



Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro
Centro de Educação e Humanidades
Instituto de Letras

Roberta Ventura Calabre

Fighting the Strai(gh)tjacket: black women bonding in “Loving Her” and “The Color Purple”

Rio de Janeiro

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Dissertação apresentada, como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Mestre, ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras, da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Área de concentração: Literaturas de Língua Inglesa.

Orientadora: Prof^a. Dr^a. Eliane Borges Berutti

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2010

DEDICATION

To the one whose natural talent in the English language and whose passion for learning inspired me to become what I am, who I am. Looking back, it is truly amazing to realize how far I have come, just for the love of studying you instilled in me. I hope to have made you proud. It saddens me every day to know that, no matter how much I accomplish in life, you will not be there to see it. Mom, I miss you more than I let myself show. I love you. Thank you for everything.

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My professors and colleagues at UERJ, for the wonderful times, lessons and laughs, I thank you all. This has been a wonderful experience, and you have earned a special place in my heart.

How much easier (it) would be if there were one book [...] that would tell me something specific about my life. One book based in Black feminist and Black lesbian experience [...]. When such a book exists then each of us will not only know better how to live, but how to dream.

Barbara Smith

RESUMO

CALABRE, Roberta Ventura. *Fighting the Strai(gh)tjacket: black women bonding in “Loving Her” and “The Color Purple”*. 2010. 124 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa) - Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2010.

O objetivo deste trabalho é analisar como as relações lésbicas são retratadas nas obras “Loving Her” e “The Color Purple”. Ao analisar as relações entre homens/mulheres e mulheres/mulheres, este estudo também revê e critica o “golpe triplo” sofrido por lésbicas negras, por serem, ao mesmo tempo, mulheres, afro-americanas e homossexuais. Utilizando fatos históricos para situar as obras em um contexto social, além da teoria do *lesbian continuum* afim de atestar a riqueza e diversidade do laço afetivo entre mulheres, este trabalho vem por desmistificar as noções simplistas em relação à literatura lésbica Afro-Americana, afugentando a sombra que pairava sobre o “tabu” e elevando a mulher negra, lésbica ou não, a seu lugar de direito na sociedade.

Palavras-chave: Ficção afro-americana. Lésbicas. Sexualidade. Racismo.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this work is to analyze how lesbian relationships are portrayed in the fictional works "Loving Her" and "The Color Purple". By analyzing the relationships between men/women and women/women depicted in the chosen literary works, this study also revises and criticizes the "triple strike" suffered by black lesbians for being females, African-Americans and homosexuals. Using historical facts to place the fictional works in a social frame, and using the theory of lesbian continuum to attest the richness and diversity of women bonding, this work demystifies the simplistic notions of African-American lesbian literature, casting away the shadow upon the "unspeakable" and elevating black women, lesbians or not, to their rightful place in society.

Keywords: African-American fiction. Lesbians. Sexuality. Racism.

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INTERSECTING HERSTORIES

Literature is a form of learning. We learn and grow from knowledge of human behavior and relationships that we discover in works of art. The experiences contained in a book can provide a number of sentiments such as comfort, enlightenment or relief to a troubled soul. Each writer, an expert or not, a liver or an observer, has the power to change preconceived notions, challenge the world, let more light in the sultry room of forbidden subjects he or she has chosen to bring to life. Dealing with the literature of the “unspeakable” elevate these author’s writings “to a degree beyond the confinement imposed by the literary structures of the hegemonic power”¹. The works presented in this research show the experience of black women, written by black women, about black women. Being the least visible group not only in fine arts, but also in popular media, it is time for the African-American women to come out and acknowledge the weeds in their own backyard. The issues they deal with go far beyond their skin color, though. Sexism, male violence, racial prejudice and the exploration of their sexuality compose this intricate web of black female oppression. However, ethnicity, gender and sexuality norms can straitjacket such literature which has the unique power to provide access to the subjectivity and complexity of these black women.

The introduction of black lesbian character in mainstream literature, in special, allows closeted black women readers to finally meet someone they can relate to. For other women of color, reading about the black lesbian as a real person with similar struggles allows them to experience the different, the individuality of their sisters. Hence the importance of acknowledging works which introduce black lesbian issues to a wide, multicultural readership, exploring the intersections of sexuality, ethnicity, gender and class (KEATING, 1997, p.14). The study of black women writers and their real and fictional struggles is not only important for anyone studying lesbian literature, but anyone studying black history.

The main aim of this thesis is to investigate, analyze and compare how lesbian relationships are portrayed in the fictional works Loving Her and The Color Purple. This study also intends to, by analyzing the relationships between men/women and

¹ <<http://webs.wofford.edu/hitchmoughsa/Toward.html>> Access on: June 18, 2008.

women/women depicted in the chosen literary works, revise and criticize the African-American notions of ethnicity and sexuality brought to light in these author's literary discourse, demystifying thus the simplistic notions of African-American lesbian literature.

By using African-American women writers whose works defy the black heterosexist discourse and aesthetics, this study aims to perceive the plurality of relationships among black women and look into the many facets of oppression of sex, ethnicity and sexuality in these novels. The questions I seek to answer are: "how are the issues of ethnicity and lesbianism portrayed in the novels?" and "how do these same issues affect and/or are affected by the members of the black community?". My hypothesis is that the women in the novels form a strong bond with each other, in order to survive prejudice and male dominance. I also believe that the black community finally started to accept the publication of such novels which challenged their concepts of heterosexism and machismo, demanding social equality. However, women and lesbian-centered texts within the black community still struggle against oppression, and this research hopes to represent another step towards the hearing of these voices.

I plan this thesis to be divided into three parts. In the first one, it is important to locate culturally and historically the events that gave voice to black female writers. In order to do so, material on the African-American history such as anthologies will be used, emphasizing the most important facts and struggles concerning the fight for their rights that helped shape (and change) the mentality of the black community. The historical background will be joined by works from feminist critics such as Barbara Smith and Patricia Hill Collins, which will help understand the struggle of the African-American female writers, and will underline how literature produced by these women helped build their character and pride, and why that is so necessary for their culture.

The next two chapters of the thesis will involve a closer look at each novel and novelist selected, being the second chapter devoted to Shockley, and the third to Walker. Each chapter will contain an analysis of the diversity of black women portrayed in the novel, their relationships with men and other women and the messages they carried for the fictional and real black community. In addition, with the help of critical works that deal with the issues presented in the novels and on the impact these novels had on society, a critical link to the previous chapter will be

established, in order to challenge the simplistic notion of lesbian identity and to compel readers to revise their stereotypical concepts of black womanhood, female sexuality and woman-identified relationships.

The black lesbian writing appeared “at the juncture of several divergent literary traditions”, representing a “provocative intervention into previous conceptions of lesbian, African-American, and canonical U.S. literature” (KEATING, 1997, p.12). In the beginning, black literature served to reinvigorate the community’s spirit and culture. This meant portraying only the best about the African-American community. As mainstream African-American literature held masculinist and heterosexist discourse, minority literature, such as women’s and lesbians’, was ignored. Only with the movements of the 1960s and 1970s their voices started to be heard, for these movements created small spaces for black female writers to come out.

Audre Lorde and Nella Larsen were forerunners of the insertion of homoeroticism in black female literature, but they kept it safe due to the politically repressive conditions under which lesbians lived. In 1974, instigated by the previous attempts to finally surpass the “sexism that made it difficult for early twentieth-century women of any color to adopt openly lesbian lifestyles and identities” (KEATING, 1997, p.12), Ann Allen Shockley published her first novel, Loving Her. The book, most important for the double boundary it transgresses, marked the beginning of a new stage and “alerted black lesbians to the fact that others were out there” (Gomez, apud LANE, 1997, p. V).

Ann Allen Shockley was born on June 21, 1927, in Louisville, Kentucky, the only daughter of social workers Bessie Lucas and Henry Allen. She attributes to her parents, as well as to a devoted eight-grade teacher, her passion for reading and writing, which led her, as a young girl, to edit the junior high school newspaper and write several short fictions and essays concerning social and cultural issues. In 1948, Shockley received her B.A. from Fisk University, where she also worked as an archivist, librarian and professor. A year later, she started a weekly column called “Ebony Topics” for the *Federalsburg Times*, and later wrote a similar column for the *Bridgeville News*, in Delaware. Her column discussed political, social and cultural events, celebrated the African-American family unity and honored black heroes, along with other outstanding members of the African-American community. While she worked as a public school teacher, she continued freelancing for newspapers, writing articles for the *Baltimore Afro-American* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. In that same

year, she married teacher William Shockley, whom she later divorced. The couple had two children, William Leslie Jr. and Tamara Ann. In 1959, she received her master's degree in library science from Case Western Reserve.

Shockley's writing career includes books and essays that combine her passion for books and libraries with a social engagement for her community by pinpointing the neglected areas of librarianship related to African-Americans. One of her unpublished books shows how inadequate and segregated public library services were in regards to African-Americans in southern states during that period. She also published a black authors' compilation in 1973. Additionally, she published an archivists' and librarians' guide to preserving black historical materials in 1977, and a documentation on lives and achievements of black women writers, released in 1988. Ann Allen Shockley currently lives in Nashville, Tennessee.

Shockley's short stories also relate to the African-American culture and struggles. Sexism, hypocrisy, student uprisings and homophobia are some of the many themes explored by Shockley that reflect the social and political unrest lived by the black community in the 1960s and 1970s. These stories grew out of the black, lesbian and women's liberation movements, contemplating the experiences lived and choices made by African-Americans.

Shockley's major contribution to African-American literature lies on her lesbian-focused works. Through her collection of short stories called The Black and White of It, published in 1980, Shockley celebrates lesbianism as a nourisher for female vitality and integrity. Her stories tell of infidelity, homophobia in the black community, racism among lesbians, self-denial and awakening. The novel Say Jesus and Come to Me, published in 1982, is another work of equal importance, for it highlights the homophobia in the African-American church brought about by the presence of a lesbian minister.

However, it was the 1972 novel Loving Her that made Ann Allen Shockley the pioneer of African-American lesbian literature. For her bold attempt to challenge homophobia and give voice to the African-American lesbians, whom she felt were strangely missing from black literature, Shockley was then seen as the black Radclyffe Hall — the openly lesbian author who published a novel in 1928 (The Well of Loneliness) about a "sexually inverted" Englishwoman in a time where lesbianism was unspeakable.

Loving Her is groundbreaking for having not only a black lesbian as the main character, but also for presenting an interracial (and lesbian) relationship in an uncomplicated light. The novel is centered around Renay, a young black musician who gets pregnant in college by her flirtatious boyfriend Jerome Lee. This forces them to get married, and Jerome's frustration soon turns into alcoholism and abuse. Renay copes with the humiliation and physical abuse for the sake of her daughter Denise, but when Jerome sells her piano to finance his drinking, she runs away with Denise to Terry's, a wealthy white writer whom she met at a supper club. Terry's love leads Renay to discover her own sexuality, despite the sexist, racist and homophobic prejudices they face. It is the couple's mutual support what leads them to find physical and emotional joy.

After Shockley's first and uplifting novel for black lesbians in the 1970s, the 1980s were fertile ground for writings by and about African-American lesbians, with the inclusion of lesbian and bisexual characters in mainstream, heterosexually identified popular fiction. Literary canon Alice Walker belonged to this era in which women writers, lesbian or not, combined self-expression with culturally specific metaphors to create positive images of black lesbians that replaced "their historic and aesthetic erasure" with "a continuum of female bonding" (KEATING, 1997, p.12).

Alice Malsenior Walker was born on February 9th, 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia. The novelist, essayist, poet, biographer, publisher, activist, and educator was the last of Mimmie Tallulah Grant Walker and Winnie Lee Walker's eight children. She grew up in the rural American South, and her family's experience with racism, as well as the oppressive sharecropping system, influenced deeply not only Walker's life, but also her writing.

Up until 1952, Walker describes herself as a confident little girl, who was praised for her reading skills, cuteness and "sense". In the essay "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self", she writes: "It was great fun being cute. But then, one day, it ended" (WALKER, 1984, p.363). She refers to the episode that happened when she was eight years old, when her brother accidentally shot her in the right eye with a BB gun. For the lack of immediate aid, her eye was scarred and permanently blinded.

Ashamed of the "hideous cataract" (WALKER, 1984, p.364), little Alice Walker changed drastically: she lost her self-confidence, becoming introverted and isolated. She believed she was ugly and was teased at school. Her grades plummeted. In that same essay she states that, for the next six years, she did not look at people in the

eyes. During this time, being excused by her mother from doing chores, she found comfort and refuge in reading and writing, and became more of an observer than a participator in everyday life.

At the age of fourteen, Walker underwent surgery to have the white scar removed from her eye. Once it healed, she regained her confidence, graduating as valedictorian. She then left in 1961 for Spelman College in Atlanta, with her mother's three gifts: a typewriter for creativity; a suitcase for travelling; and a sewing machine for self-sufficiency. On her way there, Walker started to show signs of her political activism by refusing to sit on the back of the bus, like all the African-American descendants were obligated to do. At Spelman, she was an active member in the fight for Civil Rights. In 1963, she left Spelman for Sarah Lawrence College, in New York, where, as a junior, she spent a summer as an exchange student in Uganda and where, during her senior year, she contemplated suicide at the discovery of an unwanted pregnancy.

At this point, Walker turned once again to writing as an outlet for her anguish. She was able to attain an abortion, but fell again into a deep depression. From the pain arose her first volume of poetry, published in 1968. In that same year Walker, who had married civil rights attorney Melvyn Leventhal the previous year — a groundbreaking event, since it was the first interracial marriage in Mississippi — published her first short story, "To Hell With Dying", which was based on the negative reactions that resulted from the abortion she went through. She became pregnant again during late 1967, but lost her child due to stress and the assassination in 1968 of Martin Luther King Jr, the African-American prominent leader of the Civil Rights Movement whom she held in high regards. In 1969, she finished writing her first novel, The Third Life of Grange Copeland, just three days before giving birth to her first and only child, Rebecca.

After college, she worked for the New York City's welfare department and continued her involvement in the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi and Georgia. In the 1970s, Walker's writing career began to blossom. She took a position as writer-in-residence at Tougaloo College and in 1972 became a teacher at Wellesley College, beginning one of the first "Gender Studies" classes in the United States. That was when, after much search, she discovered the works of another great African-American woman writer, Zora Neale Hurston. Zora's life and work, which spoke of

richness and the tradition that came from the African-American culture, was about to deeply influence Walker's.

Throughout the decade, Walker's projects blossomed: she continued searching for her roots, discovering more and more about the lives of black writers and their literature, ignored by the scholars. She also published many books on poetry, a children's book on the famous Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, short stories about black women and their problems. Her taboo-breaking works were diverse in subject and varied in form, but they all were clearly centered around the struggles and spiritual development of African-Americans, focusing specially on the survival of black women. Walker's writings challenged the ordinary representations of African-American passions and oppressions, exposing the naked truth of the complexity of her community.

For all her hard work, she received many literature awards and grants, and she was also hired as a contributor editor for *Ms. Magazine*, an American feminist periodical co-founded by feminist and activist Gloria Steinem. Her second novel, *Meridian*, published in 1976, had its storyline based on the lives of women during the Civil Rights struggle. The book was generally well received but, although her career as a writer was rapidly climbing the ladder of success, her marriage was falling apart. After ten years, Walker and Leventhal filed for divorce. She soon fell in love again, this time with fellow editor of the African-American journal *Black Scholar*, Robert Allen. After publishing a second volume of poetry in 1979, Walker released a book of short stories in 1981, which offered provocative and sometimes humorous stories about women who, although oppressed, were not defeated. However, the book did not achieve the success (nor attracted as much controversy) as her next work soon would.

In the years following her father's death and her divorce, Walker felt the need to write a novel about two women who felt married to the same man. She also wanted her novel to be a historical one. However, she had problems figuring out a plot for her story. On a walk with her sister Ruth, Walker and she started discussing a love triangle they both knew about. Her sister's comments on the subject later became, Walker stated, "balanced in the center of the novel's construction" (WALKER, 1984, p. 355). When the protagonists of this next novel started to take form in her mind, Walker left New York and moved to San Francisco because, being very sensitive to the spiritual world and claiming to being able to communicate with

the deceased, Walker says she was receiving a lot of “complaints” from their characters (allegedly real people with real stories to tell) about the urban noises. Yet she discovered, soon after arriving, that San Francisco was no friendly place for these spirits to tell their story. They “needed” the countryside, and that is where Walker moved to next. Living off her book sells and grants, she finally found the peace necessary to write her next novel. The city of Mendocino, in Northern California, was the place Walker chose to settle, for it resembled her hometown Georgia, where most of the novel setting would be taking place.

The Color Purple, the much commented and highly praised novel, was published in 1982, giving Walker not only the American Book Award, but also the Pulitzer Prize. The novel narrates the struggles of black countrywomen in Georgia in the first half of the 20th century. The work, written in an epistolary form, brilliantly explores the damage done to the individual by racism and sexism, seen as related consequences of a patriarchal society. The main character Celie, for example, is physically and emotionally abused from childhood by whom she later discovers to be her stepfather. Soon later, she is married off to an equally distant and abusive man. In this context, lesbianism is seen as “natural and freeing, an aid to self-knowledge and self-love” (LEE, 1997, p.722). It is only in the erotic bonding with Shug, her husband’s mistress, that Celie is able to grow towards fulfillment, regaining her strength and security.

In Alice Walker’s works, there are no such things as forbidden loves or themes. Like she has done in The Color Purple, her literature seeks to question conventions and instigate racial discussions. Walker’s works rewrite history, by exposing the untold hardships and victories of “herstory”. She is committed to speak of not only the strength of women, but also of spiritual survival, identity, freedom and power, within the framework of black female experience. Conformity to abusive behavior is the main cause for the fragmentation and self-hatred of her female characters. She strongly believes that self-knowledge and self-love glues back a torn spirit, changing these women’s own concept of identity, in the hopes that, in the future, the rest of society will change their concept towards them as well.

In 1988, Living by the Word: Selected Writings, was published. Her second compilation of essays, speeches and lectures ponders about spiritual subjects like life, childhood, the relationship with her father, her reflections on lesbianism and

lesbian/heterosexual acceptance, as well as her reactions on the criticism over The Color Purple.

Walker continued to speak out for the marginalized women, denouncing the herstory concealed from the mainstream literature. In 1992, she published a novel about the horrors of clitoridectomy practices on African women. She spoke out against genital mutilation for it not only denies women their sexuality, but threatens their life and health. She was criticized for speaking of a subject she does not know, since she does not live in a community with those rituals, but Walker refused to silence herself, releasing a documentary on the same subject in 1993. In 1996, she released her third book of collected essays called The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult, which narrates, among other things, her battle against Lyme Disease and her feelings about the criticism over the novel and the movie The Color Purple. She continues to write about the lives of African-American women, the sexism, racism and poverty that makes their life a daily struggle. She also speaks of love, family, rebirth and self-love. She is still actively engaged in environmental, feminist/womanist causes, and issues of economic justice, just stopping every now and then to look around and see the never-ending effects that The Color Purple still has on cultural and racial discussions in the United States and beyond.

