

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# "Tell Nobody but God": Reading Mothers, Sisters, and "The Father" in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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## Keywords

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, sisterhood, mothers, patriarchy

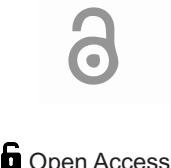
## Introduction

Alice Walker's 1982 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple* opens with the admonition: "*You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy*" (Walker, 1982, p.1). This warning comes as "Pa" rapes Celie, his (step) daughter and the fourteen-year-old protagonist of the novel. Scholar Christine Froula (1986) writes that Pa's warning robs Celie "in the name of her mother, of her story and voice" (p. 638). It is significant then that Pa rapes Celie when her mother is away from home, and visiting a sister. In his attempt to guarantee Celie's silence, which in addition, burdens her with responsibility for her mother's life and wellbeing (i.e. "*It'd kill your mammy*,") Pa inadvertently provides Celie an outlet for her confusion, grief, and shame, "tell ... God". Celie heeds Pa's cautioning and pens her first letter to God.<sup>1</sup>

In my reading of *The Color Purple*, I make several interconnected arguments, the first being that "The Father," that is any male, sanctioned by patriarchy, and in the context of a patriarchal, sexist male order, disrupts what would otherwise be a powerful and sustaining relationship, that of the mother-daughter relationship. I continue that sisterhood that is multifaceted and intergenerational serves as a corrective to the disrupted maternal and filial relationship. It is sisters in the novel and not mothers who step in to "mother," that is nurture, protect, support, as well as challenge one another, even in the most harrowing of situations – including rape, incest, spousal abuse, ailing health, and imprisonment. It is in the context of Celie's sister-relationships Walker's protagonist is able to wrest herself free of patriarchal dogma, informed as it is by sexist, racist cultural and familial practices, that do not serve her well; and that favor abusive men. It is also in the context of Celie's sister-relationships with Nettie, Celie's biological sister; Sofia, Celie's daughter-in-law, Lillie "Shug" Avery, Celie's love/r, and Mary "Squeak" Agnes, Celie's acquaintance, that Celie is able to transform from a poor, isolated, victimized, and beholden Southern Black girl who simply wants to know "what is happening to me?" to a self-possessed, loved, and enterprising Black woman, in community (Walker, 1982, p. 1). Celie's transformation is not one-sided however, as Walker constructs these sister-relationships as mutually influencing.

bell hooks (1989) argues that by emphasizing sisterhood in *The Color Purple* Walker displaces "motherhood as central signifier for female being," adding, "it is the recognition of the self in the other, of unity [or, the desire for recognition and unity], and not self in relationship to the production of children that enables women to connect with one another" (Bloom, 1989, p. 226, italics mine). In her emphasis on Black female sisterhood, Walker demonstrates an awareness as a Black feminist artist (i.e. womanist), as a mother of a daughter, and as the youngest of eight children born to sharecropper parents in a racially apartheid US South of what scholar Dianne Sandoff (1989) terms the "historical burdens" of Black motherhood. According to Sandoff such historical burdens include slavery, sexual exploitation, forced loss of children, and economic marginality (p. 121). In her 1979 essay "One Child of One's Own," included in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker provides that in addition, "a slave heritage ...poverty...hatred, generally speaking...segregated schools, slum neighborhoods, [and] the worst of everything" constitute the historical inheritance, and material reality of Black

<sup>1</sup> Ruth El Saffar (1985) writes in "Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*," that Celie's "letters ... have the effect of turning her from object to subject. They record not only the events of her life, but the process by which she becomes aware of her innate value as a being capable of loving and being loved. The particular epistolary structure that Alice Walker has chosen allows Celie, as no other structure could, to be transformed, and in her turn, to transform her world. Silent, yet attentive as the God to whom Celie writes, Alice Walker creates the space in which her character can develop on her own terms" (p. 11).



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motherhood (Walker, 1983, p. 374). This seems especially so when one considers that *The Color Purple's* setting is rural Georgia during the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century. Celie and her "sisters" are a little over two generations out of slavery. Whereas Black mothers in Walker's novel, and this includes Celie, Sofia, Shug Avery, and Mary Agnes, and, to a degree, Nettie, are physically and mentally conquered, silenced, absented, or dead, Black and Black-identified sisters are constant, if temporarily disrupted, relations. Thus, suggests *The Color Purple*, if patriarchal, and racist, sexist, and classist socio-cultural forces, forces with longstanding histories that predate even Celie's narrative, inhibit Black motherhood in such a way that both mother and daughter/child are adversely affected, what is required is a new imagining for the Black maternal and filial relationship. That new imagining is sisterhood, suggests *The Color Purple*.

Gloria Thomas Pillow (2010) writes in *Motherhood in Shades of Black* that the "most compelling aspect of the mother/child [or mother/daughter] relationship in [*The Color Purple*] is, in fact, its absence" (p. 114). As such, continues Pillow, "A great deal of displaced mothering goes on by women who either cannot or will not nurture their own children" (Pillow, p. 114). Pillow adds, "even when the biological mother is present, she is not – not for long, not in a truly nurturing or protective way" (Pillow, p. 114). For this reason, Pillows continues, "a sense of pervasive motherlessness underlies" Walker's novel (Pillow, p. 114). I agree with Pillow's reading of the novel, and further add that *The Color Purple* demonstrates it is sisters and sisterhood, and not mothers and motherhood, that promotes Black girls and women's emotional, psychological, spiritual and physical growth and development, and it is sisterhood that is the most sustaining of relationships for Celie and her sisters.<sup>2</sup> These relationships are not without challenges; rather they are complicated by physical distance, jealousy, sexual desire, intra-racial color prejudice, emotional withholding, and emotional abuse. According to Mae G. Henderson (1989), *The Color Purple* demonstrates "the necessity for each person to struggle against unjust oppression, whether in the home, in the community, or in a racially hostile society" (Bloom, 1989, p.70). Such struggle, argues this article, and in particular for Celie and her actual and figurative sisters, necessitates a community of at once nurturing, challenging, and supportive sisters.<sup>3</sup>

### Reading Black Feminist and Intersectional

My approach to reading *The Color Purple* is Black feminist literary, and intersectional. An intersectional Black feminist theoretical is premised on the idea that "gender inequality," in the words of sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, "has long worked in tandem with racial domination and economic [and sexual] exploitation" (as cited in DeShazer, 2000, p. 638). As such, there is a recognition throughout of patriarchy as part of interlocking systems of oppressions that include oppressions of race, sex, class, and sexuality (as cited in DeShazer, 2000, p. 638). I read *The Color Purple* with the recognition that, as scholar Virginia M. Koudis (1995) writes, "the universal institutionalization of male privilege, [sic] is experienced most immediately as the power of the father within the biological [and, I would add, non-biological] nuclear family" (Koudis, p. 655). In my reading, patriarchy is understood to work on micro and macro levels, privileging males, and in particular and in the context of the Black family, fathers, and operating, once again, in tandem with race/ethnicity, sex/gender/sexuality, and class systems, and often to the detriment of Black and Black-identified girls and women. Second to this, I understand, as the late Jewish poet and theorist, Adrienne Rich (1984) did, and as *The Color Purple* suggests, that "patriarchy exists nowhere in a pure state," and is part of "a tangle of oppressions grown up and around each other for centuries" (Freedman, 2007, p. 374).

