female folk discourse.

As Gates, paraphrasing Thomas Kochman, explains

...signifying depends upon the signifier repeating what someone else has said about a third person in order to reverse the status of a relationship heretofore harmonious; signifying can also be employed to reverse or undermine pretense or even one's opinion about one's own status. ("The Signifying Monkey," 289)

Mitchell-Kernan further defines signifying as a form of verbal dueling that can have a range of manifestations, but, as mentioned earlier, must always involve indirection and ambiguity: "The apparent significance of the message differs from its real significance" (325). However, in contrast to the famous signifying scene between Janie and Joe Starks in Their Eyes in which Janie uses verbal dueling in order to prove that she is able to use an essentially masculine mode of speech, Celie signifies upon signifying itself in order to convert it into a womanist declaration of self, in conjure woman style.

Each time Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ belittles Celie's ability to survive outside of the patriarchal household, Celie responds, not with indirection, but with a non-metaphorical, non-ambiguous comment: "Any more letters come? I ast" (186). In response to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s derisive "Who you think you is...You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, You pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all" (187), Celie speaks, not in an ambiguous

rebuttal, but through "the voice." This voice, which symbolizes the changed relationship between women, men, and nature in the utopian world of The Color Purple, reverses what Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has previously stated. Rather than responding within the parameters of the signifying ritual, Celie claims the ability to "curse," in a transparent reference to the tradition of African-American folk ways and conjure. By "cursing" she rebuffs the masculine signifying act by throwing back on the speaker his own linguistic aggression. Yet, ironically, in true signifying style, Celie has the final word on the object of this verbal duel, herself: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening, But I'm here" (187).

Walker's attempt to adapt signifying to black female discourse and womanist aesthetics is also evident in the confrontational scene between Sofia and Eleanor Jane. In this scene, signifying is used as long as Sofia continues to act as a mammy figure to Eleanor Jane, for the obvious reason that ambiguity and indirection are the only means through which to express a veiled aggression at the same time as one complies with the role one is expected to play. Such strategies of indirection are part of the folk heritage of African-American culture. However, signifying cannot act as the mode of expression for very long in this scene for two reasons: first, Eleanor Jane is incapable of participating in the verbal duel since, as a white woman, she is unaware that signifying is taking place. As Mitchell-

Kernan explains, both parties must be aware that signifying is taking place in order for the speech act to be designated as signifying. Second, signifying is not able to break Sofia out of the mammy mould; in order for this to happen the blunt, direct commentary that has been Celie's method of narration must also become Sofia's.

Although signifying is used as a rhetorical strategy in The Color Purple, the bluntness of black female folk discourse is clearly preferred as a narrative strategy that can clarify and reverse relations of power between individuals of differing races, sexes, and classes. It is Walker's unique use of language that poses the most effective challenge to the heroine's trajectory in the love plot. Indeed, rather than effecting a split between the use of the folk voice and the "fairy tale" plot, as Trudier Harris has suggested, this combination of narrative voice with letter/journal entries is the means through which a private, autobiographical act becomes a communal narration. For in contrast to the public, trickster voice, the private, journalistic voice speaks without recourse to metaphor or indirection. In some opinions, of course, this constitutes a major flaw in the text. It cannot be over-emphasized, however, that the stark, matter-of-fact tone of the journal entries made public is tailored to the narrativization of female desire and female experience within a Southern, rural setting.<sup>14</sup>

While Celie describes Reynolds Stanley Earl in the

piercing, direct idiom of black female folk discourse, "He a little fat white something without much hair, look like he headed for the navy" (232), Sofia must first engage in the signification ritual of indirection and ambiguity:

Don't you think he sweet? she ast again.  
 He sure fat, say Sofia, turning over the dress she ironing.  
 And he sweet, too, say Miss Eleanor Jane.  
 Just as plump as he can be, say Sofia. And tall.  
 But he sweet, too say Eleanor Jane. And he smart  
 ...Ain't he the smartest baby you ever saw? she ast Sofia.  
 He got a nice size head on him, say Sofia. You know some peoples place a lot of weight on head size. Not a whole lot of hair on it either. He gon be cool this summer, for sure. She fold the piece she iron and put it on a chair. (232)

By using indirection to speak about a third party (the baby), Sofia lets both the reader and Celie, but not Eleanor Jane, know that she is repudiating her role as mammy. In order for Eleanor Jane to receive the same information, Sofia must resort to direct, blunt speech that will echo Celie's initial direct narratorial commentary on Eleanor Jane, as well as the relationship between "whitefolks" and black women: "And you know how some whitefolks is, won't let well enough alone. If they want to bad enough, they gon harass a blessing from you if it kill" (232). Sofia abandons the indirection of the signifying act and speaks with outspokenness and bluntness: "Just a sweet, smart, cute, innocent little baby boy, say Miss Eleanor Jane. Don't you just love him, she ast Sofia point blank...No ma'am, say Sofia. I do not love Reynolds Stanley Earl" (232). Here Eleanor Jane's need and desire



for Sofia's love leads her to demand the same from Sofia. This leaves Sofia little choice but to first, resort to signifying, and then to discard that mode of speech in favor of the direct, blunt mode of black female folk discourse, which is able to upset the power balance between the white mistress and the black servant: "I love children, say Sofia. But all the colored women that say they love yours is lying" (232).