Walker is still actively writing against the ongoing problems of the world, such as the oppression of women, war and spiritual matters, together with new poetry and novels. In 2006, she was inducted by California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger into the California Hall of Fame, at the California Museum of History, Women and Arts. More recently, she wrote an open letter to the recently-elected President of the United States, Barack Obama, expressing her joy and hopes towards the first black president of the country.

1. FIGHTING FOR LOVE, FIGHTING FOR LIFE

It is safe to say that the lesbian community would not revel in the identity, the history and the freedom that they now possess if it were not for Art, Female Art, Lesbian Art. The choice for capitals is not random: under this umbrella are concealed thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands creative women, who used their skills and imagination into the creation of aesthetic objects and experiences that can be shared and enjoyed with others. These women had also the ability and boldness of turning their art into manifests, expressing through their creations their own political statements, and, most importantly, rescuing and rejoicing in their erotic identity.

In the beginning of the 21st century, it is possible to see enough positive public images of the lesbian, as well as enough diverse communities so that lesbians feel at least more welcome in this “heterocentric” world. But before the past century, writes Margaret Reynolds, none of it could have happened, “not the knowing, not the naming, not the pleasure, and, above all, not the writing” (REYNOLDS, 1993, p.xiv). For centuries, female sexuality was policed and repressed with extraordinary rigor. Before the 1800s, women did not have the choice to look at another woman romantically — there was no such thing as “lesbianism” as a valid sexual identity. In addition, erotic writings describing women’s sexual experiments with other females were more often than not private and encoded. Sometimes there could be something as a “romantic friendship” between females, or a woman dressing and working as a man, or even a sexually deviant female who would later be burned as a witch, but their love, their erotic bondings, their intimacy, was not revealed, it *could not* be revealed. As a result, despite the early and powerful exponent lesbian poems written by Sappho, positive concepts about lesbians almost disappeared, turning the lesbian writing almost a nonentity as well.

For a long time, the “gaze”, in arts, was male. This meant that it was rather difficult to conceive erotic images for anything other than a male audience. Therefore, girl-on-girl imagery was conceived for male arousal, making it particularly difficult for lesbians to achieve a proper sense of ownership and recognition of their own self in sexually explicit lesbian art. To complicate matters, because straight men find pleasure in fantasizing about two women together, inevitably the imagery, codes, and

signifying systems of women-with-women erotic art were developed by men to arouse other men.

The interrogation of what could be considered lesbian writing was vastly discussed by three different editors of lesbian short story compilations. Naomi Holoch, editor of Women on Women: An Anthology of American Lesbian Short Fiction, organized the book, together with Joan Nestle, around some major themes she believes unite lesbian lives, such as intimacy, loneliness, anger, death, ambition and desire. In her opinion, the experiences in the stories should be shaped by the writer's own experiences. The lesbian writer, she emphasizes, "cannot set aside such a strongly enforced self-consciousness as she goes about her business. To do so would isolate her art from her existence, mutilating both the writing and the writer" (HOLOCH, 1990, p.3). In this sense, heterosexual writers were unable to fully understand or convey the meaning of such writing which, she believes, only lesbian authors can do.

Difference is also a key word in Holoch's view. She sees as fundamental that "to live, to observe, to write as a lesbian is to live, observe, and write from a position of difference" (HOLOCH, 1990, p.2). Being a gay woman, she argues, is to never forget your oppression and invisibility. Lillian Faderman, in her compilation Chloe Plus Olivia: an Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the 17th Century to the Present, alludes to the same feelings, resenting the lack of importance which "new" lesbian writers give to lesbian-feminist struggles: "sometimes this younger generation of lesbian authors simply takes for granted lesbian-feminist principles rather than foregrounding them in their work" (FADERMAN, 1995, p.689).

Faderman's biggest concern with the compilation was not only to consider lesbian literature as a task to be fulfilled by lesbian authors, but also the evolution in lesbian subjects. Her book features works from both old and new generations, but she believes that there is a clash between the two, with the latter sometimes mocking the seriousness of lesbian-feminists, as well as being non-separatists and less critical of males. Another important difference she notices in post-lesbian-feminist literature concerns the literary representations of their sexuality. If the first generation excluded some important sexual expressions in favor of the "politically correct", the second generation demanded that their works addressed the "sexually forbidden" themes, such as "butch/femme, s/m, and other varieties of sexual relationships and role play, penetration with or without dildoes, desire that is divorced from politics"

(FADERMAN, 1995, p. 690). Danger, she believes, is a stimulant to such literature, producing a pleasure that is finally aimed at lesbian readers, not “the straight male, who was often the targeted reader of literature about lesbians in other eras” (FADERMAN, 1995, p. 690).

Holoch defended that lesbian literature should be written only by lesbians and about lesbian matters. Faderman partly agrees with this idea: she also understands that lesbian literature is best portrayed when written by lesbian authors. Contrary to the first, however, is Faderman’s belief that lesbian literature can include themes and people that were largely absent from earlier literature. Themes such as AIDS, the extinction of the binary division between homo and hetero, gender behavior, gay men characters, lesbian mothers and their children, are all part of what Faderman considers contemporary lesbian literature, which she believes “mirrors contemporary lesbian life in its reflection of far greater inclusiveness in the definition of community” (FADERMAN, 1995, p.693).

Margaret Reynolds, editor of The Penguin Book of Lesbian Short Stories, presents a more open idea of what lesbian writing consists of. In her introduction, she alludes to the previous invisibility of lesbian love, as for when girls who went to bed together they would be “ignored or tolerated as adolescents going through a ‘passing phase’ or desperate freaks who have failed to find anything better” (REYNOLDS, 1993, p. xv). Therefore she makes an effort to collect texts which historically portray lesbian love in its many stages, from the writing under the influence of sexologists’ theories of abnormality from the beginning of the 1900s to the boldness of the 1920s and 1930s’ Paris group of lesbian authors who saw themselves as different and took pride in it.

Literature from the World War I and II also appear in Reynolds’ work: the propaganda of gender stereotyping which forced women who were once called into working in “men’s” jobs to go back to the kitchen was, in her opinion, highly influential on lesbian thinking. From the 1950s, Reynolds illustrates her book with stories who play with “butch” and “femme” roles as a “reflection of a particular sexual ideology in a particular place and time” (REYNOLDS, 1993, p. xxv). From the 1960s and 1970s, she selected works that experimented with “coming-out” stories born out of the new freedom of lesbian-feminist politics. The literature chosen by Reynolds from the 1980s represent the bridging of the gap between straight feminist writers and lesbians, derived from the active feminism of the previous decades.

Reynolds also made sure that fictional and real-life characters were also featured (sometimes to redeem, sometimes to condemn) in her collection. The married lesbian, for example, is criticized for gaining “social status and respectability while she betrays and tortures the woman whom she claims to love” (REYNOLDS, 1993, p. xxviii). The lesbian vampire, on the other hand, is rescued from the end of the nineteenth century literature to be analyzed, subverted and ultimately laughed at.

These are just examples of common themes drawn from lesbian history that appear in Reynolds’ book. Many of the stories compiled, she explains, are experimental, filled with word-play and codes to name what had not been yet expressed. Lesbian literature represents a challenge to the traditional form. So, in short, what is lesbian writing? In Reynolds’ opinion, “it is writing which exhibits, within the confines of the text itself, something which makes it distinctively about, or for, or out of lesbian experience.” (REYNOLDS, 1994, p. xxxii). The writer, she goes further, “may never have kissed another woman. Even if she has, she may not call herself a lesbian” (REYNOLDS, 1993, p. xxxii). Many of the writers she chose were not lesbians — but they are all women. Women whom she felt added difference, diversity, individuality and, above all, quality, to the lesbian as subject matter. I agree with this definition, for the women writers featured in this work may or may not be lesbians, but their works certainly aided countless women who needed to come to terms with their own (homo)sexuality. This first chapter, without the pretension to depict history in an anthology fashion, aims to pinpoint the major movements, previously mentioned by Reynolds, that contributed to the growing acceptance of lesbianism, and subsequently African-American lesbianism, reclaiming the woman’s body and pleasure that male pornography, masculinist society and institutionalized oppression have “stolen” and misused for centuries.

It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that the category of lesbian was created. If the law and general public denied lesbianism, science, from 1869 on, proved its existence. The year of 1900 witnessed the pathologizing of homosexuality by the medical profession. Carl von Westphal, for example, studied a girl who dressed as a boy and was attracted to other girls. He perceived that her tendencies were “inappropriate” to her female gender — that is, she was “active when she should have been passive, independent where she should have been submissive, outspoken where she should have been silent” (REYNOLDS, 1993, p.xvi). Based on his discoveries, Westphal concluded that her condition was

biologically based and abnormal, labeling her “congenital invert”. From then on, women who fell in love with other women had a set of concepts by which their behavior was scrutinized. What was once invisible became a pathology. Westphal’s case turned the lesbian into a distinct person, bringing with it, as Martha Vicinus enumerates, a number of subsequent studies of “the ‘invert’, the ‘third sex’, the woman with ‘a touch of the hermaphrodite’, the ‘male soul trapped in a female body’, the ‘unsexed’, the ‘semi-women’” (VICINUS, 1996, p. 223). A little more than a decade later, Richard von Krafft-Ebbing’s work popularized the idea of female deviance in his “antifeminist bible” (DONOVAN, 1989, p.25). Published in 1882, Psychopatia Sexualis labels ‘deviant’ and ‘degenerate’ any woman who does not conform to the following stereotypes, which would be a sign of an “antiphatic sexuality” wrought by “hereditary degeneracy”:

In woman voluntary subjection to the opposite sex is a physiological phenomenon. Owing to her passive *rôle* in procreation and long-standing social conditions, ideas of subjection are, in woman, normally connected with the idea of sexual relations. (KRAFFT-EBBING, apud DONOVAN, 1989, p. 25)

Meanwhile, traditional culture was trying to yield homosexuality silent, labeling same-sex love “unspeakable” and censoring any writing that contained the slightest homosexual tinge. Because women were generally beneath the law, lesbianism was also overlooked. In the beginning of the twentieth century, lesbian activism was still yet to exist. Many women who loved other women continued to view themselves as romantic friends and devoted companions. Lillian Faderman attributes the lack of lesbian consciousness to a number of different phenomena:

[...] the push toward companionate marriage and the identification of same-sex attraction as a hindrance to its success, the depression, McCarthy-era persecution, the obsession with molding all women to fit the feminine mystique, and the identification of those who did not as queer or sick—also discouraged women from organizing and demanding their rights as lesbians. (FADERMAN, 1991, p.189)

Nonetheless, some female authors, especially the ones who were not afraid to assume their “invertedness”, refused to silence and defied this invisibility and prejudice. Radclyffe Hall, or John, as she preferred to be called, was one of the few female writers who lived her lesbianism openly and proudly. Born in 1880, she was very impressed with the sexologists’ studies of her times, which categorized people

like her as members of a third sex. In 1928, she published The Well of Loneliness, a novel that became known, according to Martha Nell Smith (1997, p. 40), as the best lesbian literary work of the 20th century. The groundbreaking novel tells the story of Stephen Gordon, an Englishwoman from a rich background whose “sexual inversion” is apparent from an early age. Stephen finds love with another woman, but their happiness is followed by social isolation and rejection.

Although the novel was in accordance with the imposed beliefs of the time, such as that homosexual relationships were a menace to society — therefore they could only bring disgrace to the parts involved, Hall’s work presented homosexuality as a natural, God-giving state, agreeing with British sexologist Havelock Ellis’ theories on lesbianism (he even wrote her a preface vouching the genuine depiction, in the novel, of the “female congenital inversion”). The story stood as a political piece, a plea for every homosexual’s right of existence, for Hall argued that homosexuals could not help being as they were, since they were born with their “condition”. The story, which did not contain a single erotic scene, was nonetheless prosecuted by the authorities. Hall’s widely famous trial for obscenity evidenced an utterly intolerant attitude of scorn for lesbians, reinforcing the creed in lesbianism’s “wicked” eroticism. The “bad” publicity, however, also increased the visibility of lesbians, and, despite receiving critics at the time not only for its “apologetic tone” and “pleas for pity”² but also for the protagonist’s expressions of shame and self-hatred, The Well of Loneliness was the first liberating encounter many lesbians had with other lesbians in the book’s pages for the subsequent decades.

Following the end of the World War II flourished what became known as the “witch hunt”. McCarthyism persecuted homosexuals in the 1950s, for they were seen as an “uncomfortable challenge to the mood that longed for obedience to an illusion of uncomplicated ‘morality’” (FADERMAN, 1991, p.140). Lesbians were affected by what was promoted as “mental health”, i.e. a consensus among psychiatrists that women who loved women were incapable of being truly happy in life, since they were not content to marry and stay home, having babies and caring for their husbands. It was at this time, Lillian Faderman adds, “that the lesbian ‘sicko’ became the dominant image of the woman who loved other women and curing lesbians on the couch became a big business in America” (FADERMAN, 1991, p.130). The

² <<http://www.gayhistory.com/rev2/factfiles/ff1928.htm>> Access on: July 10, 2008.

persecution intended to not just separate these women from humanity, but also to show that same-sex love was a symptom of a character disorder, a perversion. Such threats from society terrified many women who felt desire for other women. Getting “professional help” became the general rule for many families who identified in their young daughters some signs of homosexuality. However, at the same time that the “witch-hunt” pushed some homosexual men and women even further into their closets, others were compelled to fight for their rights. McCarthyism helped fostering self-awareness and identity among gays and lesbians.

Although a significant number of women were suddenly coming out together in the 1950s, there were few models for how to do it. The only pattern they had was the heterosexual one. While the first generations of middle-class women saw the advantage of the “marriage of equals”, working-class women had no such benefits. For them, a functioning couple meant different individuals, if not male and female, then butch and femme. The creation of “roles” also had an important function in the working-class and young lesbian subculture, for they operated as an “indicator” of membership. For many lesbians, the butch/femme dress code and role behaviors, although “seemed to confirm the early sexologists’ descriptions of a ‘man trapped in a women’s body’ and ‘the mate of the invert’”, became “a crucial part of who they were once they discovered the subculture” (FADERMAN, 1991, p.168). By the end of the decade, it was possible to detect various activist groups in its early formations.

Looking back, many lesbian historians suggest that the butch and femme roles were not imitations of heterosexual couples, but unique in themselves, “based not on the social and sexual models all lesbians grew up with, but rather on natural drives [...] and on lesbian-culturally developed behaviors” (FADERMAN, 1991, p.169). Yet, their style of dress was not much different from male/female style; the terms that described their relationships were modeled on heterosexual language, since there were no appropriate words to convey such commitment. The roles they played also looked very heterosexual to the world. As Lillian Faderman enumerates:

butches were supposed to control emotions, do the husband-type chores around the house, be the sexual aggressors; femmes were supposed to cook, be softer, more yielding, stand behind a butch as a woman stands behind a man. (FADERMAN, 1991, p.169)

The 1960s changed the temper of the United States drastically. The severity of the 1950s was, as Faderman describes it, “turned on its head” (FADERMAN, 1991,

p.202). While some women still felt compelled to have sex primarily for men's pleasure, others felt motivated to explore their own erotic potential by popular literature. The lesbian pulp novels of the 1950s and 1960s emerged in part due to this problematic nature of pornography for women. The fact that pulp novels with lesbian subject matter proliferated in this rigid period is not as surprising as it seems. Being "cautionary tales", they seemed to conform, at least on the surface, to social prejudices about homosexuality. On the other hand, these novels explored the "outlaw" status of the lesbian character, moving from subtle strategies of expression to unconcealed celebrations of woman-for-woman passion. Since there was very little other literature for and about lesbians, these "sensationalist" novels, which could be purchased at any newsstand or corner drugstore, helped many women define themselves, addressing "the psychological issue of power and control by reassuring the reader that submissive acts are voluntary, not capitulatory" (MILLER, 1997, p. 264).

This genre was also characterized by unhappy endings, in which lesbian relationships were brought to a halt, sometimes by one of the women "turning" straight and marrying off while the other — still gay and then abandoned — usually committed suicide, or lost her mind. This "cautionary purpose" of the pulp novels occurred due to this tension between the authors' attempts to present lesbian love sympathetically but also support the publisher's demands. Many lesbian authors implied, however, that the pathology of lesbianism described in the stories resulted not from homosexuality *per se*, but from social intolerance. Nonetheless, pulp novels represented another step towards the free celebration of female-female love, for they subverted the social and political prohibitions against homosexual expression during the McCarthy era, reassuring closeted women that they were not alone.

The 1960s also saw the flourishing of what became known as "the second wave" of feminism. If the "first wave", active during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, focused primarily on gaining women's suffrage, this second wave raised the critique against sexual objectification of women, detaching the celebration of female nakedness and eroticism from exploitative male pornography. Inspired by the minorities' fights, such as the Civil Rights, these new feminists perceived that they were kept second-class citizens by men "who claimed all the social, political, and personal powers for themselves" (FADERMAN, 1991, p.202). The only way to claim that power back was to unite. These new wave feminists were not afraid of the "lesbian" label: they saw it as a *choice*, not a demand, any women could make.

Lesbians were divided in two strong movements at the time to fight for the rights of women who loved women. One encompassed the believers in “essentialism”, in which the women “believed they were born gay or became so early. They identified their problems as stemming from society’s attitudes about homosexuality” (FADERMAN, 1991, p.189). The other movement constituted in “lesbian-feminists”, who defended “existentialism”, in which the lesbian was just like any heterosexual woman. They believed that any women could existentially “convert from heterosexuality to homosexuality in the name of women’s liberation” (FADERMAN, 1991, p.189). They recognized their problems as “stemming from society’s attitudes toward women, and lesbianism was for them an integral part of the solution to these problems” (FADERMAN, 1991, p.189).

Up until the 1970s, prosecution against homosexual content led many authors to execute some sort of censure to their own works. Lesbian presses and periodicals emerged in the 1940s through the 1970s, product of not only gay/lesbian liberation movements, but also the women’s liberation movement. However, feminist liberation struggles also repressed lesbianism, turning the term *lesbian* a risky “label” to take. To be visible as a lesbian was (and still is) to “challenge the conventions of heterosexual patriarchy on which legal and social orders rest”, positioning oneself “to be received as threatening, menacing, disruptive to the foundations of culture and society” (SMITH, 1997, p. 40). Because of that, many lesbian writers disguised homosexuality in their works, while others avoided writing about the subject altogether. Moreover, in an attempt to expose the “perversity of homosexuality”, lesbians, in books written by men, were described as “nymphomaniacs and sexual predators corrupting innocent young girls in a shadowy underworld”³.