I understand sisterhood in the novel to be a process, and one that is ongoing<sup>4</sup>, and argue that in *The Color Purple* Walker puts forth a vision of Black female sisterhood in which

<sup>2</sup> I agree further with Pillow when she writes "the pathology of gender oppression that spirals throughout [Celie's] story," and "the victimization of Black women at the hands of Black men – especially fathers and husbands" is "more starkly felt [in the novel] than even the blatantly racist society in which" Walker's characters are set (*Motherhood in Shades of Black* 115). After all, Celie's first experience of intimate violence, sexual abuse, and oppression occurs in her family home, and at the hands of the man she believes is her father.

<sup>3</sup> The setting for *The Color Purple* is pre-Civil Rights, Jim Crow Georgia.

<sup>4</sup> For additional perspective on Black feminists' approaches to and understandings of sisterhood between Black girls and women, all of which form the foundation for my reading of sisterhood/sister-relations in *The Color Purple*, see Cheryl R. Hopson's (2015) essay "The U.S. Women's Liberation Movement and Black Feminist 'Sisterhood'" in *Provocations: A Transnational Reader in the History of Feminist Thought*; Audre Lorde's (1983) "Eye to Eye" in *Sister: Outsider*; Alice Walker's (1983) *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, bell hooks' (1984) *Feminist Theory: From the Margin to the Center*, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall's (1995) edited volume *Words of Fire*.

generations of Southern Black girls and women come together, however tenuously, as nurturing, supportive, and challenging “sisters,” and against a patriarchal, and sexist male order. I continue that these sisterhoods allow for and foster communication and knowing; they engender creativity, as well as personality, and consciousness shifts, and are, generally speaking, positive relations. I read *The Color Purple* as a suggestion by Walker that sisterhood between generations of Black girls and women, despite or perhaps it is in full recognition of the challenges, and benefits, encourages and permits all involved “to grow, to develop, to change, [and to] keep up with” one another as sisters (Walker, 1983, p. 215).

In *The Color Purple*, Walker provides four distinct though interrelated models of Black female sisterhood. These models are intergenerational in nature, and develop under patriarchy and in a virulently racist and sexist Jim Crow U.S. South. The sister-relationships Celie forms with her actual biological sister, Nettie, and her figurative sisters, Sofia, Shug Avery, and Mary Agnes are not automatic by virtue of these Black female character’s gender, race, and class sameness (though these, similar to proximity, show an influence) Rather, these sister-relations Celie establishes and shares develop over years. That Celie’s biological sister Nettie co-writes the narrative of *The Color Purple* can be read as a suggestion by Walker that biological sisters hold, to some degree, the private, personal histories of one another that when shared provide a larger, more encompassing perspective. Celie and Nettie’s relationship serves as a model of sisterhood in which there is unconditional love and support across and despite the challenge of geographic and temporal distances. The intertwining of their voices in the narrative telling of *The Color Purple* is suggestive of the degree of intimacy and influence of their shared sister relationship.<sup>5</sup> Their sisterhood develops in the presence of an overburdened, mentally ill, and eventually physically dead mother, and a sexually and physically abusing stepfather.

Celie is both Nettie’s sister and a mother figure for Nettie, and Celie nurtures, protects, cares for, and challenges Nettie in a way that their mother refused or was unable. Celie effectively functions then as an othermother to Nettie, stepping in to care for and protect her sister in their mother’s absence. Collins (1990) introduced the term “othermothers” in her Black feminist canonical collection *Black Feminist Thought*, and in which she writes of othermothers as (Black) girls and women who are “key not only in supporting children but also in supporting bloodmothers who, for whatever reason, were ill-prepared or had little desire to care for their children”<sup>6</sup> (Collins, p. 48). According to Collins, othermothers are commonplace within African American women’s mothering practices, and within (Black) girls’ experiences as daughters.

As an othermother to Nettie, and as her biological sister, Celie fiercely loves and protects Nettie, at times sacrificing herself for the sake of her sister. In return, Nettie attempts to build Celie’s confidence by assuring Celie that she is intelligent, competent, beautiful, and worth fighting for, and this despite Pa and Mr.\_\_\_\_ words to the contrary. Celie and Nettie’s sister relationship is paramount as it is the first relationship in which both sisters experience unconditional love. Their sisterhood withstands familial strife, sexual violence, forced separation, and the passage of time.

The sisterhood that Celie and Sofia together establish demonstrates what Walker might refer to as the underside of sisterhood that is the sometimes distressing and disappointing challenges of Black female sisterhood. Sofia is one of six daughters, and at least a decade younger than Celie. Because of Sofia’s experiences with her own biological sisters, all of whom support one another in every way they can, Sofia trusts Celie from the start of their relationship. However, when Celie betrays her trust, Sofia is dumbfounded. Through Celie’s breach of trust, Sofia learns a valuable lesson about sisterhood. It is, as Walker (1983) has written, that “complete trust in all Black women,” like all categorical trust, is foolish (Walker, p. 377). As Lauren Berlant (1989) astutely argues, Sofia is “...the first woman Celie knows who refuses to accede to both the patriarchal and the racist demand that the black woman demonstrates her abjection to oppressors” (Bloom, 1989, p. 219), be they male or female, Black or white. Sofia fights to self-defend, to respect and honor her mind, body, and spirit and in doing so, she demonstrates for Celie “courage, a sense of humor...and faith in her own perception of reality” (Walker, 1983, p. 352). In addition, Sofia’s presence and her willingness

<sup>5</sup> My idea here aligns with Froula’s (1986) argument that “Celie’s voice [and story] gains strength as she comes into possession of her history [and herstory]” through the reading of Nettie’s letters (p. 640).

<sup>6</sup> Collins (1990) continues, “in African-American communities, the boundaries distinguishing biological mothers of children from other [girls and] women who care for children are often fluid and changing ... Grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins [and ‘fictive kin’] acted as othermothers by taking childcare responsibilities for each other’s children” (p. 47).

and need to fight to self-protect, makes Celie that much more aware of the diminishing effect of continuous battling on the body, as well as the psyche. By the time Celie and Sofia meet, Sofia, at fifteen years old, is tired of, though far from done with, fighting.

Of Celie and Shug Avery's sister-relationship, scholar E. Ellen Barker (1999) writes that Shug Avery is a "subtly guiding 'mothering' influence" on Celie, and that Shug Avery aids in Celie's "spiritual rebirth, freeing her to finally enter 'into the creation'" that is life<sup>7</sup> (Dieke, 1999, p. 55). The same can be said be said of Celie for Shug Avery. Celie and Shug Avery share a sisterly bond that is both sexual and nonsexual in nature. When the two first meet, Shug Avery, a sharp-tongued, traveling Blues singer who is anywhere from fifteen to twenty years older than Celie, treats Celie as both her servant and her archrival. Estranged from both her parents due to her lifestyle, though an estrangement seemingly most felt in her relationship with her mother, Shug Avery arrives in Celie's life and narrative, a woman in need of care that is both sexual and nonsexual in nature.<sup>8</sup> In return for Celie's caretaking, attention, and listening ear, Shug Avery brings excitement and an appreciation for beauty, sex, love, and music to Celie's life and narrative. Shug Avery also later provides Celie much-needed shelter and economic support. Additionally, Shug Avery cajoles Celie into questioning and ultimately rejecting patriarchal religious dogma handed down by her family and culture, and into rethinking Celie's conception of God as an aloof *white man* to "everything that is or ever will be" (Walker, 1982, p.167). This spiritual reconsideration is significant for Celie as it allows her free herself not simply of her abusive marriage to Mr. \_\_\_, but also of her imbibed belief in Mr. \_\_\_'s *right*, as her husband, to abuse her.