From the first few pages of The Color Purple, Celie's narration sets the tone of the "Dear God" diary entries, beginning the process of revisionary mythopoesis, signification, and direct commentary on the condition of black women within the Southern, rural, and patriarchal household. The tone is, above all, a highly pragmatic one distinguished by its terseness, its lack of sentimentality, and a blunt, matter-of-fact attitude that exhibits a perceptiveness and precociousness about sexual matters that belies the heroine's ability to keep her innocence through all her trials. Most importantly, though, in terms of the construction of the womanist self, this choice of narrative voice brings to the fore the theme of female difference. This is done by setting up an opposition between androcentric, heterosexual desire that is characterized by aggression, and womanist desire that is characterized by a desire for wholeness and the ability to nurture other members (both male and female) of the utopian, womanist community.

The narration of black female difference in The Color Purple begins with the narration of incest from the point of view of an adolescent female who is acutely aware of her position as a desirable object in the patriarchal household ruled by the stepfather. Indeed, as I have tried to show, the difference between Celie's narration and Trueblood's (in which incest is stripped of its ethical overtones by implying that even in this sexual act a man is no more than the passive "victim" of his physiology: "But once a man gits hisself in a tight spot like that there ain't much he can do. It ain't up to him no longer" (58)) is the difference between the androcentric, heterosexual male narrator and the womanist narrator; it is the difference between the voice of Linda Brent and Dr. Flint, of Freud and the adolescent Dora.

It is not without reason that Celie's narration is, from the outset, couched in the language of an adolescent Southern country girl. The male member is described as "his thing," and an erection as "sort of wiggling it around." Clearly, the immediate effect of this discursive mode is to rob the heterosexual act of coitus of its erotic dimensions, as well as to deprive incest of any romantic overtones. The abrupt, matter-of-fact and non-metaphoric voice in effect both demystifies the phallus and denies it its Freudian supremacy. The euphemism "his thing" is not used in an effort to obscure meaning, or in accordance with the diction of Southern

black English, but primarily to establish a clear-cut difference between the androcentric narrative voice and that of black female discourse in the womanist text.

It is evident, then, that Walker's didactic purpose in The Color Purple is the deromantization of incest/rape, and a critique of heterosexual, androcentric notions of woman's place within a patriarchal society that is also racist. The possibilities of such a critique, however, depend largely, in Walker's view, on who is doing the narrating. As I have argued, and as the most profitable reading of The Color Purple will show, at the thematic center of Walker's text is the desire to tell the other side of the story, in this instance, the Southern, rural black woman whose historical roots lie in the experience of slavery and sexual oppression. Celie's response to Pa's interdiction "But I don't never git used to it" (11) begins the process of the construction of the womanist self, a process reflected through the use of language as a means of self-liberation. The cynical yet practical note sounded at the end of each letter/journal entry continues this process, linking the reconstruction of the self to the history of all the women in Celie's community. These comments are non-metaphorical, and offer up pragmatic solutions to finding a way out of oppressive circumstances:

But too sick to last long. (11)  
Kill this one too if he can. (12)

I keep hoping he fine somebody to marry. (13)  
 It be more then a notion taking care of children  
 ain't even yourn. And look what happen to Ma.

(14)

I say Marry him, Nettie, an try to have one good  
 year out your life. After that, I know she be  
 big. (15)

Celie's commentary is the literary progression of the complex relationship between African-American women writers, the word, and the construction of the autobiographical self. In the late eighteenth century, Phillis Wheatley wrote and published poetry that appeared to conform to the cultural discourse of Pope and Milton. Yet, as Henry Louis Gates has suggested, the publication of Wheatley's first book of poems, Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral (1773), brought about a change in her ontological status from that of slave to human. Wheatley was manumitted after the publication of her poems, for the reviews argued that if blacks could write, then they were humans and should not be enslaved. Contemporary African-American women writers such as Walker, aware of this history of difference and of Wheatley's literal writing of herself into existence, continue to explore, in novels such as The Color Purple, the relationship between the word, the self, and the condition of being black and female in twentieth century American society.

NOTESIntroduction

<sup>1</sup> Narrative of Elizabeth Sparks, in Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves, eds., Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980) 273.