By the end of the 1970s, homosexuals got bolder. Inspired by the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s, organizations became more militant, adapting the slogan “Gay is Good” from the “Black is Beautiful” one. In 1969, in the midst of a New York mayoral campaign, the police descended for the third time on the Stonewall Inn, a private gay bar in Greenwich Village. Homosexuals were used to the raids, usually disbanding after the officers’ arrival, but on that June 28, two-hundred working-class patrons stayed and protested. The numbers doubled by the end of the

³ <http://www.glbtc.com/arts/pulp_paperbacks.html> Access on: July 10, 2008.

night, and the next day the riot continued. The movement, known as the Stonewall rebellion, was “widely received as the originary moment of the gay and lesbian liberation movements” (SMITH, 1997, p. 40), becoming a symbol of gay and lesbian power. This gay liberation movement gave more visibility to gay and lesbian worlds, providing “a desperately needed antidote to the homophobia” (SMITH, 1997, p.40) of the time. Therefore, by the end of the 1960s, lesbian literature, supported by the gay and women’s liberation movement, offered more stories of “a proud and affirmative community bent on changing public discourse and conventional society’s reception to lesbian life” (SMITH, 1997, p. 40), which in turn helped to bring more lesbians to the new movement.

The rapid changes of the period translated into confusion, euphoria and rage in lesbian works. Female authors were fighting the profound injustices, challenging the usual characterization of fictional lesbians as “sordid, suicidal creatures of the night” (WADSWORTH, 1997, p. 48) present in pre-Stonewall literature. Thereupon, lesbian writers also began questioning other issues, such as the perfect matriarchal society that had always been denied to them and would represent the regaining of female power. Not even the rejection from the main publishing houses stopped this wave of self-awareness, and small women’s presses were created to print out the new lesbian writing that was flourishing at the time.

Following the growing march towards acceptance of lesbian subject matters in America, the 1970s also witnessed the awakening of frank sexuality and free celebration of lesbian desire. Different from sensationalistic contents of the pulp novels and certainly exempted from any constraints of medical, social or political nature that dictated the previous generation of female writers, the huge changes in attitude which marked the lesbian experience at that time encouraged many writers to experiment in literature the new-born freedom they were experiencing in their lives. In Margaret Reynolds’ words, “experience became the common term, and suddenly there was a market of reading dykes out there desperate for stories about their sisters, about themselves” (REYNOLDS, 1993, p. xxvi). It was in this scenario that the free celebration of lesbian love in white lesbian literature fully emerged.

Despite the existence of various “lesbian subcultures” in the 1950s and 1960s, the one thing they all had in common was the fight against homophobia, allied to the fact that none of them had enough background history to conceptualize themselves as a group. Black lesbians, in this sense, had even *less* to base themselves on. Until

the 1970s, open affirmations of women's same-sex desire in African-American literature were rare. As Barbara Smith points out in The Truth that Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender and Freedom, the history of African-American lesbians and gays presents itself in fragments, scattered through documents, fiction, poetry, blues, rumors and allusions. Their story has been written "in juxtaposition to the history of white lesbians and gays and has been presented in works in which the history of white lesbians and gays constituted the dominant narrative" (SMITH, 2000b, p.83). The existence of a broad feminist movement was essential to the growth of feminist literature, criticism and women's studies, which paved the way for (white) lesbian literature to also come out. The fact that an equivalent black feminist movement evolved in a much slower pace impacted on the proper analysis and recognition of black women writers and, consequently, stagnated black lesbian writings. But, in retrospect, it was very difficult for a community who was still fighting for racial equality to focus on what they saw as "smaller" matters, such as sexual orientation.

The black community, since the Emancipation in 1863, had been fighting a long hard battle to be recognized as true American citizens. The Reconstruction of the late 1800s, the foundation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, the Harlem Renaissance from the 1920s, and the Civil Rights Movement (1955-1968) represent iconic historic movements which paved the way, however slowly and unsteadily, towards the social and political equality of black society.

Black nationalism, a political and social movement from the 1960s and 1970s, sought to acquire economic power and to infuse among blacks a sense of unity. In the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, explains Gayle T. Tate, "separatism and emigration were the dominant themes of Black nationalism" (TATE, 1998, p.64). In modern times, the movement has often been identified with Pan-Africanism. Despite the variations, four features have remained constant: racial solidarity, religious separatism, cultural history and black autonomy. In the late 1800s, after the failure of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow laws in the South, which segregated blacks from whites, many adherents to black nationalism developed further, suggesting the creation of an entirely separate black nation.

By the 1950s, the Nation of Islam appeared with a nationalism based on the doctrines of the Islamic faith. Malcolm X, its most eloquent spokesman, "espoused a

philosophy of racial pride, knowledge of Black history, and self-determination” (TATE, 1998, p.63) which led to the Black Power movement. The movement was conceived after the attempt by black activists to combat racism during the early 1960s was not completely successful. The movement was largely perceived as the African-American’s persistence on reinforcing their dignity and self-reliance. The celebration of their cultural heritage and African roots was also strong in the movement. African-American women, of course, were part of these movements, for they were subject to humiliation because of the color of their skin as much as their brothers were. However, racism was not the only oppression black women had to confront.

The victory against color prejudice would definitely alleviate African-American women’s problems, but this fight did not include some of these women’s most poignant problems: poverty, unequal pay, lack of childcare and violence of every kind, which the rest of society, especially black men, had overlooked with sharp indifference. For that reason, black women joined the second wave of the wide women’s feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, in an effort to end discrimination between males and females. The *Combahee River Collective*, one of the most important black feminist groups, formed in Boston in 1974, wrote a statement in 1977 signaling the black feminist existence in both movements:

A Black feminist presence has evolved most obviously in connection with the second wave of the American women’s movements beginning in the late 1960s. [...] In 1973, Black feminists, primarily located in New York, felt the necessity of forming a separate Black feminist group. This became the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO). Black feminist politics also have an obvious connection to movements for Black liberation, particularly those of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of us were active in those movements (Civil Rights, Black nationalism, the Black Panthers), and all of our lives were greatly affected and changed by their ideologies, their goals, and the tactics used to achieve their goals. (COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE, 2000, p.265)

Unfortunately, the feminist movement proved to be yet another place where they were treated as third-class citizens. Not only were the goals black women had different from their white peers, but they also had to face racism from their supposed allies. In 1913, during the first wave of feminism, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the journalist who led the anti-lynching campaign in the late 19th century, formed the Alpha Suffrage Club to march in a suffrage parade in Washington D.C. As they prepared, organizers asked the group to march at the back of the parade, in order to “please” the racist South legislators and pass the constitutional amendment. Over fifty years later, black women were once again sent to the “back” of the feminist movement.

Critics and readers also ignored the implications of black women's sexual politics in literature, dealing with it only within the context of black literature. For that reason, Barbara Smith wrote, in 1977, a groundbreaking essay entitled "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism", in which she confesses that she did not even know where to start, for she felt it was overwhelming "to break such a massive silence" (SMITH, 1977, p. 3). The breaking which she refers to is the attempt, for the first time, to discuss black women writing from a feminist perspective, and black lesbian writers "from any perspective at all" (SMITH, 1977, p. 3). In the article, Smith complains about the lack of attention all segments of the literary world give to black women's literature, for they act "as if they do not know that Black women writers and Black lesbian writers exist" (SMITH, 1977, p. 3). Smith also makes an observation which is truly striking: many African-American women, lesbians or heterosexual, did not even notice their absence from literature, from politics, from life:

It is galling that ostensible feminists and acknowledged lesbians have been so blinded to the implications of any womanhood that is not white womanhood and that they have yet to struggle with the deep racism in themselves that is at the source of this blindness. (SMITH, 1977, p. 3)

Racial minority homosexuals did notice, however, how lesbians and gays were ostracized in their parent communities. At the height of Civil Rights movements, "it seemed that suddenly homosexuals had popped up and were trying to steal the minorities' thunder by calling themselves a 'minority'" (FADERMAN, 1991, p. 240). But even before that, Faderman explains, gays and lesbians were generally more outcast in ethnic communities, since they tended to be working class and particularly strict about machismo and sexuality. Rita Dandridge complements this idea: "naturally, the independent woman-identified-woman — the Black Lesbian — was a threat [...] to the projection of Black male macho, but a *sexual* threat too — the utmost danger to the Black male's designated role as 'king of the lovers'" (DANDRIDGE, 1987, p.85). Cheryl Clarke states that homophobia is not only practiced by speaking against homosexuals, but also by omission:

homophobia in the black community has not only a decidedly bourgeois character but also a markedly male imprint. [...] we can find his homophobic counterpart in black women, who are, for the most part, afraid of risking the displeasure of their homophobic brothers [...]. Black bourgeois female intellectuals practice homophobia by omission more often than rabid homophobia. (CLARKE, 2000, p.196)

According to Clarke, the combination of a sexually repressive culture with a racist mythology which labels black people's sexuality as depraved has made the African-American community live with this contradiction by repressing or closeting any other sexual/erotic urges, feelings, or desires (CLARKE, 1987, p.192). In addition, there was also the impending need to ally with heterosexual men and women of their group in order to alleviate the oppression they experienced before they could even call themselves lesbians.

It is no wonder, therefore, why black women writers were afraid of writing about lesbianism: they knew of the acute homophobia in their community. It was difficult for them to risk the animosity which they would face had they dared to speak out. As Audre Lorde explains, the label "lesbian" carries with it not only a fear of rejection, but also a deeper fear of rearranging black society as a whole:

Despite the fact that woman-bonding has a long and honorable history in the African-American communities, and despite the knowledge and accomplishments many strong and creative women-identified black women in the political, social, and cultural fields, heterosexual black women often tend to ignore or discount the existence and work of black lesbians. Part of this attitude has come from an understandable terror of black male's attack within the close confines of black society, where the punishment for any female self-assertion is still to be accused of being a lesbian and therefore unworthy of the attention or support of the scarce black male. But part of this need to misname and ignore black lesbians comes from a very real fear that openly women-identified black women who are no longer dependent upon men for their self-definition may well reorder our whole concept of social relationships.⁴

The few black women who did become part of visible lesbian-feminist life in the 1970s were subject to just that: alienation and public scorn. In 1974, influenced by the black power, gay liberation, and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Ann Allen Shockley attempted to break the silence surrounding black lesbianism by publishing Loving Her, a revolutionary novel which featured a black lesbian as its main character. Shockley is recognized in Smith's essay as one of the "handful of Black women who have risked everything for truth" (SMITH, 1977, p. 16), intersecting sexuality, ethnicity, gender and class in order to "correct" earlier misconceptions of black lesbianism. However, critics were so hard on the novel that what should be celebrated as the first time black lesbians could stop "imagining" and actually see themselves on paper became another device of public humiliation. Shockley's work

⁴ Available at <www.clc.wvu.edu/r/download/29781> Access on: Mar. 15, 2009.

deserved a fair reading but, since there was no solid black feminist theory, the book was judged according to heterosexist, homophobic criticism.

Through a non-hostile feminist perspective, Smith analyzes in her article works from black female authors which, in her opinion, feature black lesbian characters, such as Toni Morrison's Sula, in an attempt to "overturn previous assumptions about it and expose for the first time its actual dimensions" (SMITH, 1977, p.9). Smith's essay was one of the first steps towards the invention of an identifiable African-American women's literary tradition, representing a significant challenge to previous concepts of criticism. There was no political movement, presence or political theory that would support, empower nor demand a minimal level of consciousness and respect for anyone willing to study African-American women's experience. Smith's desire to "construct a positive, self-affirming history and tradition of black lesbian artists" (KEATING, 1997, p.10), therefore, played a significant role in creating a body of black feminist political theory, whose assumptions could be used in the creation of African-American lesbian literature and criticism.

Smith's essay ignited black women's desire to be recognized by their own particularities in their own terms. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, women of color who actively participated in feminist causes against sexual politics realized they were excluded and alienated from the general feminist thinking. These black feminists emphasized that feminism should consider the differences regarding different races and classes in its analysis of women. They felt that their own experiences were not fully accounted for in the broad feminist panel.

Out of the dissatisfaction with these liberation movements, Black Feminism as a political and social group was born. The main crux of the black feminist movement, Barbara Smith argues, is conjugating "the concept of simultaneity of oppression" (SMITH, 2000b, p. xxxiv). Black women argue that sexism, class oppression and racism are inextricably bound together in their lives and, while white feminism strove to overcome sexism and class oppression, they ignored their pleas against racism, something which the Civil Rights fought against, but nonetheless ignored sex and class oppression suffered by their women.

Black feminist organizations emerged in the early 1970s. Fighting the complaints of several black male activists about women's issues being "narrow, apolitical concerns" (SMITH, 2000b, p. xxxi), urging them to focus on the "larger struggle", black women organized to fight the simultaneity of oppressions that

affected what came to be called “Third World women”. Black lesbian-feminists were the first to organize as lesbians and feminists along racial lines. They were present in the NFBO of 1974 and, in 1978, they formed a “National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gay Men”. They also established a magazine, which created unity between women. In response to the male community about fighting the greater enemy first, Smith argues: “if we have to wait for racism to be obliterated *before* we can begin to address sexism, we will be waiting for a long time” (SMITH, 2000b, p.xxx).

The image of black womanhood has been consistently stereotyped and distorted. The vast majority of African-American women were brought to the United States to work as slaves. The union of race, class and gender oppression typical of U.S. slavery, argues Patricia Hill Collins, “shaped all the subsequent relationships that women of African descent had within Black American families and communities, with employers, and with one another” (COLLINS, 2000, p. 4). Controlling images, originated in the slave era, are still applied to black women, attesting and justifying the ideological dimension of their oppression which subjugates and assigns them a subordinate place in American society.

Two of the most common controlling images fashioned to manipulate ideas of black womanhood are the opposition between “mammies” and “matriarchs”. The “mammy” typifies the domestic servant of African descent who works in white people’s homes. Generally pictured as the good-natured, often overweight and asexual black mother who raises white kids with “infinite patience”, “self-deprecating wit” and “implicit understanding and acceptance of her inferiority” (WALLACE-SANDERS, 2008, p.2). The figure of the mammy is best represented in the character of Aunt Jemima, the robust former slave with a bandana who served pancakes in a booth and later became the face of breakfast foods for Quaker Oats Company. According to Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, this image of the mammy is “the most widely recognized representation of an African-American woman [...] between the 1820s and the mid-twentieth century” (WALLACE-SANDERS, 2008, p. 2). The figure of the mammy represents the “good” black mother, who embodied everything a mother “should be”, except she cared more for the white children she worked for than her own offspring.

Directly opposite to this image lies the figure of the “matriarch”, which symbolizes a “failed mammy”, as it was seen the mother figure in black homes. Popularized in the 1960s by the release of a government report entitled *The Negro*

Family: The Case for National Action, better known as “The Moynihan Report”, the black matriarchy theory argued that the failure of the black family lies in the black women’s inability to fulfill her “womanly” role as housewife. The ideology behind it depicted the African-American households as being dominated by overly aggressive, unfeminine women, who emasculated their lovers and husbands. Working outside the house, author Daniel P. Moynihan argues, leads to a lack of supervision of their children, who resent the missing parents, therefore acting poorly in school. The “tangle of pathology”, Moynihan writes, is that

the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.⁵

Onto the black woman who dared to reject the image of the submissive, hardworking servant, a negative stigma was cast. The historically myth of being “towers of strength who neither feel nor need what other human beings do” (SMITH, 2000a, p. xxviii), as shown, was even reinforced by white male social scientists such as Moynihan. Taken together, the images of the mammy and the matriarch, fashioned as instruments of power from elite groups, had the effect of damaging black women’s reputation even further, eroding their self-confidence and ability to confront oppression.

The image of “man-haters” constructed by anti-feminists is “one of the silliest and at the same time one of the most dangerous” (SMITH, 2000a, p.xxx). There has to be a distinction, Smith argues, between attacking systematic institutionalized oppression and attacking men as individuals. It was necessary, therefore, to find other terminologies that would express those subjectivities, while emphasizing the inextricable link between African-American men and women’s fate. Alice Walker’s *womanism* was an important contribution for its attempt to locate black women in history and culture, rescuing them from negative stereotypes which damaged their images. Walker’s womanism gained notoriety after the publication of The Color Purple. The novel was published in the 1980s, a time where African-American lesbian writing was proliferating, with the inclusion of lesbian and bisexual characters in mainstream fiction. The decade saw a proliferation of fiction writers and poets developing works which both reflected and reinvented their black lesbian identities.

⁵ <<http://www.blackpast.org/?=primary/moynihan-report-1965#chapter2>> Access on: Nov.3, 2009.

The criticism on The Color Purple, however, revolved less about the female bonding between the lesbian (or bisexual) characters than on the denouncing of black men's tyrannical behavior. The novel arose heated debates, as many African-American men felt that it reaffirmed old racist stereotypes about the black community, while critics and readers criticized the heavy focus on sexism. On the other hand, the novel had its supporters, who praised the book for its feminist engagement. Nevertheless, Walker does not consider herself a feminist. On a 1984 interview for *The New York Times*, Walker explains why the expression "black feminist" did not grasp the complexity of the black female culture:

I just like to have words "that describe things correctly". Now to me, 'black feminist' does not do that. I need a word that is organic, that really comes out of the culture, that really expresses the spirit that we see in black women. And it's just . . . womanish.⁶

While the idea of *womanism* is rooted in black women's concrete past in racial and gender oppression, Walker also implies that womanism manages to invoke the universality of her black female tradition:

Part of our tradition as black women is that we are universalists. Black children, yellow children, red children, brown children, that is the black woman's normal, day-to-day relationship.[...] When a black woman looks at the world, it is so different . . . when I look at the people in Iran they look like kinfolk.⁷

The lesbian relationship in the novel was also interpreted as an indicative of Walker's own sexuality, to which she makes clear that she is not a lesbian, but a "womanist". In the opening of her volume of essays In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose, she explains womanist as a "black feminist or feminist of color" and as a person "wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one" (WALKER, 1983, p. xi). In another statement, she defines womanist as

A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility [...] and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. [...] Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. (WALKER, 1983, p. xi)

⁶ <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/04/specials/walker-story.html>> Access on: February 10, 2009.

⁷ <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/04/specials/walker-story.html>> Last access: February 10, 2009.

By refusing to identify herself as a lesbian, Walker challenges the common belief established between a writer's personal identity with the subject matter she explores. As Shockley, a heterosexual woman, did in 1974, Walker here opens, perhaps more successfully than her predecessor, a way for non-lesbian writers, readers and critics to analyze literature related to lesbian relationships. Walker's *womanism*, in this sense, seeks to integrate men and women, lesbians and heterosexual women, through the celebration of women's strength and emotional flexibility.