Mary "Squeak" Agnes's Black mother becomes for the only mixed-race Black and white character in Walker's novel and Celie's sisterhood(s), a pathway to sisterhood that is intergenerational and inter-ethnic, i.e. Black and Black-identified sisterhood. Mary Agnes' presence in the novel allows Celie the opportunity to put into practice some of the lessons she has learned in her relationships with Sofia and Shug Avery. Light skin, and considered beautiful, though meek and mousy, hence the pet name "Squeak," Mary Agnes both stands apart and yet is enjoined in a sisterhood with Celie, as well as with Sofia and Shug Avery. Both Celie and Mary Agnes face domination by overbearing and abusive men, and both are victims of incestuous rape. Whereas Celie is dark-skinned and considered ugly, in particular by her stepfather and husband, and largely due to her dark skin tone and African-American features, Mary Agnes is "yellowskin," as Celie describes her, and considered beautiful, in large part because of her lighter skin and Anglo features, and in particular by her beau, Harpo. Significantly, it is by way of Celie and Mary Agnes's sister-relationship that conversations about colorism and intra-racism within Black communities generally, and within Black sisterhoods, specifically, enter into the narrative of *The Color Purple*.

### A Note on the Article's Arrangement

This article's arrangement is in accordance with Celie's introduction of her "sisters" to her readers, i.e. God and Nettie, as well as in accordance with Walker's introduction of these Black female characters to her reading public. I begin with an examination of Celie's relationship to her biological sister, Nettie, to establish a framework for reading Celie's relationships with her figurative sisters, i.e. Sofia, Shug, and Squeak. I conclude with an examination of Celie's friendship with the much younger Mary "Squeak" Agnes, once again the only biracial, Black and white female character in *The Color Purple*, and in Celie's sister circle. This arrangement allows for a demonstration of the particulars of each sister-relationship, and a highlighting of the personal and interpersonal changes that result from these sister-relationships. Second to this, the arrangement demonstrates the shaping influence of each sister on Celie's consciousness, behaviors, life, and story; and thus, on the narrative of *The Color Purple*.

### Celie and Nettie

After the death of their mother, when the sisters are in their early teens, Celie becomes a watchful and determined protector of her sister Nettie's propriety. Although Celie cannot protect herself from the sexual violence of their Pa, and although the sisters mother could not or would not protect Celie from such abuse Celie protects Nettie by sacrificing her body to keep Nettie's inviolate from Pa's sexual abuses. In a letter to God, Celie writes of Pa, "I tell him I

<sup>7</sup> See *Critical Essays on Alice Walker* (1999).

<sup>8</sup> Ironically, Shug Avery's mother is raising Shug Avery's kids, whom Shug seems to have physically and, it seems, emotionally, abandoned by the time she and Celie meet.

can fix myself up for him. I duck into my room and come out wearing horsehair, feathers, and a pair of our new mammy high heel shoes" (Walker, 1982, p. 8). Celie continues, "He beat me for dressing trampy but he do it to me anyway" (Walker, p. 8). In addition to sacrificing herself for the sake of her sister, Celie, who is little more than two years older than her younger sister provides Nettie guidance neither she nor Nettie received from their mother, a woman who by the time of Nettie's birth when Celie was just two years old had crossed over into insanity. When, for example, Celie sees Nettie keeping company with a man very similar to Pa,<sup>9</sup> in that he is older, and widowed with children, the very man in fact who Pa will soon marry Celie off to, Celie cautions Nettie to "keep at your books...look what happen to Ma" (Walker, p. 5). Because Celie and Nettie were babies when their biological father, a prosperous Black businessman was murdered, and when their wealthy mother remarried, Celie, and Nettie are unaware of their mother's and their own life prior the mother's marriage to Pa/Alfonso. As such, for Celie and Nettie, their mother's life functions as a cautionary tale. Forever pregnant when alive, and now dead, the mother becomes for her daughters, and for Celie especially, a painful and piteous example of what can happen to a woman when under the control of a brutal, domineering, and misogynist husband.

For her part, Nettie bears witness to Celie's pain, abuse, and drudgery. Nettie is present when their mother, when alive, and following the lead of her second husband, Pa/Alfonso, berates Celie for Celie's seeming ineptness at housekeeping and caretaking. Nettie is also present, or at the very least in the home, when Pa repeatedly sexually violates Celie. Nettie loves her older sister and dotes on Celie. In this way, she returns the sisterly love and maternal nurturing Celie provides her. Additionally, Nettie teaches Celie to read once the two pregnancies that result from Pa's rapes of Celie forces her to withdraw from school. Additionally, and through her letters, Nettie educates Celie about the world outside of their small Georgia town and community, telling Celie of her travels in and learnings about Africa, and questioning Celie, "Did you know there were great cities in Africa, greater than Milledgeville or even Atlanta, thousands of years ago? That the Egyptians who built the pyramids and enslaved the Israelites were colored? That Egypt is in Africa? That the Ethiopia we read about in the Bible meant all of Africa?" (Walker, 1982, 138). As Froula (1986) writes, from Nettie's letters, "Celie learns her lost history; that their father had been lynched when they were babies for having a store that did too well; that their mother, then a wealthy widow, had lost her reason and married a stranger, the man Celie knew as her 'Pa'; that he had given Celie's two children to Samuel and Corinne, the missionaries whom Nettie had also fled; and that, Corinne having died, Samuel, Nettie, and Celie's children are returning to the United States from their African mission" (p. 639-40). Nettie's letters to Celie written over three decades, are not only a way for Nettie to communicate with her sister, and to convey aspects of their shared personal history, but they as well function as a means by which Celie can further her education, and Walker can further the narrative of *The Color Purple*.<sup>10</sup>

When Pa marries Celie off to Mr.\_\_\_\_, <sup>11</sup> the marriage, and Mr.\_\_\_\_'s unwanted sexual advances toward Nettie, engenders an almost thirty-year separation between Celie and Nettie. Linda Abbandonato (1993) writes, "[w]hen Celie marries Mr.\_\_\_\_, this man with no name becomes part of the system of male oppression, joining God the Patriarch and Pa in an unholy trinity of power that displaces her identity" (Gates, 1993, p. 302). In short order, Celie becomes the wife of a physically, sexually, and emotionally brutalizing husband, and stepmother to four neglected, ill-mannered, and troubled children—two boys and two girls. Celie's life with Mr.\_\_\_\_ is as miserable as was her life at home, though more so because she can no longer see her beloved sister, nor can she protect Nettie from Pa's sexual violence. With Celie out of the

<sup>9</sup> Martha J. Cutter (2000) asserts in "Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker's Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in *The Color Purple*," that both in "his demeanor and behavior" Pa "exactly parallels" Mr.\_\_\_\_ (p. 167). Cutter continues, "Celie's letters repeatedly emphasize that sex with Albert is the equivalent of rape" (167). Cutter adds, "In the imagery of Walker's text father and husband are conflated: both are rapists who deny that women can be anything other than objects of male abuse (p. 167-168).