<sup>2</sup>Christine Froula, "The Daughter's Seduction: Sexual Violence and Literary History," Signs 11 (1986): 621-44  
Lauren Berlant, "Race, Gender, and Nation in The Color Purple," Critical Inquiry 14 (Summer 1988): 831-59.

<sup>3</sup>Zora Neale Hurston, Dust Tracks on a Road (1942; Urbana: Illinois UP, 1984) xxx.

<sup>4</sup>Perdue xxiii.

<sup>5</sup>Froula 623.

<sup>6</sup>Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Editor's Introduction, "Writing 'Race' and the Difference it Makes," Critical Inquiry 12 (Autumn 1985): 13.

<sup>7</sup>Alice Walker, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan Review," in Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983) 83.

<sup>8</sup>Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," Signs 1:1 (1975); 3.

<sup>9</sup>See Mary Helen Washington, Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860-1960 (New York: Doubleday, 1987). All further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>10</sup>Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "To Write Myself: The Autobiographies of Afro-American Women," in Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship ed. Shari Benstock (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 163. All further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>11</sup>Alice Walker, "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience," in In Search 18.

## Chapter I

<sup>1</sup>Narrative of Mrs. Minnie Folkes, in Weevils in the Wheat, Charles L. Perdue, Jr., 92.

<sup>2</sup>Nelson George, "Native Daughters," The Village Voice May 23 1989: 34. All further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>3</sup>Trudier Harris, "On The Color Purple, Stereotypes, and Silence," Black American Literature Forum 18 (Winter 1984): 155. All further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>4</sup>Mel Watkins, "Sexism, Racism, and Black Women Writers," New York Times Book Review June 16, 1986: 37.

<sup>5</sup>Roseann P. Bell, "Judgement: Addison Gayle," in Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker, and Beverly Guy Sheftall Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1979) 211.

<sup>6</sup>Robert Staples, "The Myth of Black Macho: Response to Angry Black Feminists," The Black Scholar March-April 1979: 26. All further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>7</sup>Alice Walker, "To The Black Scholar," in In Search 320.

<sup>8</sup>Jean Fagan Yellin The Intricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature 1776-1863 (New York: New York UP, 1979) 126. All further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>9</sup>Arlene Elder The 'Hindered Hand': Cultural Implications of Early African-American Fiction (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1978). All further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>10</sup>Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Criticism in the Jungle," Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. Black Literature and Literary Theory (New York: Methuen, 1984) 9.

<sup>11</sup>Barbara Christian Black Feminist Criticism:

Perspectives on Black Women Writers (New York: Pergamon, 1985) 169.

<sup>12</sup>Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in Arna Bontemps The Harlem Renaissance Remembered: Essays With a Memoir (New York: Dodd Mead, 1972) 394.

<sup>13</sup>Richard Wright, "Between Laughter and Tears," New Masses 5 October 1937, 25. All further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>14</sup>See Darwin T. Turner's analysis of Janie's behavior at her husband's bedside in In a Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1971) as well as Rita Dandridge's critique of his remarks in "Male Critics/Black Women's Novels," CLA Journal 23:1 (1979): 1-11.

<sup>15</sup>Robert Stepto, "I Thought I Knew These People: Richard Wright and the Afro-American Literary Tradition," Michael S. Harper and Robert B. Stepto, eds., Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1979) 198.

<sup>16</sup>Barbara Smith, "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Babara Smith, eds., But Some of Us Are Brave (Old Westbury, N.Y: The Feminist Press, 1982) 173.

<sup>17</sup>Gerald Early, "The Color Purple as Everybody's Protest Art," The Antioch Review 44:1 (Winter 1986):



and Keith Byerman Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction (Athens: Georgia UP, 1985)

170. All further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>18</sup>James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," James Baldwin Notes of a Native Son (New York: Bantam Books, 1955) 10.

<sup>19</sup>Narrative of Carol Anna Randall, Weevils in the Wheat 236.

## Chapter II

<sup>1</sup>Narrative of Mrs. Sis Shackelford, Weevils in the Wheat 250.

<sup>2</sup>Nina Baym Women's Fiction: A Guide to Novels By and About Women in America, 1820-70 (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978) 46. All further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>3</sup>Alice Walker The Color Purple (New York: Washington Square, 1982) 179. All further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>4</sup>Alice Walker, "Finding Celie's Voice," Ms December 1985, 71.

<sup>5</sup>Rachel Blau DuPlessis Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth Century Women Writers (Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1985) 102. All further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>6</sup>Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," American Quarterly 18 (Summer 1966): 152.

<sup>7</sup>William Faulkner Absalom, Absalom! (New York: Modern Library, 1964) 67.

<sup>8</sup>Alice Walker, "Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson," in In Search 81.