Walker's concept was very appropriate for the mentality of the 1980s as, due to the growing feminist thinking, lesbian-feminists and straight-feminists "began to look at each other with renewed respect" (REYNOLDS, 1993, p. xxvi). One of the most important theoretical texts in this collaboration was Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". In the article, Rich's concept of *lesbian continuum* matches Walker's idea of womanism, in which women bonding, whether they consider themselves lesbians or not, is related directly to their emotional and physical survival:

I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range — through each woman's life and throughout history — of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support [...] we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of 'lesbianism'. (RICH, 1993, p. 239)

Allied with Walker's *womanism*, Rich's concept of *lesbian continuum* is crucial to my research. In Rich's article, heterosexuality is seen as a political institution designed to attain and maintain male power by straitjacketing women's political, social and sexual freedom. The urge here is not to hate men, but to fight the system. Resistance to the heterosexual institution, Rich affirms, is part of women's history, for they, as previously explained, often rely on each other for support against male tyranny. "If we think of heterosexuality as *the* natural emotional and sensual inclination for women", Rich argues, "lives such as these are seen as deviant, as pathological, or as emotionally and sensually deprived" (RICH, 1993, p.241). Resistance is also important when it breaks the rigidity of relationships, inviting homosexuality to be recognized and studied as a valid identity: the continuous

presence of women sexually attracted to other women throughout history, as well as the continuous redefining of their reality, is what Rich calls *lesbian existence*, even if the term “lesbian” itself is relatively new. The terms *lesbian continuum* and *lesbian existence* are forms to escape the limiting definition of lesbianism as merely a form of sexual practice. For the author, women identification is a source of strength, “a potential springhead of female power, curtailed and contained under the institution of heterosexuality” (RICH, 1993, p. 244). Whether these women consider themselves lesbians or not, the depth and breadth of their bonding should not be diminished. In this sense, *lesbian existence* functions, according to Rich, “as a reality and as a source of knowledge and power available to women” (RICH, 1993, p. 229).

Lesbian continuum, Rich explains, “came from a desire to allow for the greatest variation of female-identified experiences” (RICH, 1993, p. 249). The term, therefore, widens the view of lesbianism beyond the sexual connotation, comprising all women bonding experiences, which can and often include heterosexually-oriented women:

if we consider the possibility that all women—from the infant sucking at her mother's breast [...] to the woman dying at ninety, touched and handled by women — exist on a lesbian continuum, we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not. (RICH, 1993, p.240)

Together, *lesbian continuum* and *lesbian existence* come in Rich's work to replace the use of the term “lesbian”, in an effort to erase the “limiting, clinical associations in its patriarchal definition” (RICH, 1993, p. 240). As these two new terms converge, the erotic in female terms is discovered “as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself” (RICH, 1993, p. 240). The perception of female's power as an energy diffuse and omnipresent not only in women's sexual relations with each other, but also in the sharing of emotional, physical and psychic joy is, in the end, what Rich, Walker, Shockley and myself are trying to rediscover, encourage, and, most of all, celebrate.

2. LOVING ONESELF

Ann Allen Shockley is a woman of “firsts”. She was the first African-American to write a newspaper column both in the *Federalsburg Times* and the *Bridgeville Times*. She was also among the first people to write essays regarding the care of black library collection, as well as being the first person to co-author a directory of living black American authors. More importantly, she was the first African-American woman to introduce in literature a disdained and ostracized figure in the black community — the black lesbian.

Shockley’s writing career includes dozens of short stories published throughout the years in newspapers and periodicals, whose subjects dealt with a wide variety of themes such as “integration and segregation, inter and intraracism, heterosexuality and homosexuality, fidelity and infidelity, youth and age, conspicuous display and poverty, and life and death” (DANDRIDGE, 1987, p. xvi). In her collection of short stories, entitled The Black and White of It, Shockley extended the fictional treatment of lesbian experiences started in Loving Her. The book, released in 1980, is considered the first published short story collection about lesbianism written by an African-American woman. The stories, some of which were written in the 1960s, offer a wide range of situations where lesbian love occurs, celebrating the milestones accomplished by women in race and sex.

Basically, the collection is dominated by one pattern: the “tenuous, fragile lesbian relationships in heterosexual, male dominated communities” (DANDRIDGE, 1987, p. 24). The plots progress from the fear of discovery, to the separation of lovers, to the solitude and longing for woman-bonding relationships. The stories also feature characters and situations that are not very farfetched from reality, such as black lesbians ostracized by white lesbians (“A Meeting with the Sapphic Daughters”), a black college girl who is afraid of coming out to her family (“Home to Meet the Folks”), a mother having furtive encounters with a past woman lover (“One More Saturday Night Around”), a distinguished political candidate who keeps her long-time affair with her lover a secret from the public (“Play it, but don’t Say it”).

The similar pattern of the stories exposes the rigidity of the environment in which her lesbian characters lived. The images presented by Shockley annul the vibrant and joyful expectations of love, creating sentiments of isolation, decay and

difficulty. For example, in the story “Spring Into Autumn”, it is on a “bleak and thick [day] with a dreary hovering grayness” (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.1) that the protagonist, Penelope Bullock, remembers the anniversary of when her lover Claire walked away from their relationship. On “Holly Craft Isn’t Gay”, Holly Craft, an “ex-lesbian” who got married to a famous Civil Rights activist, receives a phone call from her old lover Adrienne. The day they decide to secretly meet was “a typical Big Apple bleak and cold, representing February’s dung” (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.71). Another example can be found in “One More Saturday Around”, which frames in one night of passion the frustration between two lovers that cannot fully live their love. On this Saturday night, they restrain their love to a secret encounter in a cheap motel, under the watch of the ceaseless clock. The bed, where their love would take place, “appeared burdened with its heavy spread, and the cream-colored walls loomed more comfortless with thoughtlessly placed pictures” (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.81). These images give readers a small glimpse of how the world can appear cold and hostile to lesbian love. By the sadness of these stories, Shockley indicates a wish to critique society’s insensitiveness to the lesbian existence, which imprisons these women’s self-expression, “[casting] them in a pale from which it is difficult to extricate themselves” (DANDRIDGE, 1987, p. 24).

Much before the publication of The Black And White of It, Shockley, who has proclaimed herself to be a socially conscious writer, felt the need to write a story centered on black lesbians. In her essay “The Black Lesbian in American Literature: an Overview”, originally published in 1979, she points out that “[the] Black Lesbian was a nonentity in imagination as well as in reality” (SHOCKLEY, 2000, p.83). Up until that moment, almost nothing had been written about these homosexual women, and Shockley had some ideas as to why this happened: “[the black lesbian writings] were probably not published because the works came too soon with respect to marketing time. [...] a money-making market was inconceivable” (SHOCKLEY, 2000, p.84). Shockley attributes that to “the socio-political temper of the times”, which had not yet “given rise to the activism of the women’s or gay rights movements of the sixties” (SHOCKLEY, 2000, p. 84). She explains that the ideology of the period fueled even more the African-American community’s negative view of homosexuality — it was a time when the Black movement was flourishing, bringing with it “the promotion of Black male identity to offset the myth of the Black matriarchy” (SHOCKLEY, 2000, p.85). The idea of an independent, woman-loving woman was a

threat not only to the black male dominance, but also to their sexual “reputation” as super studs. As she remembers, “the singular goal of those times was to enhance Black manhood” (SHOCKLEY, 2000, p.85).

In the essay, Shockley also comments on the lack of publishable lesbian literary works in that period, for she felt that the women who had the knowledge to write about the lesbian experience did not have the time, inclination or ability. The few works that presented black lesbian characters, she says, were written by white women, whom she felt “[did] not know enough about Black Lesbians to write about them” (SHOCKLEY, 2000, p.83). Also because white women’s literature focused on their own battles, the black lesbians portrayed in these works were stereotypical caricatures, feeding antipathies and contributing to their misconception. Since the “visible” lesbians in real life were the ones who looked “mannish”, their traits were transported into the literary world, increasing the misconception and animosity towards them. For being “mannish”, these women were ostracized, receiving derogatory comments such as “too ugly to get a man”, “manhaters” and “*man-women* physically” (SHOCKLEY, 2000, p.85). Less “obvious” lesbians, understandably, either were not or did not wish to be recognized.

This lack of understanding has led to not only misinformation about the lives of black lesbians, but also fear and animosity toward them. The knowledgeable people who could have provided truths, leading the community towards a more human vision of lesbianism, have done little to help clarify the myths. In her essay, Shockley mentions the oral response she received from a Southern black female gynecologist when the subject of black women as lesbians came up: “the learned practitioner off-handedly remarked that Lesbianism was acquired from the white women” (SHOCKLEY, 2000, p.85).

All this prejudice toward the black lesbian caused a deep fear of labels, which prevented African-American female writers from openly discussing the lesbian world in their works. The fear was genuine: as previously explained, being labeled as gay or a “bull-dagger” meant positioning oneself in the eye of scrutiny, prejudice and scorn. The threat of this label, Shockley explains, is entrenched with the overall homophobic attitude of the black community, which has its roots and branches in social, religious and “biological” convictions. These women writers lived in the black community, nurturing the closeness and acceptance of their family, friends, neighbors and co-workers “who share the commonality of ethnicity in order to survive

in a blatantly racist society” (SHOCKLEY, 2000, p. 86). For them, it was just easier to live in peace with the black community, focusing their works on what was “socially acceptable”. As she explains, blacks attempted very little to comprehend or even learn more about Black lesbians.

Shockley, however, chose the hard path. A “staunch feminist” (DANDRIDGE, 1987, p. xiii), she did not conform to a literature that deliberately omitted certain members of black society, deciding thus to write herself about the people she wanted to read about. In doing so, she wrote forwardly, obscuring nothing, frowning only when people defied the existence of her subject matter or argue that whatever topic she chose to write about is not “appropriate” for literature. Originally entitled A Love So Bold, Shockley’s first novel was also the first one ever to focus on the subject of black lesbians through the point of view of a black woman. Shockley published the now entitled Loving Her in 1974, as a means to objectively present the existence of lesbianism among blacks, as well as to put an end to the distorted and misconceived notions held by homophobic or misinformed members of the community.

Reflecting a sensibility that predates the black, lesbian and women’s liberation movements, for she claims the novel was written between 1960 and 1969, Shockley’s work challenged sexual and racial phobias, exploring tabooed themes and subverting the “norms”, in search of social transformation. In the novel, lesbianism is seen as the nourisher, while the patriarchal family scheme provides only suffering, damaging the female integrity. However, Shockley refuses to label her work as either heterosexual or homosexual fiction. She believes, as a straight woman writing about homosexual issues, that neither her sexual orientation nor race are relevant to the discussion of her work. She argues that it is very limiting to categorize every African-American woman who tackles the topic of lesbianism as a lesbian because a writer should be able to choose any point of view.

Shockley’s writings offer complex portrayals of lesbian experience, constituting a new and brave contribution to the development of lesbian literature. Her women characters’ choices and lifestyle add new layers to the formerly monotonous black literature. Although she has won major awards and positive reviews from scholars and critics, her work is still relatively unknown to the greater audience. However, she continues to write better and bolder pieces since Loving Her came out. Her courageous attempt to expose alternate life-styles of her female characters has placed her years ahead of her literary contemporaries, loosening the strai(gh)tjacket

of a segment of society bound up by racial and sexual prejudice, while also adding a cutting-edge richness to a literature whose subject matter had faded into repetitiveness.

2.1. The Strai(gh)tjacket

Jerome Lee Davis was the boy of every black girl's fantasy. The tall, dark and handsome football player was the star of his college team. His "stiff curly hair" and "flashing dark eyes", accompanied by a big "ready smile [...] enhanced by the dimples" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.13) made all the girls on campus crazy about him. He was the black version of prince charming, embodying the epitome of the heterosexual, predatory, pretentious macho. He was obviously aware of such magnetism on girls, for he "swaggered with a hip-dip walk, hugging and kissing everybody lightly in passing, calling baby and doll and honey" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.13).

Renay was a shy girl who was brought up on church and melody. Daughter of a housekeeper and high school principal, she discovered in sixth grade a passion for music. Every Saturday, Renay would walk up to the "uppity" black neighborhood to have piano lessons with Miss Pearl Sims, a music teacher who worked at the same school as her father. Miss Sims really liked her — "You are going to be a great musician one day" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.10), she would say. On Sundays, in the Asbury Baptist Church, Renay would put into practice everything she had learned in her lessons by playing the piano "to give pleasure to others while they praised God and dreamed Sunday dreams of a better world" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.11).

It was thanks to the church scholarship committee and Miss Sims' recommendation letter that Renay got a spot at the state college in Frankfort. Her academic life started off well: the head of the music department wanted her to try for a graduate scholarship at Julliard. Then, in her junior year, her path crossed Jerome's. If life were a fairy tale, it could be said that the fable of the prince charming was coming to its fulfilling climax, where the two young, handsome characters meet, fall in love and live happily ever after.

Except Renay did not like Jerome. Their date to his spring fraternity dance was everything but a prologue to a happy life thereafter. Jerome took it as a challenge when Renay refused his advances. He desired her so badly that he “bombarded the dormitory with telephone calls for her, chased her and cajoled her” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.13). In his mind, Renay was playing her role as a “female”, enticing the man to increase the value of the reward at the end of the conquering game. Jerome had help of Renay’s roommate Marissa, who teased her for studying too much, and could not understand why she would pass on what she saw as a good catch. Marissa was decisive in Renay’s change of heart: one night, when Marissa got back to their room “reeking of beer more than usual” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.14), she asked the question which stirred mixed feelings Renay was not aware she had: “You *do* like *men*, don’t you?” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.14). Feeling a hot flash through her body, Renay yielded, accepting the date with Jerome. But she knew something was not right.

From the beginning, Shockley shows how uncomfortable Renay felt in the presence of Jerome. On their first kiss, Renay remembers, she did not hear bells ringing. Instead, she felt the experience was jarring. While she stood on her spot in shock, “feeling nothing, knowing nothing, willing nothing” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.15), Jerome “[mashed] hard upon her mouth and teeth, prying her lips open to insert a tongue coated with the taste of beer and cigarettes” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.15). On the way to her room, her only thought was: “I’ve been kissed by a man and I hated it” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.15).

Renay kept seeing Jerome purely to keep Marissa at ease. Mechanically, she learned to accept his midnight kisses, mentally detaching herself from the situation. In her mind, “she was only superficially acting out the woman’s role she thought she was expected to play in the context of their relationship” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.15). The theory of the black fairy tale could have already been completely shattered, if it were not for another surprisingly violent element which marked the end of the dream and the beginning of Renay’s plight. At the night of his fraternity dance, Jerome drank more than usual, his stupor helping him decide that it was time to take their relationship to the next level. On their way back to the dormitory, Jerome pulled Renay roughly to him. Feeling “the rising spear of his maleness throbbing against her” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.16), Renay began to protest, frightened. He ignored her,

his hands forcefully groping her body, while he whispered in her ear that, if she loved him, this would be the way to prove it. And then he raped her:

Impatiently, savagely, he pinned her shoulders down with his weight, trying to shove his male dagger into the secret abyss of her being. He pushed and heaved and grunted against the virginal obstruction of her cavity. She cried out in pain as he finally penetrated her. Now inside, he groaned and plunged as until he came in quick, youthful, bungling passion. It was over, and all she knew was the hurt and the stickiness on her legs. (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.16)

As the days progressed, Renay's nightmare worsened, as she realized she was pregnant. With no money for abortion, she decided to keep the baby. A boy like Jerome would have probably walked away but, surprisingly enough, he stays. "Half in youthful fear, half in desperation" (Shockley, 1997, p.17), as Shockley explains, Jerome suddenly grows a conscience, reminding himself that he was the one chasing Renay — she had not helped nor encouraged him to do so. In the beginning of their life together, Jerome tried to be a good husband. As Renay reminisces, "he bought food regularly and saw to her needs as best as he could in preparation for the baby" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p. 83). But Renay realized that, even with all that care, she could not respond to him as a wife, for she did not love him. After their daughter Denise is born, they dropped out of college, moving to the Midwest. Frustrated, Jerome starts taking odd jobs — his drinking habit slowly increasing. In his mind, the loss of his dream of finishing college and becoming a professional football player was so agonizing that drinking became a way "to forget his plight of having to marry before he was ready" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.17).

2.1.1- The Black Macho and the Perfect Black Family Sham

As previously shown, Jerome and Renay's marriage, develops not into the promised domestic bliss, but slowly descends into domestic violence, directly contradicting the "fundamentally white middle-class family model" (LANE, 1997, p. ix) which black nationalists envisioned as ideal for the African-American family. According to Alycee Lane, black radical nationalists of the 1960s and 1970s proposed as a solution to the "dissolution" of the black unit that the figure of the black male should be "reinstated into his rightful role as head of the black family" (1997, p. ix). Black nationalism emerged in conjunction with racial segregation, and it can be

defined as “a political philosophy based on the belief that Black people constitute a people or a nation with a common history and destiny” (COLLINS, 2000, p.298). One of the common bases between black nationalist discourse and black women’s philosophy was the notion of black solidarity, a theory which presupposes that blacks have common interests and should therefore support one another. However, there is a branch in the black nationalist ideology which believes in the centering of black men as the true object of nationalist discourse. This point of view, started by the notorious Moynihan Report, published in 1965, and subsequently echoed by many other black nationalists, placed black men as the most affected victims of racial discrimination. In addition, black women were identified as active agents on black man’s social and economic emasculation, just like white society. According to Madhu Dubey, the Moynihan report “argued that the black male’s “natural” tendency to exercise his masculinity was inhibited by the stronger social and economic position of the black woman” (DUBEY, 1994, p.17). In Loving Her, it is possible to see Jerome’s decay, which he would later blame on his wife: working as a beauty shop products salesman, it does not take long for him to get back to his old habits, using his charm to attract and seduce women, turning his work into a never-ending party. Jerome was spoiled by the women at work and, in exchange, he “enjoyed bullshitting both the pretty ones and the bats. He had become king of the turf once again” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.18).

Meanwhile, his life with Renay and Denise took a toll for the worse. He stopped providing for them, disappearing for long periods of time. As Renay comes to realize, this was actually better for her and her daughter, since when he was home, Jerome would get drunk too often, physically abusing her on a daily basis. In the novel, Shockley also describes their sex life as far from ideal as well — for Jerome, accustomed to the “chasing” game, having the same woman in bed meant that he had to have sex with her every night, something which Renay deeply resented: “Wasn’t that what a wife was for: to screw whenever you pleased and to take care of a husband’s needs of washing, ironing, cooking and making him comfortable?” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.83). Her words may sound conforming but, in truth, she half-mocks the condition she has been put in. Unable to escape her compulsory heterosexuality, Renay gives up happiness, living but not feeling alive, often wondering whether she existed at all.

Marital rape was another recurrent event in Renay's life. Regardless of whether Renay wanted to have sex or not, "practically every night he wanted her" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.83). At any given time, if Jerome happened to wake up and find her there, he would roll up on Renay and satisfy himself. At these times, she would lay in bed wondering whether he was doing it because he had sexual desire for her or simply because she was there and available. A contemporary reader might question why Renay gave up her right to be sexually pleased. Renay stayed trapped inside a brutal relationship, where she possessed nothing, not even her own body, exchanging her body's "potential for joy" for "the social legitimacy that heterosexuality accords" (LANE, 1997, p. xiii). Like many African-American women, Renay coped with such vicious relationship for fear of being labeled by the community. From an early age, Renay could feel the prejudice towards single black women at her own home. She recalls her mother and her friends joking about Miss Sims, while sipping coffee. They would make sneering remarks about her, calling her "old maid, "spinster" and "too much ed-u-cashon to git a man" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.9).