<sup>10</sup> I appreciate scholar El Saffar's (1985) reading when she writes "That the letters Nettie writes to Celie in which she discloses the truth of their personal history are as liberating for Nettie as they are for Celie, "for Nettie, who has been burdened by the suspicions of the missionary's wife, Corrine, that Nettie was their adoptive children's mother and that Corrine's husband, Samuel, was their father. The repressed anger and jealousy Corrine held toward Nettie and Samuel brought her to her deathbed, where Samuel finally revealed what he knew of the children's origin, and Nettie explained that their mother was Celie. The information allowed Corrine to die in peace, and left the door open for Nettie and Samuel eventually to declare their love for one another and to be married" (p. 15).

<sup>11</sup> Celie's addressing her husband by the formal and detached Mr.\_\_\_\_ suggests not only his dominance over her as others have rightly argued, but it as well suggests her fear of this man who is for all intents and purposes a stranger.

home, and with no one to protect her, Nettie becomes even more susceptible, and in anticipation of Pa's attack, runs away to Celie. Nettie is not with Celie long, however, before Mr. \_\_\_ begins pursuing her sexually. When Nettie rebuffs Mr. \_\_\_'s advances, he throws her out. However, before Nettie leaves she, the younger sister, gives her older sister some sisterly advice. Nettie says to Celie, "Don't let them run over you... You got to fight," (Walker, 1982, p. 18) to which Celie thinks but does not respond, "...I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive" (Walker, p. 18). Because Celie sees herself as a good girl gone bad, a girl marked by the abuses of her father, and because Celie sees Nettie as being unalterably good, Celie is able to fight for her sister and not for herself—not yet, anyway.

When the two sisters separate, Celie beseeches Nettie to write. Nettie responds, "[n]othing but death can keep me from it" (Walker, 1982, p. 19). It is not death that keeps Nettie's letters out of Celie's hands, however, but Mr. \_\_\_, who intercepts the mail carrier daily for thirty years, to stow away any mail from Nettie to Celie. In running Nettie off and then hoarding her letters to Celie, Mr. \_\_\_ disrupts the only mutually loving relationship Celie or Nettie have known to date, i.e. their sisterhood. However, Celie does find a way to help Nettie, and before Nettie is run off Celie gives her the name of a man she thinks might assist Nettie, a Reverend Mr. \_\_\_, whom Celie met on a trip to town with Mr. \_\_\_. Celie advises Nettie to "ast for his wife... maybe she would help" (Walker, p. 19). The Reverend Mr. \_\_\_ is none other than the man to whom Pa gave away Celie's (and Pa's) two babies shortly after their birth, a girl, whom Celie named Olivia, and a boy who was taken from her before Celie was unable to name him.

During the sister's thirty-year separation, Nettie's thoughts seldom leave Celie, as her letters attest. In Nettie's first letter to Celie after being runoff, Nettie implores Celie to "fight and get away from Albert [as] [h]e ain't no good" (Walker, p. 132). Nettie also shares with Celie what she discovers at Reverend Mr. \_\_\_'s house—"a little girl opened the door and she had your eyes set in your face" (Walker, p. 132). In a letter written soon, Nettie admits to missing Celie terribly, and to anticipating a letter from her. Nettie thinks about Celie every minute, and writes to her sister, "By now I am almost crazy. I think Albert [Mr. \_\_\_] told me the truth, and that he is not giving you my letters" (Walker, p. 134). Nettie continues, "...when I don't write you I feel as bad as I do when I don't pray, locked up in myself and choking on my own heart" (Walker, p. 136). Nettie adds, "I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was. Well, now I know what you meant. And whether God will read letters or no, I know you will go on writing them; which is guidance enough for me" (Walker, 1982, p. 136). In true novelistic fashion, Reverend Mr. \_\_\_ hires Nettie as a caretaker for he and his wife's adopted children, Olivia, and a boy the couple has named Adam, both of whom, Nettie soon discovers, are Celie's children, conceived in rape. Unable to return to Celie, and with no other family to turn, Nettie relocates to Africa with Reverend Mr. \_\_\_ and his family, to do missionary work. Nettie spends the next thirty years of her life learning, teaching as a missionary, raising her niece and nephew, and writing in earnest to Celie.

When the Celie and Nettie reunite at the novel's end, Nettie is by then "a little dumpty woman with...gray hair" and Celie is herself old, and yet the two sisters are reborn in each other's presence. Celie writes that she and Nettie "totter toward one nother like us use to do when us was babies" (Walker, p. 293). Celie continues, "Us sit and lay there on the porch inside each other's arms" (Walker, p. 293). In the presence of her sister Nettie once again, and after meeting her two biological children, both of whom refer to their Aunt Nettie as "Mama Nettie," Celie feels "so happy" and the youngest she has ever felt.

### Sofia

The relationship that Celie and Sofia share constitutes the first non-biological sister relationship for both. The two meet when Harpo, Celie's stepson and Mr. \_\_\_'s oldest child, brings a pregnant Sofia home to announce the couple's plans to marry. At the time, Celie is around twenty-five years old, and Sofia is fifteen. Upon first seeing Sofia, Celie writes that Sofia is "bout seven or eight months pregnant, bout to bust out her dress" (Walker, 1982, p. 32). Celie continues, "Clear brown skin, gleam on it like on good furniture. Hair notty but a lot of it, tied up on her head in a mass of plaits" (Walker, p. 32). Celie adds, "not quite as tall as Harpo but much bigger, and strong and ruddy looking, like her mama brought her up on pork" (Walker, p. 32). It is significant that Celie first associates Sofia with her mother—"like her mama brought her up on pork"—as this suggests Celie has ideas about Sofia that are rooted in Sofia's assumed relationship with her mother. Celie thinks Sofia is well fed and cared for by her

mother and that Sofia lives under her mother's roof. However, when Mr. \_\_\_ suggests that Sofia's father, disapproving of her pregnancy and of Harpo, has thrown Sofia out and left her and her unborn child homeless, Sofia responds matter-of-factly, "Naw. I ain't living in the street. I'm living with my sister and her husband. They say I can live with them for the rest of my life" (Walker, p. 33). It is Sofia's sister, and not her mother or her father, for that matter, who, at least in Sofia's current moment of need, provides Sofia nurturance, and the shelter of home. When Sofia concludes her visit with Mr. \_\_\_, Harpo, and Celie, and stands up and marches off, sans Harpo, whom a prideful Sofia tells to stay, Celie writes that it "[l]ook like the army change direction, and [Sofia] heading off to catch up" (Walker, p. 33).