<sup>9</sup>Zora Neale Hurston Mules and Men (Philadelphia: 1935) 18-19. Quoted in Alan Dundes Mother Wit From the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1973)

<sup>10</sup>Jane Tompkins, "Sentimental Power: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Politics of Literary History," collected in Elaine Showalter, ed. The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 84. All further references will be cited in the text. See Tompkins' analysis of the progressive nature of stereotypes in nineteenth century American fiction in Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction (New York: Oxford UP, 1985). An erudite but essentially shallow apology for racism.

<sup>11</sup>Sonia Sanchez, quoted in Claudia Tate Black Women Writers at Work (New York: Continuum, 1983) 148.

<sup>12</sup>Narrative of Mrs. Mary Jones, Weevils in The Wheat 188.

<sup>13</sup> Hazel Carby Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 58.

<sup>14</sup> Linda Brent [Harriet Jacobs] Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1973) 207.

<sup>15</sup> See Ellen Tarry The Third Door: The Autobiography of an American Negro Woman (New York: Guild Press, 1955) This novel (the autobiography of a black woman's conversion to Catholicism) clearly illustrates the way in which a sentimentalized presentation of the black woman by a black woman is abruptly cast aside, revealing anger and a deep sense of difference that must be kept out of the text.

<sup>16</sup> See Helen Waite Papashvily All the Happy Endings: A Study of the Domestic Novel in America, the Women Who Wrote it, the Women Who Read it in the Nineteenth Century (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1956). Baym's evaluation of Maria McIntosh's Two Pictures: or, What We Think of Ourselves and What the World Thinks of Us (1863) is disappointing. A close reading of this novel, is, indeed, a dismal affair, but Baym insists on apologizing for McIntosh's pro-patriarchal (and pro-s'avery) bent by using the tactics of those very androcentric critics from whose ire she has tried to save nineteenth century women's fiction. In an attempt to explain McIntosh's call for the

recognition of slavery as a divinely appointed institution, Baym suggests that perhaps McIntosh's age should be taken into account. Perhaps, Baym claims, McIntosh was tired, "...nostalgic, exhausted, old." We should then view Two Pictures as the writing of "...a woman who had been supporting herself for thirty years...[and] perhaps knew exhaustion at first hand" (108).

<sup>17</sup>Harriet Beecher Stowe Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852: New York: Penguin, 1981) 418.

<sup>18</sup>Narrative of Mr. Beverley Jones Weevils in the Wheat 183.

### Chapter III

<sup>1</sup>Narrative of Mrs. Minnie Folkes Weevils in the Wheat 95-96.

<sup>2</sup>Gloria Naylor, "Love and Sex in the Afro-American Novel," The Yale Review 78:1 (March 1989) : 20.

<sup>3</sup>Byerman 19. See Byerman's assessment of Trueblood's assumption of the trickster role for an example of how the role of the black woman in the Trueblood episode is overlooked and misinterpreted.

<sup>4</sup>Janet Gurkin Altman Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form (Columbus: Ohio State Up, 1982) 121. All further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>5</sup>See Guy B. Johnson, "Double Meaning in the Popular Negro Blues," in Alan Dundes, ed. Mother Wit From the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : Prentice-Hall, 1973) 258-66 for an amusing example of one critic's bias against the blues and their suspect double meanings that are linked to female sexuality and creativity. As Johnson explains, "Folk song students know that many standard folk songs have come up out of the slime. But it is doubtful if any group has ever carried its ordinary vulgarities over into respectable song life so completely as the American Negro" (66).

<sup>6</sup>See Marjorie Pryse's Introduction "Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and the 'Ancient Power' of Black Women," in Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington: Illinois UP, 1979) for a discussion of the role of the conjure woman in black women's fiction.

<sup>7</sup>See Henry Louis Gates, "The Blackness of Blackness: a Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," and Houston A. Baker, Jr., "To Move Without Moving: Creativity and Commerce in Ralph Ellison's *Trueblood* Episode," in Black Literature and Literary Theory for an analysis of revision in African-American texts.

<sup>8</sup>Gates "The Blackness of Blackness" 286.

<sup>9</sup>Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, "Signifying," in Mother Wit From the Laughing Barrel 325.

<sup>10</sup>Mary Helen Washington, "'Taming All That Anger Down': Rage and Silence in Gwendolyn Brooks's Maud Martha," in Black Literature and Literary Theory 260.

<sup>11</sup>James Olney, "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," in Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. eds. The Slave's Narrative (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). All further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>12</sup>Susan Willis, "Crushed Geraniums: Juan Francisco Manzano and the Language of Slavery," in The Slave's Narrative 202. All further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>13</sup>Narrative of the Rev. Ishrael Massie, Weevils in the Wheat 206.

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