Renay's relationship with Jerome would not only deny her sexual pleasure, but also trap her body and spirit in a cycle where they were constantly beaten down in order to keep her down. With a "seriously flawed personality" (DANDRIDGE, 1987, p.26), Jerome embodies the macho way of thinking: his menacing actions and words are contaminated by heterosexist patriarchal ideologies, perpetuating the repressive nature which women all over the world still fight hard to extinguish. As the "ruler of the household", Jerome is a "particularly ruthless and domineering figure" (LANE, 1997, p. ix). When he is home, Renay is expected to attend to his every need. Afraid of speaking up, Renay embodies the figure of a slave, granting her master's wishes to avoid punishment, which falls upon her anyway. Aside from the physical abuse and name-callings such as "yellow cheese-shit bitch" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.45), Jerome often blurts out how worthless and snob he thinks she is: "You always did think you were better than me, Miss High-'n'- Mighty, Miss butter-won't-melt-in-your-mouth" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.131). He does not forget, however, that it was exactly her "proud queenly aloofness" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.131) what attracted him to her in the first place. Through Renay's ponderings, however, Shockley analyzes the behavior of the Jeromes in the world, placing in her female character's considerations all the explanations that have been used as excuses for these men's abusive behavior:

Why did he want her back? To be his scapegoat? To be the blame for his alcoholic weakness? To be an escape mechanism for the women of whom he wearied, and a safeguard for the ones he wanted for a while? But above all, to be the doormat upon which he could wipe his feet. Wasn't that what most black men wanted their women for? To take their anger at themselves and the world about them, hold their sperm, spew out their babies? This was what made them feel manly: the white man's underdog having an underdog too. (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.44)

Through Jerome's unfounded accusations to Renay, it is possible to see Shockley's criticism on this nationalist rhetoric on black family, showing that his repressive behavior and demoralizing speech are just instruments used by black men to assert their power and manipulate ideas about black womanhood.

Nonetheless, Jerome's conception of marriage is in accordance with the social myths of the time. One of the most encompassing images created to validate black women's oppression was that of the "black matriarch". This intersection of race, class, gender and sexuality in a stereotyped figure produced a powerful ideological justification "to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (COLLINS, 2000, p.69). Directly opposed to the figure of the "mammy" — the black mother figure in white homes, which represented the "good" black mother — the black matriarch represented the mother figure in black homes, symbolizing the "bad" black mother. The argument is that matriarchs do not perform their conventional "womanly" duties at home, and that jeopardizes black civil society. Because they fail to "care" for their children, since these women would be outside their homes doing "men's" work, their kids would fail in school for lack of "supervision". In addition, these working mothers were considered "overly aggressive, unfeminine women" (COLLINS, 2000, p.75), allegedly emasculating their lovers and husbands.

This is precisely what Jerome accuses Renay of doing to him in Loving Her. Unable to see his own flaws, and consequently every other man's faults, Jerome places onto Renay the responsibility for having his life destroyed:

You know we black men have a hard enough time as it is making it in the white men's world. Be damn glad you could help me. I could have been somebody if it wasn't for you. All you castrating black bitches want to keep a man down. *Ruin* him. Just like my mama ran my daddy away. Always after him. And *you*. What goddam good are *you* to a man? Not even a good screw! (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.29)

For Jerome, as for other narrow-minded black men that insist on subjugating their female companions, black women "not only dominate the black family but are complicit with the 'white power structure's' emasculation of black men" (LANE, 1997,

p.viii). A woman like Renay would represent a failed mammy, a negative stigmatization to be applied to black women who challenged this image of a submissive, selfless, diligent servant.

2.1.2- The “Failure” of Black Aesthetics

As previously shown, Renay was a woman which Jerome felt the need to straitjacket mentally, sexually, spiritually and physically. Yet he knew that the best way to really hurt her was by deriding her art. His “brutal and hellish existence” (DANDRIDGE, 1987, p.26) made life unbearable to Renay who, oppressed by his abusive behavior, found her only escape through music. During their marriage, her piano “was the only thing that made her life less lonely in the small, dingy four-room apartment” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.18). Jerome, on the other hand, in no way attempted to understand Renay or what music meant to her. In an effort to undermine his wife, Jerome would ridicule her talent, dismissing her efforts as a woman artist with a sneer: “You just ain’t got it. You can’t play worth a damn, and it’s time you knew it. I’m your husband, so don’t that make me the best critic?” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.82). Practicing at home on the old piano her mother had given her, Renay finds in music not only the comfort she could not find in her husband, but also the solution for her and Denise’s survival. Without Jerome’s knowledge, she starts working at a supper club frequented mostly by white diners. The club grants her and Denise enough money to live by, becoming also the place where Renay would meet a person that would change her life forever.

However, before Renay could gather enough courage to leave Jerome, or maybe this event was the last straw, he makes another effort to crush her spirit (and finance his drinking): he sells her piano. Yet in Jerome’s mind, Renay “owes” it to him, for trying to “keep him down”. His words at this moment reflect Shockley’s denouncing of a sexist reality in which black men completely discard women’s attempts at producing good art and, in this case, support their homes: “You ought to be glad I could get something for it. It’ll keep us going. Playing that shit in Charlie’s club ain’t helping *that* much” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.29).

Shockley uses this battle between Renay and Jerome to discuss real-life debates about black art. As Lane argues, Jerome, in this sense, would represent “the

limitations and more oppressive elements of black aesthetics” (LANE, 1987, p. xv) which condemn the art and artists that “fail” to conform to the ideal critical standards. As Patricia Hill Collins points out, it was also in African-American music that black women had a chance to express themselves (COLLINS, 2000, p. 105). The blues tradition, Renay’s specialty, is an essential part of African-American music. The style was not just entertainment — it was also a way of establishing the black community and commenting on the social structure of the African-American working-class. However, as Collins explains, middle-class blacks who were involved in the 1920s Renaissance found such music as “antiethical” to their cultural movement. Consequently, black women blues singers were often considered of “low” culture.

Jerome lacked sensitivity in all areas of his life. For him, as Renay describes, “a flower is just a plant, a bird’s chirping is just noise, and a pink sunset the end of a metallic day” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.82). Whenever he would come home to find Renay at the piano, he would turn on the record player and listen to his favorite music: rock or rhythm and blues, styles that, in Renay’s words, “best served his background for drinking and man-lies and woman-tales” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.82). Shockley uses Jerome as the incarnation of those critics which derided any kind of art that, in their opinion, was not “sufficiently black”: “Will you stop all that goddam banging! It ain’t getting you or me anywhere. Ain’t nobody going to listen to that shit. Let me hear some funky music!” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.82).

Like her protagonist, Shockley suffered with the lack of respect for women artists and their work. Frank Lamont Phillips, a former Fisk University student and a potential poet, attacked Shockley in an African-American magazine, criticizing Shockley’s “assault” on black nationalism as “bullshit” that “should not be encouraged” (DANDRIDGE, 1987, p. xii). In his opinion, Shockley should have known better than exposing such negative view of black males. As Lane points out, when Phillips condemns Shockley for not addressing the unity of the black community through her work, he is also, in coded terms, accusing her of failing to fulfill the criteria of black aesthetics. Black art, as explained in the first chapter of this thesis, was supposed to affirm the “beauty” of black society, while encouraging its members to unite against racism and oppression. Through her novel, Shockley confronted these repressive implications of black art, reading it as a “masculinist, heterosexist discourse, one that constrains black women’s creativity” (LANE, 1997, p.xiv). Loving Her not only certified the beauty of white women but also questioned

the validity of black unity when its male members force their women into the same vicious treatment white society thrusts upon them. Renay, in this sense, represents all the oppressed African-American women, something which Phillips, as a “paternalistic male critic who resists change by trying to regulate the subject matter in black women’s novels” (DANDRIDGE, 1987, p.105), failed to recognize.

Despite Phillips subsequent attempts to rectify his behavior, it is impossible not to notice the similarities between him and the character of Jerome Lee. As a masculinist and heterosexist critic, his patronizing attitude towards Shockley’s work and the condemnation of her art “are precisely what Jerome embodies and what Shockley holds up to ridicule” (LANE, 1997, p.xv). Unfortunately, the blow caused by his thoughtless article appears to have cast an invisibility spell on Shockley’s subsequent works forever.

2.2- Freedom

Terry came into Renay’s life at the supper club. At this particular night, the blues singer received a request to play Debussy, an impressionist French composer. When she realized that the request for classical music came from a white person, Renay felt challenged, her preconceived notions of racism overwhelming her: “pains of anger and resentment stabbed her. The woman was making fun of her. A nigger knows nothing but blues and jazz” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.19). To prove that white woman wrong, Renay played *Clair de Lune* at the best of her abilities, showing, more to herself than to any other person in that room, that she, as a black woman, did study music, knowing far more than the darkness of her skin would credit her.

Terry’s first impression of Renay, on the other hand, was completely different. Terry saw through Renay’s talent, discovering the blues inside her. She felt compelled to watch her sad touch on the piano keys, to observe her shy movements, wondering why this girl did not look at the audience more, why she did not smile more. When Terry realized she was going to the supper club for more than the music, she felt a little shocked. She was touched by Renay’s melancholy, feeling not only sexual attraction for the girl, but also “a desire to know her better, to fathom her thoughts, to wipe away the sadness” (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.106).

As they get to know each other, the racial tension dissipates. Renay feels drawn to Terry's confidence and intelligence. They find affinities and, shortly after, become friends. Terry, a rather wise middle-aged writer who is used to get whatever she wants, quickly perceives what Renay failed to: "You're married, aren't you? [...] But you don't love him" (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.22). It was then that Renay realized how compliant she had been, not out of love, but out of obligation: "Dutiful. In a way, that was what she was. Doing it and playing by the book because no one had come along to make her want to forget the rules" (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.22). Terry was confident that she was the one to change Renay's mind:

I'm wealthy. I'm used to getting what I want, even if it means buying it. You've probably guessed what I am by now, or else you're terribly naïve. I'm one of those women who prefers her own sex and I want you. However, as trite as it may sound, I want you for real. (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.22)

Terry was a lesbian, a piece of information which Renay received with no surprise, but with a little hesitation. Terry knew of the blues singer's hidden passion, a desire to love and be loved, but Renay was not sure it could be met this way, since she had never really thought about it. Still, "a knowingness stirred her like truth itself" (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.23). In a way, she felt like she may have known it all along.

What Terry then offered — a helping hand, if Renay ever needed her — was more than just protection; it was freedom. After going back to Terry's "fashionable apartment building" (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.26), Renay opens up, telling her how much she despised Jerome. Terry's comforting comes in the form of a hug, which soon becomes more than friendly: "The mouth meeting hers was soft like her own and very, very gentle, unlike the hardness she had been accustomed to feeling" (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.27). Terry makes sure she is not afraid or ashamed before pronouncing the words that would finally set her free: "Renay — come" (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.27). And indeed she does, for the first time in her life.

Now that she had found what she wanted and needed most, Renay knew she could not go back to "the hurried mounting of her, the jabbing inside her with the acrid whiskey odor heavy in her nostrils" (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.28). With a place to run to, and with somebody who truly satisfied her sexually and emotionally, Renay was now aware of herself, finally gathering up enough courage to leave Jerome and start anew. She sees her chance to flee after another usual night of beating, made worse by Jerome's selling of her piano. When she realizes he is not home, Renay

hurries to wake up her daughter, trying not to think about the consequences. She escapes like a runaway slave — away from her prison, her sovereign male companion, towards a promise of excitement and serenity much needed to bring her back to life.

2.2.1- Domestic Bliss

Terry's apartment perfectly reflects her own traits: the decoration was of good taste, sober, without the "frivolities of the usual feminine touch" (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.26). It is with the same firmness but softness that Terry, the wealthy, rational, straight-forward white writer, leads Renay through the beauty and the ugliness of the newfound lesbian world. When Renay arrives, Terry provides for her and Denise not only shelter and financial comfort, but also love, security and peace. In many ways, their life as a lesbian couple resembled, as Shockley affirms, the traditional "man-wife" couples:

The days had a pattern. After dropping Denise at school, she would return to the apartment and prepare Terry's breakfast of grapefruit juice, eggs, toast and the strong black coffee Terry liked. There were so many little things that Terry ignored. She didn't like to make a bed, cook or hang up clothes. These Renay did while Terry read over her night writing with the FM radio station playing in the background. (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.39)

It is clear in the novel that Terry assumes the dominant role in the relationship: while she is responsible for the financial security of the house, Renay plays the role of the stay-home mom, who takes care of all household chores (which Terry hates to do) and still looks beautiful as her partner arrives home. It does not take long for Renay to adapt to her new middle-class routine: "she shopped in careless pleasure, knowing that she did not have to worry about prices or about embarrassment at the checkout counter at having to put back some of the items because she did not have enough money" (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.8). Unfortunately, Shockley fails to acknowledge the dynamics between the homosexual couple. Being a straight woman herself, and perhaps also by the lack of models, Shockley did not have an inside vision of how lesbianism is different from heterosexual living. The fact that Terry is the provider, while Renay stays home as the nurturer, does not equal them to a man/wife pair, but shows how independent from a man a woman can be. The fact

that Terry has a masculine soul which reflects in her outlook and manners does not make her a man, but a *butch*, i.e., a woman who dresses and behaves in a masculine way, while Renay can be seen as a *femme*, which is a lesbian who dresses and behaves in a feminine way. By comparing their relationship to that of a traditional man and wife, Shockley accidentally robs them from their uniqueness. Sally Munt, editor of the book Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender, explains the importance of the terms butch/femme to one's self-identity:

Butch/femme is lesbian gender experienced from the inside, it is a mode of articulation *and* a living movement, it is the way our bodies speak our desires. In short, butch/femme is a way we can inhabit lesbian desire, a *habitus*. (MUNT, 1998, p.2)

Shockley, whether she knew it or not, created a couple which perfectly embodied the butch/femme dynamics. For example, when Renay gets hit on by another woman at a party, Terry gets jealous and angry, which Shockley, holding a heterosexual view on the event, describes it as an act of “a jealous husband” (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.79). Let it be clear that, although Loving Her was considered *avant garde* for its time, it becomes obvious in passages like the one above that her work still contained some vestiges of backward thinking — also visible in some of the vocabulary chosen by the author. For a work written not only in the midst of the Gay Liberation movement but also published a year after the American Psychiatric Association ruled that homosexuality was not a mental illness, Shockley makes use of real archaic terms, such as “homophile” and “invertedness” (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.61), terms no longer used to describe homosexuals. Now, in the 21st century, it is possible to finally understand that the homosexual world has its own dynamics — equaling their way of living to that of heterosexual couples is not only retrograde, but also deeply mistaken. They have fashioned a new way of living, one that suits the wants and needs which the traditional world could not suffice them, let alone comprehend.

Nevertheless, Shockley pays attention to the subtleties of the new relationship by comparing it to the heterosexual marriage previously had by Renay. After her quarrel with Terry over jealousy, Renay feels happy, even turned on by Terry's resentful display of affection, thinking how different it was with Jerome:

A smile pocketed the corners of her mouth as she thought about last night and Terry's jealous anger. To be jealous was a healthy sign. She pressed herself into the indentation on the bed

and rested her head where Terry's had been. A small pulsation of desire stirred her where the motions of love begin and end. Strange—she had never felt this way about Jerome Lee. She could never remember wanting him physically. Not like this—in the morning, at noon and at night. It was a wonderful feeling, like that of a giver and the gift. (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.81)

The comparison between Jerome and Renay's relationship and Terry and Renay's relationship is a constant in the novel, in which Shockley ironically places in the homosexual bond "the domestic bliss that nationalists imagine will define the black household once it is taken over by men" (LANE, 1987, p.x). In all of these comparisons, it is clear to see that the relationship between Renay and Terry is based on mutual love and respect, being thus quite liberating, while the relationship with Jerome is based on fear and constraint:

There had been no companionship with Jerome Lee. They had not gone places together, nor had he stayed at home with her for any length of time. [...] Worst of all, he had never communicated with Denise. Terry adored her, spoiling her with attention and affection as Jerome Lee never had. He had treated her like a fixture around the house that was created by him. She was simply proof of his reproductive capacities. (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.83)

Terry's support helped Renay regain her strength and self-confidence in all areas of her life. One of the first things she understood about Renay (and something that Jerome was never able to understand) was how important music was to her. When Renay tells her that Jerome has sold her old piano, Terry is enraged. She knew that music was "the side of [Renay's] nature that needed expressing and nurturing" (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.82) so, after their first day living together, Renay goes back home to find what her mother could never give her: a brand new baby grand piano in their living room — a gift from Terry. As an intellectual, Terry also recognizes the importance of education on a person's morale, so she encourages Renay to return to college, in order to finish her course and get a degree in music.

By presenting a life so much better than the one she had before, Terry made Renay realize that she deserved more than what Jerome had ever given her. The fact that she was submissive to him before made him confident that she would go back to him whenever he wanted. But now, with renewed confidence brought by the discovery of true love, Renay felt empowered enough to stand up to him when he discovers that she has left him for another woman and threatens to take Denise from her.

That's real funny. You turning into a queer. Maybe that's what was wrong with you all along. And *you* getting a divorce from *me*. Wait until I tell the court about your he-she friends. You won't get Denise or a goddam motherfucking thing. *You hear me?* (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.127)

For the first time, Renay answers back. She is still afraid of Jerome's temper, but she no longer fears to speak up. Subsequently, they actually have a conversation, though a heated one. In it, Renay confronts Jerome about the true role he played on their daughter's life: "yes, you planted the seed, but what *e*/se have you done?" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.129). At this point, Renay realizes that everything would be unveiled: her fears, his anger, their pain. Everything they have never openly spoken about was finally being said:

"How can you say I haven't acted like no father?" he persisted [...]. "Have you *loved* her?" she asked in a whisper [...].
 "Have you loved *me*?" he breathed quickly, and for a brief moment she saw his face soften in bitter despair. (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.129)

Renay knew the answer to that. Even in the beginning of their marriage, when he tried to be a good husband and father-to-be, she could not love him. Their marriage was a mistake, realizing then that it was not the best solution for their problem. She thought he would always feel like "the arrogant black knight-errant who had done the right thing by a black maiden in distress" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.129). Now that she had gone through the worst in her life being beside him, she knew all too well why he wanted her back, and it had nothing to do with love:

"Yes", she said, turning to face him, "you want to beat me, to trample on me, see me grovel because you despise what you can't change. A man should be able to control his woman—especially a black man who can't control anything else. But do you really want to know why you hate me? Because I've survived your male deterioration. Do you understand? Survived! Through the muck and slime you've wallowed in and put me through, I've come out of it [...]" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.132)

The relationship she shared now made Renay comprehend that Jerome was the weak one in the marriage. The drinking, the beatings, the self-pity, were all excuses he used for not pursuing a better life. She had gotten out of it, and now life was finally good. In the relationship they shared, Terry, who had once been cold-hearted and purely physical with her lovers, warmed up to Renay in such a way that she completely opened up to her. In return, Renay learned from Terry what love really was. Terry, with her thoughtfulness and ability to share, finally made Renay realize her self-importance. This new, happy life, also allowed Renay to discover her

sexuality. Sex was never a pleasurable experience for her in the past, as she was just fulfilling her role as a wife. She had never felt desire for Jerome, as it shows in the next passage:

During the times of his lovemaking, she would lie there quietly, gritting her teeth, hands gripping the sides of the bed, and wait impatiently for his climax. At those moments, only the monotonous rhythm of the bedsprings penetrated her thoughts. When he had finished, he would grunt: "Ugh! Like screwing a dead woman!" (Shockley, 1987, p.83)

Renay could not help but feel like a dead woman trapped in that marriage. She did not know then whether the failure was in her or in him. After thinking back on her years with Jerome, she realized she could not go through that again. Now she knew that he could never move her like Terry did. He was not in her mind or thoughts or anywhere. Terry's love helped her find herself, "and the part she tried to deny" (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.28). Renay finally realizes how much beauty and pleasure she had given up. Now "there was life in life [...], and love in its moments" (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.84). She realized she was a lesbian.