Sofia's "army" consists of her Amazonic sisters, women who, like the Amazons of feminist lore, are "capable of defending [themselves and Sofia] against the violence of patriarchy" (Davidson, 1995, p. 47). For her part, Celie notices that Sofia speaks back to Mr. \_\_\_, something Celie is unable to do, for, as Henderson (1989) writes, Celie, unlike Sofia, "...accepts a theology which requires female subjugation to father and husband" (Bloom, 1989, p. 71). As Celie and Sofia's relationship develops, Celie quickly learns that when in their mother and father's home, Sofia and her sisters fought male relatives constantly in an effort to self-protect and ward off physical and sexual violence. As Sofia tells Celie, she grew up in a household where her mother was under the rule and foot of her domineering husband, Sofia's father; "Anything he say, goes" (Walker, 1982, p.43). Sofia adds, "She [Sofia's mother] never say nothing back. She never stand up for herself. Try to make a little half stand sometime for the children but that always backfire" (Walker, p. 43). Sofia continues, "More she [her mother] stand up for us, the harder time he [Sofia's father] give her" (Walker, p. 43). Because Sofia and her sisters are determined not to live as their mother lives, they physically fight to defend themselves against the physical and sexual attacks of family men, including, in Sofia's case, her husband and her father. By the age of 15, however, Sofia is tired of fighting. As she says to Celie, "All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (Walker, p. 42).

Despite protestations from Mr. \_\_\_, Sofia and Harpo marry. After three years of wedded bliss and a new baby, however, the couple begin to fight in large part due to Harpo's belief, learned at the knee of his father and grandfather, for that matter, that a wife should subordinate herself to the demands and will of her husband – and Sofia's unwillingness to do so.<sup>12</sup> After seeking advice from his Mr. \_\_\_, who tells Harpo to slap Sofia to "bring her down a peg" for, in Mr. \_\_\_'s estimation, Sofia thinks too highly of herself, Harpo turns to Celie, the most submissive woman he knows. Though at first Celie tries to shift Harpo's thinking by reminding him of the happiness he and Sofia share—"three years pass and he still whistle and sing"—this is to no avail (Walker, p. 38). Celie writes to God, that she "like Sofia," but Celie is also aware that Sofia "don't act like me at all. If she talking when Harpo and Mr. \_\_\_ come in the room, she keep right on. If they ast her where something at, she say she don't know. Keep talking" (Walker, 1982, p. 38). "Beat her, I say," writes Celie (Walker, p. 38). Froula (1986) provides that Celie's advice to Harpo propounds "the cultural script of violent male rule in marriage, the only one [Celie] knows" (639), a reading which aligns with Henderson's (1989) assertion that Celie's advice to Harpo to beat Sofia is reflective of Celie's internalization of "the principle of male domination" (Bloom, 1989, p. 71). Might it also be, however, that Sofia's impulse and willingness to fight back reminds Celie of her own inability to do so, and thus Celie's advice to Harpo as well reflects her chagrin. After all, it is only after Celie remembers the look of pity on Sofia's face at Celie's jumping at Mr. \_\_\_'s call, that Celie advises Harpo, "beat her."<sup>13</sup>

When Harpo takes Celie's advice to heart, he and Sofia begin to battle "like two mens," (Walker, p. 38) with Sofia landing most of the punches most of the time, but suffering physical and emotional blows the same. When Harpo confesses to Sofia that is was Celie who told him to beat her, Sofia, angry and astounded, confronts Celie. "Just want you to know I looked to

<sup>12</sup> I am building off Lucie Fultz's (1991) argument in *Double Stitch* that "socialization begins with the nuclear family and is passed from one generation to another through cultural and historical consciousness" (Bell-Scott, 1991, p. 37). Harpo witnessed his father's abuse and subjugation of Celie, just as Mr. \_\_\_ (Albert) witnessed his father's abuse and subjugation of his own wife, and Mr. \_\_\_'s mother. What Harpo does in attempting to beat Sofia into submission is repeat a patriarchal and generational family model of Black masculinity. However, it is significant that Harpo does not heed his father's advice until he hears from Celie that he should beat Sofia. This suggests the influence that Celie, as stepmother, perhaps unwittingly has on her stepson and stepchildren (i.e. Mr. \_\_\_'s children from his first marriage); it also suggests actual and figurative sisters' witting (and often unwitting) complicity in the oppression of their sisters, and thus their participation in the maintaining of patriarchy.

<sup>13</sup> The point being that even within a patriarchal system of domination and oppression, Celie still has some agency, however circumscribed. That is she is not simply a robot parroting patriarchal masculinist behaviors.

you for help," Sofia tells Celie. Sofia continues, "You told Harpo to beat me" (Walker, 1982, p. 42). At first fearful, Celie lies:

No I didn't, I said  
Don't lie, [Sofia] said.  
I didn't mean it, I said.  
Then what you say it for? she ast...  
I say it cause I'm a fool, I say. I say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't.  
What that? she say.  
Fight, I say. (Walker, p. 42)

Sofia is blindsided by Celie's betrayal primarily because her experience of Black women, and in particular her sisters, has been that she can trust and look to them for support and some measure of protection. For her part, Celie's advice leaves her tormented. Unable to sleep, Celie writes to God, "What it is? I ast myself. A little voice say, Something you done wrong. Somebody spirit you sin against" Celie continues, "Way late one night it come to me. Sofia. I sin against Sofia spirit" (Walker, p. 41). This awareness of wrongdoing on Celie's part suggests a bond between Celie and Sofia, and an understanding on Celie's part of the harm she has done her figurative sister.

After Sofia confronts Celie about her betrayal, the two begin to open up to one another about their lives. Sofia tells Celie about being "unsafe in a family of men," and about she and her sisters having to fight off family men's ostensible sexual attacks. Celie, amazed, writes, "I never know nothing bout her family. I thought, looking at her, nobody in her family could be scared" (Walker, p. 43). Sofia further tells that her father "hate children and...hate where they come from" (Walker, 1982, p. 43). Celie, who now seems to feel a deeper affinity with Sofia, suggests that the two make a quilt together, a quilt which Celie tellingly names "Sister's Choice."<sup>14</sup> Judy Elsley (1999) writes that when Celie and Sofia begin to quilt together, "Celie asserts her right to choose" (Dieke, 1999, p. 166). Elsley adds, "Celie has been separated from women all her life, but that changes when she begins to quilt with Sofia" and that "putting together the fragments of 'messed up curtains' torn in a fight between Sofia and Harpo," Celie and Sofia "reconfigure their bond" from virtual strangers, to sister-friends (Dieke, 1999, p. 166).

Later, when Celie confesses to Sofia that she feels no feelings at all, Sofia responds, "Nothing at all?" as if shocked. Celie replies, "Well, sometime Mr. \_\_\_ git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to the Old Maker. But he [Mr. \_\_\_] my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life be over...Heaven last all ways." Sofia responds that Celie "ought to bash Mr. \_\_\_ head open...Think about heaven later" (Walker, p. 44), at which Celie falls down laughing. "Not much funny to me," writes Celie, "That funny" (Walker, p. 44). Notably, this is the first time in Celie's life, outside of her truncated childhood with Nettie, that she has had the pleasure of a good laugh, and at the expense of Mr. \_\_\_.<sup>15</sup> Celie and Sofia laugh "so hard," at Sofia's advice to bash Mr. \_\_\_'s head open that both she and Sofia "flop down on the steps" (Walker, p. 44), with their bond by now cemented.