Sex is a major part of Renay and Terry's life — and one of the most prominent features of the novel. Not only this was the first relationship Renay felt comfortable in, but it was also the one where she truly discovered her sexuality. As Lane points out, it is "the equity in the two women's relationship [...] what makes the sex between Renay and Terry so good" (LANE, 1997, p.x). The softness of Terry's touch, the tenderness of her skin and the delicate way in which she introduces Renay into a world of new pleasure is what makes their relationship work so differently from everything she had experienced. Now, instead of just lying in bed praying for it to be over quickly, sex is, as Renay describes, "a wonderful feeling, like that of a giver and the gift" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.81). Therefore, the descriptions of their lovemaking throughout the novel are frequent and often graphic. The intention was noble: being the first black female novel to openly talk about the lesbian issue, perhaps Shockley felt obligated to demystify yet another aspect of homosexual life that was considered deviant:

Terry's hands were so light, so knowing, like whispers on her breasts, wings on her stomach, so vibrantly alive in the dark mass where love is made. Her fingers probed tenderly, touching, causing Renay to moan slightly in anticipation. Her hips moved gently, urging the perceiving hands, while her own hands smoothed the ivory back poised above her. It had been done like this before, so there was no need for words. Only the slight pressure of her fingers told Terry that she was ready, more than ready, and the fastening together of woman and woman began.

Then the unison of love: the rhythm like a slow mounting blues that grew and grew into a crescendo that left her weak, but still strong enough to make the music and the feeling better. The indefinable pain lifted her to the point where her arms and legs clasped the back that was making the music heighten until the blues ended in a cry of ecstasy—the pain so sweet and yet so sharp that it hurt before subsiding in a low tremor. (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.6-7)

In this sense, lesbian sex is liberating not only for the character, but mostly for Shockley. By putting forth a novel which dealt with the anxieties specific of the 1960s and 1970s about black lesbianism using such explicit material, Shockley is finally opening that window into a world that had been kept a secret — a world doomed to obscurity, if it were not for brave people like her. It is clear in the novel how far she goes to clarify half-truths about lesbian love. Between the dialogues, the reader is confronted with didactic, almost lecture-like speeches, which intend to demystify falsehoods created by the hegemonic heterosexual society. One example is the idea that lesbians are “that way” because of external influence. Some readers might attribute to Renay’s rape her subsequent preference for women. There is no doubt that any kind of violence to one’s body has enough power to change that one person’s life. But can it really turn someone gay?

2.2.2- The Lesbian World for Blacks & Whites

Much has been conjectured about the nature of lesbianism. What once was seen as a mental illness, is still seen today by several preachers and so-called psychologists as a disease or a “sin”. Many otherwise intelligent people have also created their own assumptions as to why women loved other women. Some say that lesbianism is a result of scarcity of opposite sex mates. Others that women turn to women because they could not find a “good man”. Shockley was aware of the controversy involving the roots of homosexuality. When Renay reflects upon her newfound condition, she voices the popular belief designed to protect male egos: “what could a woman do without a penis that a man couldn’t do better with one? Women became Lesbians because of disappointment in a man. All they needed was a good man to put them on the right track again” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.44-45).

Shockley chose not to dwell on scientific explanations or religious excuses. In fact, to explain the “origin” of sexual orientation, she completely dismisses the

biological blames and behavior conditioning offered by specialists of various sorts. According to Lisa Walker, the advent of the “deviance theory” among sociologists “provided alternatives to traditional interpretations of homosexuality that authorized Shockley’s refusal to construct lesbianism as a sickness” (WALKER, 2001, p.118). This theory allowed a new look on homosexuality, seen from the point of view of their minority, affirming their proclivities, focusing on their group social life and identifying the problem as caused by society, not them. In the novel, although Jerome’s behavior serves as a pretext to the discovery of her lesbianism, it is not portrayed as the *cause* of her homosexuality. Renay, as previously discussed, has not had any feelings for any men, not even her husband. After she comes out, Shockley “reconstructs the narrative of her latent erotic attachment to her childhood piano teacher, Miss Sims, who is herself a repressed lesbian” (WALKER, 2001, p.119). This reflection upon the self is made clear in the following passage:

[...] she realized that even if Jerome Lee hadn’t been such a son-of-a-bitch, she could never have made it with him. She was aware of what she was. It had always been there, deep within: her Lesbianism. Terry had helped her bring it out. She remembered Miss Sims, whom she had tried to emulate, whose sadness she had wanted to kiss away. Miss Sims had preferred to hide or ignore her sexual inclination, suffering in isolation, silence and loneliness. (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.84)

Shockley contributed to weaken the consensus surrounding homosexuality by offering a rather simple version for what was once called “inversion” in the words of Terry, the character who is more than ready to dismiss the influence of role models on the development of her sexuality:

I’m not going to blame my inclination on the schools or a mother’s rejection. I simply like my own sex and that’s that. I’ve come to accept it and learned to live with it, and I’ve stopped wasting money trying to change myself and conform to what society thinks a female should be and what I don’t want to be. Why should I? People aren’t made alike, don’t all think alike, and aren’t pigmented alike. Why should our sex penchants have to be the same? (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.36-37)

Shockley repeats this idea later in her essay “The Black Lesbian in Black Literature: an Overview”, where she blames an ignorant society for the labeling of lesbians as “women who have been disappointed in love and turn to women” (SHOCKLEY, 2000, p.85). In order to “prove” that women did not fall for other women for the lack of a decent man, Renay meets Bob, the perfect gentleman, on an outing with her best friend. Fran knew that Renay lived with another woman but, as someone who refuses to see the truth, for Renay did not have the courage to tell her,

she thought her friend just needed to meet a good man to get back to her old ways. Bob was instantly taken by her, but Renay, no matter how nice he was, “had no reaction to him” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.159). At the end of the date, he kissed her, and she felt repulsed by his “hard male body strange against hers, not like the knowing softness of Terry” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.159). Before she closed the door, she managed to thank him — for the evening and for making her know that she could never go back to that kind of life.

It is true that Renay did not know exactly *who* she was growing up with but, even after she figured it out, she still could not count on family and friends to be on her side, therefore hiding her “secret” even from her best friend. On one side, Terry must have had an easier time fitting into the society as she was. As a white middle-class girl, her “personal burden of invertedness and its stigma” (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.61) was not visible, which made it easier to hide whenever she needed to. In her private life, she knew that the gay world for white people was wider and more detectable. That way, Terry joined this world, forming a circle of friends and lovers, all of them sharing a desire for same-sex relationships. Renay, on the other hand, was practically alone in this new world, an inadequacy many closeted black women must have felt at the time. For that reason, Renay feels hesitant about sharing with her best friend from back home her newfound sexuality, for she knows that her community was not ready to accept such love:

How do you tell your best friend that you are a Lesbian? One declaration would end their closeness, for Fran would always view her in the new light. She would secretly fear being labeled the same because she was her friend. Renay couldn't take the gamble. Fran was the link to her home and her people. (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.146)

Internally, however, Renay tries to stay true to her roots. When she is wrongly accused of stealing by Terry's white maid, she “searches for her mother's strength and the strength of all the other black women who had taken such malicious accusations with courage and composure” (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.52). In addition, she keeps faithful to her roots by baking soul food at home, for her and Terry to enjoy. It cannot be denied, on the other hand, that Renay, in order to assume her true lesbian identity, gets further and further away from her own culture, immersing herself in Terry's world. Vance, a white lesbian art teacher and one of Terry's closest friends, cannot comprehend how Renay moved into their world, not the other way around. She points out the “oddness” of such a move on a talk with Terry:

“You must really care for each other or I don’t see how it could have gotten *this* far. [...]”

“What do you mean?” Terry asked testily.

“Well—her being—you know—black and all. Some of us in the life aren’t so liberal as we seem when it comes to this kind of acceptance.” (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.96)

In Vance’s mind, being a lesbian is hard enough. Being a lesbian and dating a black woman is just too much. It is intriguing to think of how such an ostracized group could still feel *prejudice* towards another ostracized group. Vance reflects on that and comes up with the theory that people will never stop being unfair to each other — even them, homosexuals: “if our kind ever got in the majority, it’d probably be the same way” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.98). She goes on to say that Renay might get “lonesome for her own” (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.96). Terry assures her that she *is* among her own. Renay, in fact, remains in this limbo, where her black identity and her lesbian identity pull her to different sides. Assuming one is rejecting the other. Vance points out that “either for comfort or necessity, whites usually enter the *black* world” (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.97). In her mind, it must be easier for a heterosexual white woman to be accepted in the black community but, in Terry’s case, Vance speculates that maybe there is no black Lesbian world for neither of them to fit into.

Because of the homophobia in the black community at the time, for they thought that homosexuality was “a white men’s disease”, being a lesbian, for Renay, implicated leaving behind her identity as a black woman:

All traces of Renay’s black past, including her husband, her black male friends, her hometown community, her love for soul food, and most disconcertingly, her daughter, have to be expelled from her life before her lesbian relationship with a white woman can be established and affirmed. (DUBEY, 1994, p.152)

This passage is especially true when it comes to her daughter, Denise. After Renay moves in with Terry, Denise is sparsely mentioned, being said to spend most of her time at school or at her grandmother’s house. At the end of the novel, she is abruptly killed in a car accident provoked by Jerome. Desolated from the loss, Renay even thinks that this is God’s way of punishing her for being a lesbian: “Do you think God’s punishing us for this? The way we feel about each other? It’s supposed to be unnatural, isn’t it? Isn’t that what people and books and doctors say?” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.177). Later in the novel, Renay eventually makes peace with the loss, returning to Terry’s arms. In truth, Shockley does provoke the feeling on the reader that the death of Denise represented Renay’s punishment for her “transgressions”

(WALKER, 2001, p.117). The abrupt death can also represent the cutting of Renay's last string with her culture. From then on, she would live with Terry in her house out of town, away from anything that could disturb their peace.

Perhaps this is why Renay feels so alone: like Shockley with this novel, Renay is the first black woman to step up and be open about lesbianism. Alone she defies the nationalist claim that homosexuality is a "product of the decadence of the white culture" (LANE, 1987, p. xi), and this comes to her as a shock. On a birthday party for Benji, Terry's white gay friend, Vance's girlfriend Lorraine is in awe at meeting Renay: "Just think—she's gay! I can't believe it. For the first time in my life, I've met a black Lesbian!" (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.72). This is the first time Renay has been called a lesbian, the word staggering her "as much as if the girl had called her a nigger" (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.72). In her mind, she is still the old Renay. Though there is nothing on her appearance that marks her new "status", she is again labeled by society.

Also at this party, Renay meets her first black gay man — who is eager to explain to her why he is there, surrounded by those people: "I'm here with my lover. He's white. Most of our friends are white. My friends wouldn't understand it too well—you know — his being white and all" (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.74). Coincidentally or not, this man also had his bad share of dates with black men, showing that the image of the black macho exists even among the African-American gay community: "I suppose the black superstud image making it these days can't be tarnished. [...] I don't believe there can or ever *will* be gentleness among black men" (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.75).

Shockley indicates that this feeling of being burdened with too many vulnerabilities is also common to African-American women. For this group, the struggle of being black and female is already enough to handle. With the addition of lesbianism, it becomes just unbearable. Shockley comes to the point of boldly stating in the novel that black women "feared and abhorred Lesbians more than rape" (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.27). As Renay deliberates:

Black women were the most vehement about women loving each other. This kind of love was worse to them than the acts of adultery or incest, for it was homophile. It was worse than being inflicted with an incurable disease. Black women could be sympathetic about illegitimacy, raising children of others, having affairs with married men—but not toward Lesbianism, which many blamed on white women. (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.31)

Unfortunately, it lacks Shockley a little subtlety when it comes to denouncing the stereotypes cast upon the black and lesbian community. With the intention of incorporating the discourse on castrating patriarchy into her fictional language, Shockley places her own ideologies in the form of free indirect discourse. In the next passage, the narrator openly attempts to convince all heterosexual black women to accept black lesbians by using these women's common background of oppression and demeaning to reinforce their bond, turning thus the nationalist speech against its own purpose:

The women of her race loved their men, urged strength in them. And hadn't they for centuries been accused of castrating them? Besides, black women had been made masculine all their lives by forced patriarchy—a role thrust upon them by a racist society. Conversely, she thought, this should soften their outlook on the Lesbian woman, or make more black women Lesbians. (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.31)

The last sentence in this passage must have made a lot of heterosexual African-American women cringe. Shockley attributes homophobia among black women to “the fear bred from their deep inward potentiality for Lesbianism” (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.32). On a conversation between Terry and Mrs. Stilling, her (white) neighbor, Shockley brings out yet another accusation of why lesbian relationships are sometimes seen as “wrong” or “unnatural”: “the reason some give against it is that such a love is abortively barren. It cannot produce the fruits of a heterosexual relationship” (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.173). The author, once again without the subtlety characteristic of only the finest writers, dissipates all the “strangeness” of homosexual coupling by giving life a new meaning, different from the “be fruitful and increase in number” used by church fanatics who insist on explaining life only by means of reproduction:

Children don't necessarily have to be the only fruits of a marriage. Happiness together, just loving one another, can be enough. I've seen childless marriages in which people are completely fulfilled. I also know of marriages which have disintegrated because of the arrival of children. Sometimes with children the love becomes divided, and there is no time for discovery or for treasuring aloneness for its own sake. (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.173)

Although Shockley does not intentionally propose that black women turn their backs on men and become lesbians, one cannot help but notice the author's inclination towards that idea. To help support her proposal, the author makes use of the patriarchy myth in her favor: “You know, it's a wonder all black women aren't in

our world. They're the ones who can get the jobs, the ones left alone to bring up the children, the ones who head the families when the man isn't and often *is* there" (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.111). By this sentence, Shockley shows that the part black women portray in real life can be significantly different from the weak, male-dependant figure nationalists tried to convey. The lesbian relationship, in this context, was not a far-fetched idea for what already happened, for women often relied on each other as friends, confidants, to ease the burden and find the necessary emotional support. This idea is best explained in the words of Adrienne Rich, whose concept of "lesbian continuum" (RICH, 1993, p. 239) views all women-identified relationships (not necessarily sexual) as a "source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, curtailed and contained under the institution of heterosexuality" (RICH, 1981, p.244). In this sense, all women, especially in the black community, share a long tradition of bonding, not for hatred of men, but as a means to psychic and emotional support.

On the other hand, Shockley also believes that the heterosexual women who want to be with black men deserve more "than the repressive model of home and family that nationalists offer" (LANE, 1987, p. xi). Shockley, again through Renay, hopes that the black males will someday become men who will help their women achieve whatever they want to achieve; men who will help their women become whoever they want to become.

2.3- "The Cult of Victimology"⁸

The racial tension felt by Renay in her first contact with Terry brings out a discussion about the complicated relationships between blacks and whites, which Shockley explores throughout the entire novel. Although some people criticize the novel for the *lack* of racial tension between Renay and Terry after they start dating, this feature is actually the most latent and often overlooked of the novel. It is, of course, expected from this African-American novel written by an African-American woman about a black and white relationship during the 1970s to portray some racial

⁸ MCWHORTER, 2001, p. xi

tension between the characters, since they come from different races which have been struggling to get along for centuries in the United States. For this reason, it is also predictable that readers will find in the text racist comments and actions coming from the WASP friends of Terry in relation to Renay and her daughter. For example, when Jean, a beautiful white model and Terry's former lover, finds out that she has been replaced by Renay, a poor black woman, she refuses to drink with her, and states, perhaps out of jealousy, perhaps out of prejudice, or a mixture of both: "You don't think I'd give you up to a nigger bitch, do you?" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.56). The character of Jean also exposes one of the pillars of racial prejudice — the stereotyping of individuals. According to Stuart Hall,

stereotypes get hold of the few simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them, and fix them without change or development to eternity. (HALL, 2008, p. 244)

When meeting for the first time, Terry mentions to Jean that Renay is a musician. Jean seems unsurprised by her talent, stating: "Aren't *all* colored people musical?" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.33). What Jean does here, according to Homi Bhabha, is a simplification of an "arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference [...] constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject" (BHABHA, 1992, p. 321), something which Mrs. Stilling, also reproached by Renay for thinking that she can sing because she is black, light-heartedly jokes back: "And we don't *all* like fried chicken and watermelon!" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.103). Together with Jean, other white characters in the novel also participate in the labeling of black people to explain what they see as "the norm": that African-Americans form a poor, uneducated community, and that the only relationship they can have with the white society is that of master/slave.

A good example of this backward thinking lies in the character of Mr. Herald, the manager of Terry's building. After Renay is settled in Terry's fashionable apartment located in an exclusively white (and rich) section of the town, the tenants of the building start getting uncomfortable with a black woman's presence. Mr. Herald calls Terry for a private conversation, showing by his question how fragile the "logic" correlations made by racist individuals can be: "is the Negress working for you as a sleep-in maid?" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.59). Confronted with the real answer, that Renay was actually a new tenant in the building, the weak mask of flagrant racism

falls, leaving Mr. Herald no alternative but to expose his true intentions: the “non-written” policy of the building is to not rent it for African-Americans. Although other white characters, such as Terry’s lesbian friends Vance and Lorraine, attempt to understand Renay, she remains, as Adriane Bezusko puts it, “a manifestation of African-American stereotypes” (BEZUSKO, 2007, p. 522).