### Shug Avery

Celie first overhears the name "Shug Avery" during a discussion between Pa and Mr. \_\_\_. Curious, she asks her stepmother, "What it is?" before discovering via a photograph that Shug Avery is not an "it," but rather a woman, and not just any woman but, "the most beautiful woman I ever saw...more pretty than my mama [and] bout ten thousand times more prettier than me," writes Celie (Walker, 1982, p. 7). In the photograph, a made up Shug Avery dons a fur coat, is wearing "hair like somethin tale," and is "grinning with her foot up on somebody motorcar" (Walker, p. 7). Celie studies the photograph of Shug Avery, and then begins to dream of Shug dressed "to kill" and "whirling and laughing" (Walker, p. 7). As time passes, Celie grows more

<sup>14</sup> Teresa Tavormina (2000) writes of sewing (or, in the case of *The Color Purple*, quilting) as "an act of union . . . [and] a comradely act, one that allows for both speech and comfortable, supportive silence" (as cited in Cutter, 2000, p. 172). Martha J. Cutter (2000) amending Tavormina, adds, "sewing does more than enable conversation: sewing is conversation, a language that articulates relationships and connects and reconnects networks of individuals to create a community" (Cutter, p. 172).

<sup>15</sup> Although Nettie says the same to Celie in her first letter, Celie does not receive the letter for decades after.

and more enamored with the image of the woman in the photograph so much so that she begins to imagine Shug's life.

Before meeting, Celie describes Shug Avery as being "...like a queen to me," and imagines her draped in purple and "maybe little red...too"<sup>16</sup> (Walker, p. 22), telling colors, suggestive of sovereignty. When Celie and Shug Avery finally meet, however, Shug Avery bears little resemblance to the "whirling and laughing" woman in the photograph and of Celie's imagination. Shug is sickly, thin, and, as Celie writes, "look like she ain't long for this world" (Walker, p. 47). Mr. \_\_\_ has brought Shug Avery, his mistress and the mother of three of his out-of-wedlock children, to his home for Celie, his lawful wife, to nurse her back to health. Though deathly ill, Shug Avery, upon first seeing Celie, looks Celie "head to foot," cackles, and says, "You sure is ugly," Celie surmises, "like she aint believed it" (Walker, 1982, p. 47). Ruth El Saffar (1985) writes, "When Mr [sic] brings [Shug Avery] to their house, ill, and the object of the town's approbrium [sic], Celie ministers to her, fueled by the power of her image of Shug, and indifferent to Shug's own initial cruelty" (Saffar, p. 14).

Celie and Shug Avery's relationship begins to shift when Celie combs Shug's hair for the first time. Celie writes that she works on Shug Avery "like she a doll or...Olivia...or like she mama" (Walker, p. 55) that is with tenderness, and care. Again, although at first resistant, Shug Avery soon softens under the "comb and pat, comb and pat," (Walker, p. 55) of Celie at work so much so that she leans back against Celie's knees, and gives herself over to Celie's care. This moment of connection and care begins the two's budding sisterhood. This is in part because Celie's combing of Shug Avery's hair is familiar and reminds Shug Avery at first of her own mother, and then of her grandmother. "That feel just right," Shug says, "like mama used to do. Or maybe not mama. Maybe grandma" (Walker, p. 55). That Shug Avery rethinks the "just right" feeling as being associated with her grandmother and not her mother is telling as it suggests physical distance and thus a lack of intimacy within Shug Avery's relationship with her mother. This seems especially the case when Shug Avery shares with Celie some of the challenges of being her mother's daughter. Shug Avery states,

One thing my mama hated me for was how much I love to fuck. She never love to do nothing had anything to do with touching nobody...I try to kiss her, she turn her mouth away. Say, Cut that out Lillie...My daddy love me to kiss and hug him, but she didn't like the looks of that. (Walker, pp. 125-126)

Shug craves touch, and until Celie she has satisfied this craving with sex. As Shug sits tucked between Celie's knees and yields to Celie's combing and patting of her hair, however, and unawares to Celie, Shug Avery's dormant creativity is awakened. Shug begins to sing. "What that song?" asks Celie, "Sound low down dirty to me. Like what the preacher tell you its sin to hear. Not to mention sing" (Walker, 1982, p. 55). Shug Avery responds, "[s]omething come to me...[s]omething I made up...[s]omething you help scratch out my head" (Walker, p. 55). Celie's caretaking revives the traveling chanteuse that is Shug Avery, a revival evidenced throughout the remaining pages of *The Color Purple*.<sup>18</sup>

Celie's awareness of her sexual attraction to Shug Avery does not register however until she bathes Shug Avery, and sees her naked for the first time. Celie writes that the first time she got "full sight of [Shug's] long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth," Celie felt as if she had "turned into a man" (Walker, p. 51). The language Celie uses to describe the physiological changes in her that result from seeing Shug Avery naked – i.e., "turned into a man"— might possibly demonstrate the limits of Celie's vocabulary, as well as the limits of her ability to articulate her own sexual desire. It might also, and as Abbandonato (1993) argues, reflect Celie's unwitting attempt to "define herself [and sexuality] differently" (as cited in Cutter, 2000, p. 163). When Shug Avery catches Celie staring at her naked, Shug asks her, "What you staring at?...You never seen a naked woman before?" Celie replies, "No ma'am. I never did. Cept for Sofia, and she...feel like my sister" (Walker, 1982, p. 51). Celie's emphasis on feeling, the idea that what she feels when she sees Shug Avery naked is different from what she feels

<sup>16</sup> In her collection, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, Walker (2006) writes, "black people in the South, if they were black-skinned, were told not to wear red. They were told this by their English and Irish and Scottish and French and German slave-owners. It was considered 'too loud' against our vibrant darkness. We were steered instead toward more innocuous pastels" (Walker, p. 126). In associating Shug Avery, a dark-skinned woman, with purple and red is surely Walker's way of breaking a Southern and Black socio-cultural taboo.

<sup>17</sup> These are the very colors Celie will paint her bedroom once she is free of Mr. \_\_\_ and his home.

<sup>18</sup> I look forward to scholarship that addresses more directly the transformational influence of Celie on Shug Avery. I see the work here as a start of such a critical assessment.

when she sees Sofia naked is telling. Celie does not feel anything sexual, but rather filial, when she looks at Sofia's naked body. The sight of Shug Avery's nakedness however, leaves Celie sexually aroused. Celie writes, "I feel like something pushing me forward. If I don't watch out I'll have hold of her hand, tasting her fingers in my mouth" (Walker, p. 53). Barker (1999) argues that Celie's sexual relationship with Shug Avery demonstrates lesbianism as a "learned preference" and that, considering Celie's abuse at the hands of men lesbianism is a limited and logical choice (Dieke, 1999, p. 61). However, Barker's analysis overlooks the corporeality of this moment. Celie writes of Shug Avery, "I got my eyes glued" to Shug Avery's "bosom."<sup>19</sup> The unmediated thoughts and physiological changes that accompany Celie's looking—"I feel my nipple harden...My little button sort of perk up...Shug, I say to her in my mind, Girl, you looks like a real good time" do not read like choice or a learned preference, but rather or perhaps also like unmediated desire<sup>20</sup> (Walker, p. 85).

Walker (1983) herself would describe the sexual and nonsexual relationship between Celie and Shug Avery as "womanist."<sup>21</sup> In a 1980 review entitled "Gifts of Power," and included in the collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker writes of her preference for womanist to describe "black women who love women (sexually or not)" (Walker, 1983, p. 81). For Walker, womanist (as opposed to lesbian) affirms "connectedness to the entire community and the world" and thus is more "consistent with black cultural values" (Walker, p. 71). Womanist is then for Walker a more organic a term that is rooted in and developed from Southern African American women's culture, such as that to which Celie and her sisters belong. However read or defined, Celie and Shug Avery's sexual and non-sexual relationship is demonstrative of the richness and complexity of bonds between Black women; such bonds include and are not limited to same-sex relationships, suggests *The Color Purple*.

Celie's sexual attraction to Shug Avery grows as their friendship develops, yet there is little to suggest Shug Avery's sexual attraction to Celie until Celie opens up to Shug Avery about her experiences in her family home. Celie shares with Shug Avery,

The girls had a separate room...off to itself, connected to the house by a little plank walk. Nobody ever come in there but Mama. But one time when mama not home, he come. Told me he want me to trim his hair. He bring the scissors and comb and brush and a stool. While I trim his hair he look at me funny. He a little nervous too, but I don't know why, till he grab hold of me and cram me up tween his legs...It hurt me, you know...I was just going on fourteen...After he through...he make me finish trimming his hair...It got to the place where everytime I saw him coming with the scissors and the comb and the stool, I start to cry. (Walker, 1982, pp. 116-117)

Significantly, Celie has shared the entirety of her experience with no one, not even Nettie, until this moment with Shug Avery. Celie's disclosure suggests the strength of her bond with Shug Avery. As Celie continues about "[h]ow it stung while I finish trimming his hair...[h]ow the blood drip down my leg and mess up my stocking," Shug Avery wraps her in her arms, and coos, "Don't cry, Celie...Don't cry" (Walker, 1982, p. 117). Although Shug Avery begins to kiss Celie, first on her face, and then on her lips, Celie continues, "My mama die...My sister Nettie run away. Mr.\_\_\_\_ come git me to take care his rotten children. He never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me" (Walker, p. 117). "I love you, Miss Celie," replies Shug before kissing Celie on the mouth. Celie returns Shug's kiss and soon the two engage in sexual intercourse (Walker, p. 118). Remarkably, this is the first time in Celie's life thus far that she has willingly engaged in sex, as well as given and experienced in kind, sexual pleasure.

Celie describes her first time sleeping with Shug Avery as a "[l]ittle like sleeping with mama, only I can't hardly remember ever sleeping with her. Little like sleeping with Nettie, only sleeping with Nettie never feel this good" (Walker, p. 119). Celie continues, "It warm and cushiony, and I feel Shug's big tits sorta flop over my arms like suds" (Walker, p. 119). Shug's

<sup>19</sup> Breasts signify not only sexual(ized) body parts but also nurturing. Celie's sexual-self awakens and is fed so to speak, when she eyes Shug's breasts.

<sup>20</sup> For a more nuanced read on Celie and Shug's sexual relationship, see Christopher Lewis's (2012) article "Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness" in the *Rocky Mountain Review*. Lewis reads the characterization of the sexual relationship between Celie and Shug Avery as a cultivation on Walker's part of what he terms "an ethic of Black lesbian shamelessness." Like Berlant (1999), Lewis as well reads Celie and Shug Avery's relationship as lesbian. Unlike Berlant, he sees it as an opportunity taken by Walker to foreground Black lesbians in her novel.

<sup>21</sup> Walker (1983) introduces womanist in a four-part definition that serves as a preface to her first essay collection, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. In the second section of her definition Walker writes that a womanist is "a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually [sic]. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility ... and women's strength" (Walker, 1983, p. xi).

presence in Celie's life highlights just how devoid of emotional and physical connection and pleasurable touch was Celie's relationship with her mother and certainly with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Sleeping with Shug reminds Celie of the two people who meant and mean the most to her, her mother and her sister, Nettie. Yet, it feels different, better. This is because there is then between Celie and Shug Avery a maternal and filial familiarity, and connection, that registers through physical closeness, loving care, and touch that is both sexual and nonsexual in nature.<sup>22</sup> Henderson (1989) writes that once Shug Avery "introduces [Celie] to the beauty of her own body . . . Celie's passivity and self-indifference are transformed into receptivity and responsiveness first to Shug, then to herself" (Bloom, 1989, p. 72).

When Pa said to Celie at fourteen years old, "You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't," and then forced her to do so, and when then forced Celie to marry Mr. \_\_\_, and Mr. \_\_\_ then forced her to submit to his sexual violations and physical abuses, Celie became estranged from her body, and devoid of an autonomous sexuality. Shug Avery helps Celie to recover her sexual self; it is a self that is virile and female, a self that desires, and that is of Creation.

### Mary "Squeak" Agnes

Mary "Squeak" Agnes enters Celie's life, and the narrative of *The Color Purple*, as "Harpo's little yellowskin girlfriend," as Celie writes. True to her nickname, given her by Harpo, Squeak is petite, mousy, and docile and, as Lauren Berlant (1999), is "Harpo's dutiful replacement of Sofia" (Gates, 1993, p. 219). Although Celie and Squeak differ greatly in appearance—Squeak is "high yellow" with cloudy eyes and long, straight, greasy hair, to Celie's dark skin, and short, coarse hair—Squeak is familiar to Celie. Celie writes of Squeak, "She a nice girl, friendly and everything, but she like me. She do anything Harpo say" (Walker, 1982, p. 86). Significantly, Squeak garners compassion from Celie: "Poor little Squeak," is Celie's refrain, and Squeak's presence in Celie's life permits Celie to correct a past wrong done to Sofia. Celie advises Squeak to reclaim her given name, Mary Agnes, and Celie (and Shug) later inspires Squeak to pursue a career in singing.

Celie first mentions Squeak in relation to Sofia, both of whom meet when Sofia, separated from Harpo, visits Harpo's jook joint with a new male suitor. Sofia enters the jook looking "like a good time," (Walker, 1982, p. 86) as Shug says, and Harpo, who is beside himself with jealousy, asks Sofia to dance. It is then that Celie notices that "Harpo little yellowish girlfriend sulk, hanging over the bar" (Walker, p. 86). As Celie writes, Squeak soon "git up her nerve to try to cut in," by first questioning to Harpo,

Who dis woman, say Squeak, in this little teenounce voice.

You know who she is, say Harpo.

Squeak turn to Sofia. Say, You better leave him alone.

Sofia say, Fine with me. She turn round to leave.

Harpo grab her by the arm. Say, You don't have to go no where. Hell, this your house.