By reducing all members of a race to a simplistic mold of human being, these white characters deny individuals their respect and authenticity, rejecting thus the “possibility of difference and circulation which would liberate the signifier of *skin/culture* from the fixations of racial typology” (BHABHA, 1997, p.321). Because some people belong to a particular race, their features mark them with an ineradicable sign, being thus expected to conform to the predictions based on the stereotypes cast upon them by other races. As Frantz Fanon concludes: “wherever he goes, the Negro remains a Negro” (BHABHA, 1997, p.321). Perhaps this is why, as Dubey puts it, Shockley’s novel stands in between races, identifying lesbianism with non-blackness. When the author makes statements such as “there is no Black lesbian world” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.97), she is automatically implying that there is an alienation between race and sexual orientation, confirmed by Renay’s distancing from her own community. For Terry’s friends, as previously shown, no matter how “lesbian” Renay is, she will never fully fit in with the white lesbian circle, for she will be always judged by the color of her skin.

Yet, what stands out in the novel is not the prejudice emanating from whites to blacks since, as previously stated, it is something to be “expected” from the society at that time. What is striking in the book is the excess of prejudice coming from *black characters themselves*, towards white society (as predictable) and, surprisingly enough, towards themselves. Renay and Jerome, as representatives of the African-American race in the novel, are the main pawns in this self-deprecating game. Shockley subverts all the expectations (and enrages the black community) by displacing the racial tension from whites to blacks and showing how black individuals are also to blame for racism, tending to turn it against themselves.

Jerome, as shown, is a masculinist, abusive man who diminishes Renay in order to feel better about himself. Not only he is sexist, but he also shows signs of deep-rooted racism. Like many African-Americans, he puts himself down in a sort of reverse psychology. In the novel, he is an example of how the racial discrimination started by white folks towards blacks gains strength at the very core of black society,

turning each black member into a self-degrading echo of entrenched racial stereotypes. John McWhorter, an African-American linguist and public commentator, would call this behavior a symptom of this “cult of victimology”, a belief in “underdogism” (MCWHORTER, 2000, p.xiv) started in the 1960s, when the forced desegregation took place. For the first time, black Americans had the opportunity to confront white society with their indignation and frustration on a regular basis and actually be listened to. Centuries of abasement and marginalization, McWhorter argues, “led African-Americans to internalize the way they were perceived by the larger society, resulting in postcolonial inferiority complex” (MCWHORTER, 2000, p.27). But even then, black leaders such as Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey and Elijah Muhammad already alerted to the fact that racial inferiority could handicap black civilization. Although it would be extremely naïve to suppose that America lives in a color-blind society, blacks, according to his studies, tend to encourage each other from birth to focus on each and every display of racism, following the pattern of victimization, and “[spending] more time inventing reasons to cry racism than working toward changing social mores” (BRADLEY, 2008). African-Americans, according to McWhorter, teach each other “to conceive of racism [...] as an eternal pathology changing only in form and visibility, and always on the verge of getting not better but worse” (MCWHORTER, 2000, p.xi). When Renay’s daughter, with all the innocence of a child, makes the following remark to her mom’s white friend, “daddy says the only thing we are to white people are maids and cooks and people who do dirty work” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.5), it is clear that even she, as young as she is, has already learned from her folks to despise her own race, repeating the self-deprecating rhetoric as if it were an universal truth.

Despite the great amount of rage inside Jerome, it is in Renay where we can find the most unconcealed displays of racial demoralizing. As previously explained, when Renay receives a request by a white person to play classical music, she feels challenged, thinking that this woman (Terry) is making fun of her for being black and apparently “uneducated” — therefore knowing only how to play her folks’ tunes, such as blues and jazz. After Renay approaches Terry to ask why she requested Debussy, the answer is not what she expects: “Why? Because I like him. Why else?” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.20). The “victims” of the “cult of victimology” are encouraged to fixate upon remains of racism, while resolutely downplaying all signs of its disappearance. Therefore Renay, still expecting a hint of prejudice to justify her

anger, exclaims: “I thought you were making fun of me — most white people do make fun of us, you know? We are the clowns in your circus” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.20). Renay goes on with her unfounded rage, thinking to herself that she should not apologize to white people, because “[they] insulted us everyday by tolerating us being alive” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.21).

Placing oneself in the position of victim makes it very hard to distinguish between a truly unfair situation from a simple mistake. When Terry’s white maid arrives at the apartment, Renay is stiffened by Miss Wilby’s appearance, feeling “the white hostility issuing forth like desert heat” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.49). When the maid opens her mouth to make a comment, she takes it even harder, seeing her words as accusatory and insulting: “I clean up her apartment every two weeks on Fridays. [...] *You* doing it now?” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.50). In Renay’s mind, Miss Wilby thinks that just because she is black, she could be nothing more to Terry than a maid. After her service is done, Miss Wilby realizes that the money Terry always left her was not at the usual place. Once again, Renay jumps at the conclusion, from the woman’s interrogations, that Miss Wilby suspected her:

Renay felt hot resentment rise within her at her incriminating question. To think this grubby old petty-minded woman who cleaned other people’s houses had the audacity, the supercilious bigotry of the white to hint at theft. (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.51)

Fueled by the “insult”, Renay starts to dig into the past, remembering how her mother used to come home “fuming and fussing” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.51) whenever she cleaned some white people’s house, upset about being accused of theft. The anger inherited from other black women, as much as it forms a strong bond between “the rejects”, also serves to separate them even more from society, for they see everyone who does not carry their colored skin as the “enemy”, prejudging thus any action coming from them. After the episode is over, Renay continues on the path of self-pity, mocking her own black folk language when Terry says that she is going to hire someone else to clean: “No need, ma’am. Y’all got yo’ cleanin’ woman right h’yar wif y’all, and sho’ nuff!” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.54). One of the keystones of cultural blackness is “to treat victimhood not as a problem to be solved but as an identity to be nurtured” (MCWHORTER, 2000, p.xi). Renay does not realize that the former maid is *not* black, but white, meaning that this job is not only suited for “former slaves”, and what could have been a moment to stop and reflect upon the social

conditions of blacks and whites became just one more excuse to mock and victimize her own race.

It is remarkable, on the other hand, to see how Shockley, an African-American woman herself, feels that this “inborn” racial prejudice from blacks is outdated and ultimately ineffectual. She clearly demonstrates this idea through Terry’s speech: “Are you usually this quiet? Or perhaps I should change my skin color?” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.21). Renay feels a little embarrassed by the sarcastic reply but, at the same time, she was taught to be aware of her color first and foremost, turning the meeting with white people into a cold war. Once they get to know each other, Renay learns to leave her prejudice behind, and starts wondering about how much people are missing because of the color of their skin: “*blackopaths* would question her capacity to love a white” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.85). Even though she herself was once a “blackopath”, falling in love with a white woman has made her realize that love cannot be confined to a color. Looking at the different shades of the black race, she realizes that “somewhere down the love, through rape or consent, body chemistry and mind attraction weren’t controlled by society’s norms or by the system” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.85). Here, finally, Renay seems to have found a balance for what once were excluding choices: embrace her history and risk being a perpetual victim of oppressions from the past or ignore the struggle (and achievements) from the past and focus on a better future.

What needs to be understood is that Renay and Jerome are products of a society which valued their own roots and struggles, for suffering brought their whole society together. As Renay states, being black, or a “brother/sister”, gives any African-American a lifetime membership in all of their organizations, such as NAACP and Urban League, created to defend the rights of black Americans. These organizations are also a constant reminder of how much blacks had to overcome to guarantee their basic rights. The promotion of their race as something to be proud of, like the Black Pride campaign, was also vital to uplift their spirits. Sadly, one of the side effects of these currents is the creation of a mentality among blacks that members of their race were the only people they could trust – all the others were evil. It has come to a point, Jonathan Walton argues, in which “*black* and *victim* have become synonymous” (WALTON, 2009, p. 187). Renay summarizes this idea in a conversation with Terry, after she pours out her heart: “I’m black. We’re hardened as soon as we come into this world. It’s as if our skin’s a hard dark shell to hide and

protect all the hurts to come" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.37). This protection leads to separatism, which encourages black Americans to think of themselves as a "sovereign entity" (MCWHORTER, 2000, p. xi), within which victimhood renders them morally excused from following rules made by white folks.

Despite all the hatred, the only character in the novel who does not hold any kind of prejudice is Terry. Bewildered and angered at her building manager's racist comments, Terry tries to remember if there was ever a time in which she was face-to-face with this kind of discrimination. As she recounts, racial prejudice was something non-existent in her "solidly WASP" life (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.61). Living with her own personal burden of being a homosexual was Terry's first concern, for it also made her an outcast, a minority. Even in college Terry could not escape her stigma: when she met this fellow student Alice, a black girl who was ostracized by the other white students, Terry tried to befriend her. But even Alice had heard the rumors about Terry's homosexuality and chose "to be engulfed in loneliness rather than have a Lesbian as a friend" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.61). In Terry's mind, Alice was afraid to be courted by another woman, another myth that Shockley collected from society, quickly dismissing: "Lesbians, too, had preferences, and weren't out to make every female in sight" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.62).

Possibly because of her own wounds, Terry knew better than to judge other people. In an effort to raise awareness of their social condition, she had had many arguments with her friends over the rights of African-Americans, reasoning with those who thought they were going too far in their fighting. In order to get more involved with their battle, she has donated money for their organizations and even caught up with their literature, reading from Malcolm X to black feminism. However, she knew that all of these attempts were just pure theory, since she realized that, unless *she* was black, she could not truly experience what it felt like to be an African-American. Let alone an African-American lesbian, and that is why she has so much love and respect for Renay: "I know what it is to be objectionable to people who surmise what I am and hate me for it. But *you*, now you have triple strikes against you of being black, a woman and living with me the way you are" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.64).

Being with a black girl made Terry realize the kind of fight they were about to engage in. As Mrs. Stilling put it, racism was "a monstrosity that cannot be ignored even by the totally deaf, dumb and blind" (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.173). Terry, who was completely unaware of the damage people her color have caused on African-

Americans, now knew that “it was one son-of-a-bitching world, and she was sorry she had to be the color of those who son-of-a-bitched it up more than others” (SHOCKLEY, 1987, p.61). At the same time, Terry realizes that what they have is special despite their different color, something which also Renay does not take long to understand:

It is amazing how I can lie here and see and feel this skin and not think of the awful things others of her color have done to us. And yet, my skin is light—tinged with the sun. Someone, somewhere in the past, must have done and thought and felt like this with another—or hated in a different and helpless way. (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p.100)

With the realization that her skin is lighter than some of her fellow African-Americans comes the understanding that *hate* is not the word of command when dealing with different races. Together, these two women learn that their life experiences are not that different. As oppressed members of society, Terry and Renay, as Mrs. Stilling points out, “experience many of the same ostracisms, hurts and pains which make [them] compassionate toward each other” (SHOCKLEY, 1997, p. 173). As their relationship grows, Renay teaches Terry how to love — the true, selfless love, in which sharing and protecting come as products of this feeling. In return, Terry teaches Renay how to live — proud to be a woman, proud to be of color, but humble enough to see the beauty in others’ cultures. Terry’s love empowers Renay to stand up to Jerome, something she has never done in her life.

In these moments of reflection, in which Renay ponders about the uniqueness of their relationship, but at the same time acknowledging that there must be others out there like her, she also gets closer to understanding that neither race nor gender can truly determine desire. The only important thing is how one feels about another person. At the end of the novel, the readers too understand that the quest for happiness exceeds the limits imposed by society to one’s body. With her lecture-like speech, Shockley “teaches” us that homosexuality is not white nor perverted — and that *love* is colorblind. With one daring piece of art, she alone defies the constructions of race, gender and sexuality in times where to even think about black lesbianism meant being target of rejection and despise. By loosening the strai(gh)tjacket on homosexual desire, Shockley and her Renay find not only love, but freedom.

3. PURPLE

Alice Walker, one of the most prolific black female writers of the 20th century, has published several collections of essays, poetry and novels. Her main concern is the physical and spiritual oppression women worldwide are subjected to every day. The strength of her work comes from this universal and individual appeal, for it speaks not only of issues concerning women of color, but women in general. She has the ability to reach out to women by speaking of personal, painful and taboo subjects through her characters, whether they are completely invented or based on real people. Walker has a unique way of recognizing the strength of all the black women that existed before her, using their life experience to enrich her own life and her characters'. Her maiden name "Walker", for example, was chosen in honor of her great-great-grandmother, a slave who walked from Virginia to Eatonton with "2 babies on her hips" (WALKER, 1984, p.142).

The ultimate plot for Walker's most famous novel The Color Purple was defined on a hiking trip with her sister. She already had the idea of writing a story about two women who felt married to the same man. She also wanted the novel to be a historical one, but found trouble conceiving the plot. As Walker and her sister discussed a love triangle they both knew about, the missing piece of the novel came together. Her sister's comments on the subject later became, Walker stated, "balanced in the center of the novel's construction" (WALKER, 1984, p.355). Walker claims to communicate with the deceased, and explains in her essay "*Writing The Color Purple*" (WALKER, 1984, p.355-360) that the characters came to her from the spiritual world, contacting her in an attempt to speak their stories through her. Walker firmly believes that writing is a way of passing knowledge, of learning from each other's experience. In her own words: "I learn that the writer's pen is a microphone held up to the mouths of ancestors and even stones of long ago." (WALKER, 1984, p.170). The city of Mendocino, Northern California, for its resemblance to her hometown Georgia, was the place her spiritual companions felt most comfortable. There the novel would be written and there most of the novel would be set.

The Color Purple, for its focus on the painful lives of the female characters and their attempt to find themselves in the midst of oppression, is taken by critics and readers to be a "feminist fable". As previously stated, Walker sees herself not as a

feminist, but a “womanist”, i.e., “a black feminist of feminist of color”. The expression, coined in her 1983 collection of essays In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens, describes the perspective and experiences of women of color, at the same time which places them as non-separatists “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female” (WALKER, 1983, p.xi). The term “womanist”, added to The American Heritage Dictionary in 1993, would define African-American feminism for a large group of black women who were sensitive to each other’s sufferings but had trouble finding their place within the context of the white feminist movement.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, women of color who actively participated in feminist causes against sexual politics of the previous decade felt excluded and alienated from the general feminist thinking. These black feminists emphasized that feminism should consider the differences regarding different races and classes in its analysis of women. They felt that their own experiences were not fully accounted for in the broad feminist panel. It was necessary, therefore, to find other terminologies that would express those subjectivities. Alice Walker’s “womanism” was an important contribution for its attempt to locate black women in history and culture, rescuing them from negative stereotypes which damaged their images. Walker explains the universality of black womanists:

Part of our tradition as black women is that we are universalists. Black children, yellow children, red children, brown children, that is the black woman's normal, day-to-day relationship.[...] When a black woman looks at the world, it is so different . . . when I look at the people in Iran they look like kinfolk.⁹

Walker insists that womanism broadens feminism’s perspectives by bringing new demands in theory and practice. Her statement in the 1984 collection of essays, “womanist is to feminism like purple is to lavender” (WALKER, 1984, p.xi), confirms that, in her opinion, womanists encompass larger issues than feminists. Walker’s definition of “womanism” also instills the idea of pursuit of knowledge, where black women restlessly “[want] to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one” (WALKER, 1984, p. xi). In this light, the black woman is seen as an agent of self-knowledge, capable and strong, not settling for a minor role in history

⁹ <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/04/specials/walker-story.html>> Last access: February 10, 2009.

and in society; always interrogating “the epistemological exclusions she endures in intellectual life in general and feminist scholarship in particular”¹⁰.

This is precisely what her female characters, especially in The Color Purple, represent. The relationships they establish with the society around them affect significantly their own physical, emotional and mental health. These women must confront issues relating to sexual politics and sexual dynamics, sharing a long hard journey towards self-recovery, which starts, as Walker puts it, “when they are at the worst places in their lives [...]. To improve themselves, they struggle: they struggle to understand their condition” (WALKER, 1996, p.189). In the novel, forbidden from speaking to anyone about her terrors, Celie’s only escape to the silence imposed on her is to write. It is through her private letters to God that a story is told, in which she narrates, with honesty and straightforwardness, the hardships she and people around them endure.

Together, Walker’s female characters overcome restrictions placed by society upon them not only for being African-American, but also for being women. Together, they find the love and support they need in order to recover their souls, fragmented by daily humiliations, from both inside and outside their home. The Color Purple “is part of a growing body of works of literature and art done by Black women artists that sharply target women’s oppression and do so without apology” (DIX, 1996, p.197). As the novel shows, the solution to change the world is to change your own self. The women characters know that the solution to their problems lies within, in the strengthening of their personalities in order to turn tables, be accepted for who they are and, more importantly, be respected by their peers. They do not wish to exclude men from their lives, but to show these men that they are all the same and, for that, equality is not a prize – it is a right. Each female character in The Color Purple figures out this lesson in her own way, in her own time, by learning about herself through other women’s experiences even from the men around them. Walker’s characters restore the hope for countless real women, regardless of their heritage. For breaking the tradition of gender roles and suggesting that a woman’s character has infinite shades, qualities and possibilities, they are the true womanism. Womanist women.

¹⁰ <<http://science.jrank.org/pages/8159/Womanism.html>> Last access: February 15, 2009.

3.1. Black Women's Oppression

3.1.1- Racism

During the “Jim Crow” regime of segregation, enacted between 1876 and 1965, under the “separate but equal” slogan, both African-American men and women were victimized by racist thinking and practices in the United States. The hard-won battle to ensure the rights of freedman (as the ex-slaves were called after Emancipation) during the Reconstruction era had long gone. In the Jim Crow years, unsupported by the Supreme court, southern blacks suffered under segregation and disfranchisement laws. Besides the lynching and other mob terror acts meant to ill-treat blacks, race riots in defense of white supremacy spread through urban areas in which southern, rural blacks had recently migrated to.

From schools to hotels, from public restrooms to cemeteries — the displaying of “Whites Only” or “No Colored or Dogs” signs forbade blacks from entering these places, often reminding them of their inferiority. In the novel, Sofia is the female character whose sufferings from racial discrimination are more perverse. She is a strong black woman proud of her heritage, who is determined “not to be humbled by any of the men in her life, or by white society either” (WALKER, 1996, p. 194). For that, she pays a heavy price: her strong (and rude) refusal in response to Miss Millie, the mayor’s wife’s, invitation to work for her costs Sofia twelve years of her life. On a walk around town, noticing the neatness of Sofia’s children as well as the relatively nice material possessions which denoted her good living, Miss Millie offers Sofia a job in her house as a maid, to which she hastily replies: “Hell no.” (WALKER, 1982, p.87). The mayor, outraged by her impertinence, slaps her. Sofia, in return, strikes him violently. For this “insolence”, she is sent to jail, where she is severely beaten, sustaining bruises and cracked bones all over her body. After twelve years, Sofia regains her freedom, which lifts her spirits and brings her old self back, proving she was not totally defeated. However, the price she paid for her boldness almost cost her life.