Squeak say, What you mean, Dis her house? She walk out on you. Walk away from the house. It over now, she say to Sofia.

Sofia say, Fine with me. Try to pull away from Harpo grip. He hold her tight.

Listen Squeak, say Harpo, Can't a man dance with his own wife?

Squeak say, Not if he my man he can't. You hear that, bitch, she say to Sofia. (Walker, 1982, p. 86-87)

Similar to Shug Avery response to Celie at their first meeting, Squeak's claim to Harpo necessitates her regard for Sofia, Harpo's lawful wife, as her enemy. Although angry at Harpo's ostensible betrayal, it is Sofia whom Squeak slaps "up cross the head" (Walker, p. 87). Sofia rewards Squeak's nerve when she, as Celie writes, "ball up her fist, draw back, and knock two of Squeak's side teef out" and "Squeak hit the floor. One toof hanging on her lip, the other one upside my cold drink glass" (Walker, p. 87). Later in their acquaintance, however, and just after Sofia has been beaten and imprisoned for sassing the wife of the town's mayor, both of whom are white, and for returning the mayor's slap, Squeak comes to Sofia's rescue.

<sup>22</sup> In thinking through Celie and Shug Avery's relationship as it is dramatized in the novel, I am reminded of Adrienne Rich's (1976) ideas of the mother as the child's first love object, and also as the one through whom the child, whether female or male, first experiences pleasure, delight, and comfort—as well as disappointment and rejection (see *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*). For a more contemporary rendering of Rich's ideas, see the rich body of work produced by motherhood scholar, Andrea O'Reilly.

After Squeak hears from Celie that Sofia has been beaten, Squeak, who is perhaps reminded of her own Black mother in Sofia, “fly up like she sprung, run over hind the counter to Harpo, put her arms round him, [and] [t]hey hang together a long time, cry” (Walker, p. 91). As the “black kinsfolk” of the white prison warden, it is Squeak who is volunteered (by Mr.\_\_\_\_) to speak to the warden on Sofia’s behalf. The white prison warden, who, once again, is Squeak’s paternal uncle, returns Squeak’s favor to Sofia by raping Squeak. Celie writes that “Poor little Squeak come home with a limp. Her dress rip. Her hat missing and one of the heels come off her shoe. What happen? Us ast” to which Squeak responds that her uncle “saw the Hodges in me ... And he didn’t like it one bit” (Walker, p. 100).

After her uncle rapes her, and following Harpo’s continued referring to her as Squeak, Squeak is able to hear Celie’s earlier advice to “Make Harpo call you by your real name . . . Then maybe he see you even when he trouble” (Walker, p. 89). Celie writes that Squeak “turn her face up to Harpo” as if seeing him fully for the first time, and asks Harpo “do you really love me, or just my color?” to which Harpo responds, “I love you, Squeak,” before kneeling down to “try to put his arms round [Squeak’s] waist.” Celie writes that Squeak “stand up,” and says, “My name Mary Agnes” (Walker, 1982, p. 102). To Harpo’s reply of “Squeak, Mary Agnes, what difference do it make?” a self-asserting Mary Agnes replies, “It make a lot” (Walker, p. 210). Notably, Celie’s switch from “Squeak” to Mary Agnes in her letters reflects her own absorption of the advice she provided Squeak. Celie calls Squeak by her given name, Mary Agnes, throughout the remainder of *The Color Purple*.

Because Celie and Nettie co-write the narrative of *The Color Purple*, readers have limited access to Squeak’s interiority. This change, however, after Squeak’s sexual assault by her paternal uncle. As Celie writes, “6 months after Mary Agnes went to git Sofia out of prison, she begin to sing”<sup>23</sup> (Walker, p. 103). It is through Squeak’s songs that Celie learns some of what Squeak has been thinking and feeling, and this especially with regard to her figurative Black sisters, i.e. Celie, Shug, and Sofia. At first, Mary Agnes sings Shug’s songs in mimicry of Shug, a woman whom she admires. However, because Shug Avery’s songs tend to be “about some no count man doing her wrong, again” (Walker, p. 77), as Celie writes, and because Mary Agnes clearly has other things on her mind, Mary Agnes soon begins to write and sing her own songs. Significantly, Mary Agnes’s songs are not about men but rather about, once again, her sisters. In her songs, Mary Agnes sings about the way her light skin due to her mixed-race, Black and white heritage “colors” that is influences her relationships with her sisters, and in particular their treatment of her. As Celie writes, Squeak sings,

They calls me yellow  
like yellow be my name  
They calls me yellow  
like yellow be my name  
But if yellow is a name  
why ain’t black the same  
Well, if I say Hey black girl  
Lord, she try to ruin my game (Walker, 1982, p.104)

Celie’s first description of Mary Agnes was as Harpo’s “little yellowskin girlfriend,” and that phrase alone seemed to describe the girl Celie saw: a *girl*, slight in stature and significance, and differentiated by her light skin. When Mary Agnes speaks through her song, however, she provides Celie (and readers) insight into who she is and how she thinks as a biracial Black and white female in a community of Black figurative sisters. Mary Agnes confronts Celie, Shug, and Sofia in song—“They calls me yellow”—and she challenges their regard for her—“like yellow be my name—and indicts them for their bullying and intimidation of her—“Well, if I say Hey black girl / Lord, they try to ruin my game.”

Mary Agnes’s song reflects that she is a thinking, feeling woman, who has some resentments towards her sisters. The song reveals mousy “Squeak” masked a woman with voice and perspective. Mary Agnes sings of a desire to be seen and to not be called out of her

<sup>23</sup> My reading here is in accordance with Cutter’s (2000) idea that rape in the novel does not lead to “erasure, but rather to the start of a prolonged struggle toward subjectivity and voice,” or perhaps it is to reclaiming one’s subjectivity and voice (Cutter, p. 167). Cutter writes, “given the ubiquity of rape in society,” the suggestion of *The Color Purple* is that “women need to learn how to move beyond victimization into agency and voice” (p. 178).

name by those who it seems have come to mean the most to her; that is by her figurative sisters. It is significant that Celie does not comment on Mary Agnes's song in *The Color Purple*. Instead, Celie lets Mary Agnes speak for herself. This suggests that Celie hears both the message (i.e. see me for who I am) and the indictment (e.g. colorism, ethnocentrism, bullying) of Mary Agnes's song, and that Celie, too, takes heed.

## Conclusion

In her opening letter to *The Color Purple*, a fourteen-year-old Celie notes her shift in her mind from "good girl" to a girl gone bad, suggesting the felt influence of Pa's sexual violent acts on her self-conception, and throughout her young adulthood. No longer "good," Celie surmises she must be "bad," which for Celie connotes to valueless. It takes the friendship and love of challenging, albeit supportive and nurturing sisters, both biological and non-biological, for Celie to reclaim her sense of being good, to disengage from a sexuality and religious dogma imposed on her, and to grow into the beloved Black woman in community she is by the novel's close. No longer silenced and hemmed in by Pa's warning, and no longer shamed and confused by the brutality of his and Mr. \_\_'s sexual violent acts toward her, Celie is free to enter into creation with Nettie (and her children) returned to her, and with her figurative sisters by her side.

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