This episode shows that Walker does not wish to romanticize resistance to the main forces as an act without consequences. Much on the contrary: challenging

society's rules so ruthlessly may cause a reaction as (and often more) brutal. Sofia's imprisonment sets forth another example of not only racial but also male domination: Squeak, Harpo's new girlfriend, is a white-looking, light haired black woman, who does everything Harpo demands. After they hear about Sofia's injuries, she is taught into "disguising" herself as a white woman to convince the warden, whom she admits being her uncle, to release Sophie. Even after slavery was long gone, the slavish thinking remained in many white men's minds. The exercise of white authority in the South meant that, in some situations, black women would still be sexually subjected to them. Failing to accomplish her task, Squeak reveals to the warden their blood relationship. He refuses to believe they are related, brutally raping her instead. Their blood relation is not enough to bring the two races together for, as a black woman, she represents to him no more than a chance to have a sexual escapade. As Squeak recounts: "He took my hat off [...]. Told me to undo my dress [...]. He say if he was my uncle he wouldn't do it to me. That be a sin. But this just a little fornication. Everybody guilty of that" (WALKER, 1982, p.98). After the episode, however, a new woman is born: tired of being subjugated, she stands up and announces: "My name Mary Agnes" (WALKER, 1982, p.99).

3.1.2- Weeds In Their Own Backyard

Another highly commented aspect of The Color Purple is the denouncing of black male oppression against black women. For the depiction of her black male characters in an unsavory light during the first part of the novel, Alice Walker was called a "liar" and a "traitor" (WALKER, 1996, p.33). Radical groups wanted to ban the novel altogether. According to Tony Brown, journalist for *The Carolina Peacemaker*, official entities in favor of black causes have spoken against the novel.

The Coalition Against Black Exploitation, for example, declared that the work "degraded men, children and families" (BROWN, 1996, p.224). Some critics assumed the work portrayed black males in a negative light, injuring black male and female relationships, and that Walker's ideas of tolerance and equality were harmful to the black community. Groups claimed that the oppression of women in the novel never happened among African-Americans, or maybe it happened only in the past. Others professed to recognize that the brutalization of women was an important problem, but

felt that the book raised the question in an out-of-context way. They suggested the problem should be addressed “behind closed doors”, since dealing with it “in public” would encourage “racist sentiments and may even stem from a racist motivation to promote negative stereotypes of Black people” (DIX, 1996, p.192).

The supposed lack of perspective on the big frame of racism and oppression from the white society towards black people, especially the men, was also targeted by critics of the novel. Carl Dix, in his article for *The Revolutionary Worker*, captures the sentiment of “being negatively portrayed” felt by many African-American males when confronted with the story:

[They] feel the film (and the book) does a disservice to Black people because it raises this problem in an out-of-context, distorted way. [...] By not focusing on the national oppression of Black people *The Color Purple* gives the impression that the enemy is Black men and not the system that oppresses both Black men and women. (DIX, 1986, p. 191)

Walker, however, was fully aware of this situation. Born in 1944, Walker grew up in the South of the United States which, together with the time frame of 1900s-1950s, provided the setting of The Color Purple. During this period, the South remained largely rural and agricultural. Sharecropping replaced slavery as the main source of black labor, but poverty was still widespread. Although many blacks migrated to the industrial North in search of better living, many more stayed behind, struggling to earn a living and facing an ingrained discrimination, which often expressed itself physically. Halfway through the novel, when Celie learns that, in her own words, “pa not pa” (WALKER, 1982, p.178), it is revealed that, around 1903, her real father was actually a “well-to-do-farmer” (WALKER, 1982, p. 175) who prospered enough to buy his own dry goods store. However, as soon as the local white merchants realized that his business was taking away their black and even white clientele, they burned down both his store and his blacksmith shop. He and his brothers were dragged out of their homes in the middle of the night, hanged, and their bodies were mutilated and burnt. As a black man, particularly a black *successful* man, he angered white businessmen, which reacted violently against black freedom. The lynching, a mob murder by three or more people committed by white southerners against blacks, flourished in the South in the late 1800s up to the 1930s, as a way of reasserting white supremacy, like “Jim Crow” laws, which motivated racial segregation. Lynching usually led to assassination by hanging, like the one described in the novel. The most common “motif” was the alleged rape of a white woman by a

black man, which could be provoked by anything, including a simple eye contact between a black man and a white woman that might be perceived as a threat. This excuse could be used to eliminate black men whose attitude was not obedient enough to the local whites or, as shown in The Color Purple, to get rid of an economically successful black man.

Those black men and women who stayed in the South after the end of slavery lived a generally arduous and painful life. They struggled to define their family roles, following the only context available, that of white society. However, these “traditional” roles proved to be ineffective for the African-American household. For instance, the white hegemonic society defended that men should be the head of the family, a figure of authority and respect. But African-American men found their self-respect undermined on a daily basis by white folks’ blatant displays of racism and prejudice. Without the ability to establish a proper sense of respect, black men practiced their authority on their peers and sometimes their behavior gravitated towards tyranny.

This behavioral pattern is clearly noted in The Color Purple: Celie’s stepfather, Alphonso, who only married her mother for her property and fields, is rude and abrasive towards Celie, constantly beating and humiliating her. He began raping her when she was 14, and fathered her two children, who were given away as soon as they were born. He also tries to rape her sister Nettie, but she runs away from home. When Mister¹¹ shows up at their doorstep to ask for Nettie’s hand in marriage, Alphonso convinces him to take Celie. As it turns out, Mister is also a “mean-spirited, often brutal man” (WALKER, 1996, p.50), who continues to abuse Celie.

Alice Walker describes Mister, or Albert, as a “small (physically and mentally), bitter, weak man at first”, who “knows almost nothing about children or women” (WALKER, 1996, p.52). In this context, Walker explains how the “weight of tradition and the passing down of the *natural order of things*” (WALKER, 1996, p.196) perpetuated patriarchy from father to son. She attributes all the hatred he feels towards women and children as “inherited” from his father, Old Mister, the son of a white man and a slave owner. In fact, Walker describes how Mister’s grandfather’s

¹¹ The spelling of Celie’s husband’s character varies according to the source. In the novel, he is referred to as “Mr._____”, whereas in her essays, Walker often refers to him as “Mister”. For stylistic purposes, I chose referring to him using the latter.

attitude towards his family scarred his son, Old Mister, who passed the violence onto his own son, Mister:

Mister learns how to treat women and children from his father, Old Mister. Who did Old Mister learn from? Well, from Old *Master*, his slave-owning father, who treated Old Mister's mother and Old Mister (growing up) as slaves, *which they were**. Old Mister is so riddled with self-hatred, particularly of his black "part", the "slave" part (totally understandable, given his easily imagined suffering during a childhood among blacks and whites who despised each other), that he spends his life repudiating, denigrating, and attempting to dominate anyone blacker than himself, as is, unfortunately, his son. (WALKER, 1988, p. 81)

The aversion Old Mister feels for his "black" heritage, Walker explains, shows in the way he treated his own wife, and in his mockery of Shug Avery: "She black as tar, she nappy headed. She got legs like baseball bats" (WALKER, 1982, p.54). Mister's sisters, Carrie and Kate, carry the same racist traits, despising and mocking Shug for being "too black" (WALKER, 1982, p. 21). Old Mister also objects to their relationship because Shug is a free woman possessed with a "completely unapologetic self-acceptance as outlaw, renegade, rebel, and pagan" (WALKER, 1996, p. 35), very different from the "slave-wives" Old Mister is used to. After Celie leaves, he advises Mister to just get another slave-wife and start over.

Harpo, being the son of Mister, is expected to share the same patriarchal values. Despite loving Sofia *because* of her strength and non-subservient nature, the weight of tradition tells him that his wife should belong to a submissive race, being her duty to serve and obey him. When he is young, Harpo asks his father why he beats Celie, to which he responds: "[...] cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn" (WALKER, 1982, p. 23). The answer only reinforces the idea in Harpo's mind that women were born to be under a man's thumb. Therefore, when he finds himself unable to "control his woman", he even goes to Celie for advice, since she is firmly controlled by his father: "When Pa tell you to do something, you do it [...]. When he say not to, you don't. You don't do what he say, he beat you" (WALKER, 1982, p.63). Celie's response comes from the only life experience she has, that in which oppression of women is "just the way things are". So she tells Harpo to beat his wife.

Walker felt extremely disappointed in African-American men for not empathizing with their women's sufferings, declaring:

[...] there are many black men who appear unaware that sexism exists (or do not even know what it is), or that women are oppressed in virtually all cultures, and if they do recognize there is abuse, their tendency is to minimize it or to deflect attention from it to themselves. (WALKER, 1988, p.79)

Anita Jones, from the *Carolina Peacemaker*, agrees with Walker, reminding her readers:

The Color Purple is not a story against black men: it is a story about black women. The fact that the men in this story are not all good guys needs no justification, for it is not the obligation of any work of fiction to present every possible angle of every possible situation. (JONES, 1996, p.226)

According to Walker, the novel was an opportunity for black men to purge the tendency or desire to oppress women and children but, instead, they took the chance to draw attention to themselves— claiming to be the ones being oppressed. Walker, seen as a “man-hater” after the release of the novel, has said that her work is not “anti-male”, but “pro-female”. Moreover, it was from men of color she asserts having learned about gracefulness, love and resistance. In Living By The Word, she remembers that black men were responsible for the some of the most inspiring directions towards African-American freedom, for both men and women:

When Malcolm [X] said, Freedom, by any means necessary, I thought I knew what he meant. When Martin [Luther King Jr.] said, Agitate nonviolently against unjust oppression, I assumed he also meant in the home, if that's where the oppression was. When Frederick Douglass talked about not expecting crops without first plowing up the ground, I felt he'd noticed the weeds in most of our backyards. (WALKER, 1988, p.79-80)

Moreover Samuel, the reverend whom Alphonso gives Celie's children to, is an example of a black man possessed with a genuinely good character:

Samuel is large, black, kind and gentle man whose priestly look belies the ease with which he gets on with women. [...] “Touching” person and a natural comforter. [...] he is the kind of man women have fantasies about. [...] vulnerable man, capable of tears, of being wrong, of admitting failure. In this he is a success with women, as well as a success with women who desire a man who is human like themselves. (WALKER, 1996, p. 53)

With these thoughts in mind, it deeply saddened Walker to realize that black men felt women should fight when the enemy was white, but must succumb to silence when injustice came from inside their home.

It is to break from the sexist viciousness from men that the women in The Color Purple struggle. One argument that attempts to explain this brutalization of black women is that black men are driven to act like that because of the overall brutality white society subjects them to. This may be a *part* of the problem, but certainly it is not enough to justify such violence. This idea is justified by the fact that,

as explained in the previous section, black women were also victims of the racist system which oppressed their black companions: “For all the oppression that black men have suffered, black women have suffered twice as much because [...] black women had to take it from white society as well as black men” (JONES, 1996, p. 227). Dix explains with precision the roots of the never ending cycle of domination and cruelty:

Women’s oppression is reinforced by the whole superstructure of politics, of culture and ideology generally, of advertising on tv, of education, and in many other ways. The man acting as the lord and master in relation to his wife and children is put forward as the way things are and should be. Oppressed men buy into this too. (DIX, 1996, p. 193)

As it can be seen, *patriarchy* is an essential part of modern society. The oppression among the oppressed just cannot be justified by the pressure black men face in a white society. The idea of being a servant to men is ingrained in society’s thinking, and dealing with these problems behind closed doors is to conform to an outdated and tyrannical system. Women’s oppression crosses boundaries of race, nationality and class, making The Color Purple not only a wanted work of art, but a *necessary* work of art. By writing the novel, Walker also gives readers an opportunity to look inside the diaspora, and learn not just about the domineering aspect of black male/female relationships, but mostly what it feels like for an African-American woman.

3.1.3- Looking into the oppression

Ironically enough, the line that opens a novel so concerned with the power of voice consists on a demand for silence. “You better not ever tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (WALKER, 1982, p.1).The words were spoken to Celie by Alphonso, whom Celie believes to be her father. The subject which she is forbidden to talk about is just the beginning of Celie’s long relationship with pain. At the age of fourteen, she had just started being raped by her stepfather.

The first five pages of the book describe the brutal sexual violence done to Celie with all the primitiveness an almost illiterate child could express:

First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. (WALKER, 1982, p.1)

At the end of the novel, although almost fifty years have passed since her first sexual experience with a man, Celie's point of view as a victim is still the same. She conceives men in her mind as something non-human, like frogs: "no matter how you kiss 'em, as far as I'm concern, frogs is what they stay" (WALKER, 1982, p.258). This passage ends the romanticization of rape, for Celie's speech shows that rapists have nothing attractive about them, that women do not "secretly wish" to be raped; that children are deeply affected by such violence. No fear, silence or time can wash away the damages done by sexual assaults. Alphonso and, later on in the novel, Mister, aside from raping, also batter Celie's self-confidence by making her believe she is evil, stupid and ugly – for having a shapeless, skinny body and flat chest, considered a "deformity" for women at the time. As we read Celie's letters, it becomes evident that the horrors in her life turn her into a frightened, beaten-down girl, whose writing becomes not only a shred of hope, but a means of survival.

After the death of her mother and giving birth to two children fathered by Alphonso, Celie is sold to the second abusive man of her life: Mister, an old widower with children who also treats her like an object. She is a good wife, a good cook and a good stepmother to his children, but that means nothing to him. Mister shows no compassion or love for Celie, continuing the cycle of violence started by Alphonso. The beatings are frequent: "He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't ever hardly beat them" (WALKER, 1982, p. 23). Unlike Sofia, Celie submits herself to male authority "because she accepts a theology which requires female subjugation to father and husband" (HENDERSON, 1988, p.71). In order to protect herself from the physical and spiritual pain, her only option is to make herself wood: "I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man" (WALKER, 1982, p. 23).

Mister's sister, Kate, also under the tyrannical spell of her brother, tries to encourage Celie to fight his domination: "You got to fight the, Celie [...] I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself" (WALKER, 1982, p. 22). Once again, in order to survive, Celie makes herself silent and invisible: "I don't say nothing. I think about Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive" (WALKER, 1982, p. 22). This sentence comes from Celie's deduction that the lack of news about her sister means she is dead. Nettie,

after running away from home, stops shortly on Celie's house, only to be confronted again with Mister's sexual advances. At her refusal, Mister lets her know it is time to go. She promises her sister to write, but Mister intercepts the communication, making Celie believe her sister is dead.

Sofia, the impudent girlfriend of Harpo, is one of the strongest women in the novel. From the first time Sofia appears in the story, she leaves no doubts about the strength of her character. In this scene, Harpo brings her to meet his father, Mister. When Celie sees them coming from afar, she comments that they look like they are "going to war" (WALKER, 1982, p.81), with Sofia "leading" Harpo into his own house. She is pregnant and quite big but, instead of despairing at Mister's refusal to let them get married, Sofia laughs when he questions not only her reasons to marry him, but also the paternity of her child. Everybody, especially Celie, is awestruck by Sofia's assertiveness, as she talks back at Mister: "[...] What I need to marry Harpo for? He still living here with you. What food and clothes he git, you buy" (WALKER, 1982, p.32). She refuses to be humiliated by Mister, defying the mores of patriarchy by marrying Harpo anyway.

Their life as a black married couple is very different from the ones seen so far in the novel: Sofia demands that Harpo help her with the chores, she refuses to stop talking when Harpo or Mister enter the room. Also, she does "man" work around the house, like making shingles to repair her leaking roof. Harpo, who fell in love with Sofia because of her strong nature, feels intimidated by her independence, perhaps threatened in his idea of masculinity: "I'm getting tired of Harpo, she say. All he think about since us married is how to make me mind. He don't want a wife, he want a dog" (WALKER, 1982, p.65). The only way he finds to "make Sofia mind" is by beating her. Unfortunately for him, Sofia is a robust and vigorous woman, who is used to defend herself from the men in her life:

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 uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. [...] I loves Harpo [...] But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me. (WALKER, 1982, p. 40)

In the end, Harpo sustained more bruises on his body than the wife he tried so hard to tame.

If there is one other feminine character in The Color Purple that matches Sofia's boldness is Shug Avery, Mister's lover. But, different from Sofia, whose

heftiness transmits strength, Shug's stoutness qualifies her as sexy and "womanly". Shug (diminutive of Sugar) is a blues singer very much in control of her life, who knows how gorgeous she is, taking advantage of that to attract (and use) men. Shug, much like Sofia, refuses to be dominated by anyone, something that gives her freedom to come and go as she wishes. Her free-spirit, shallow relationships render her a bad reputation, to which she pays little attention, and continues to enjoy her life. In Walker's words, "[Shug] has decided to give herself and her love where she pleases – she has understood that society, not having been arranged for her benefit, is not owed by any of her loyalty" (WALKER, 1996, p. 140).

Nettie, Celie's sister, is the only character who experiences how it feels like to be a black woman in America and in Africa. A short while after Celie marries Mister, Nettie flees to her sister's house, escaping from Alphonso's sexual advances. She does not stay long at Celie's, for Mister also starts to pressure her to sleep with him. Once again she is obligated to leave, looking for Reverend Samuel and his wife, a couple that would change her life forever.

Samuel and his wife Corrine, along with Celie's children, Adam and Olivia, take Nettie on a missionary trip for the Christian church in Africa. Through the Olinka tribe, Nettie learns more about her roots, becoming amazed by the African's culture and the darkness of their skin. However, she learns something more: their women are treated just as badly in Africa as they are in America. Nettie describes on a letter to Celie one of her first encounters with the sexism inherent in the African tribe: "The Olinka do not believe girls should be educated. When I asked a mother why she thought this, she said: A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something" (WALKER, 1982, p.156).

Through the Olinkas, Walker conveys the idea that not all the sexist meanness was inherited from slave owners. In fact, when Nettie narrates her experiences with the Olinka people in Africa, the family structures are very similar to the ones in her homeland, showing that patriarchy was not an isolated phenomenon. Like Alphonso, the Olinka men did not see the point in women being formally educated, since they would not need it for the roles society had for them. Very much like Mister, they also felt that a woman was nothing by herself, needing thus a *man* to take care of her:

Our women are respected here [...]. We would never let them tramp the world as American women do. There is always someone to look after the Olinka woman. A father. An uncle. A brother or nephew. Do not be offended, Sister Nettie, but our people pity the women such as

you who are cast out, we know not from where, into a world unknown to you, where you must struggle all alone, for yourself. (WALKER, 1982, p. 162)

Nettie, however, sees more to it than she lets the Olinka men know:

There is a way that the men speak to women that reminds me too much of Pa. They listen just long enough to issue instructions. They don't even look at women when women are speaking. They look at the ground and bend their heads towards the ground. The women also do not "look in a man's face" as they say. To "look in a man's face" is a brazen thing to do. They look instead at his feet or his knees. And what can I say to this? Again, it is our own behavior around Pa. (WALKER, 1982, p. 163)

With this passage, Walker complicates the notions of oppressor and oppressed. In Nettie's observations, it becomes very clear that the native Africans are just as sexist as the Americans she left behind. Nettie also discovers that, much like Celie's plight in America, her condition of "unmarried woman" puts her in an inferior position with the Africans, being thus treated with pity and contempt. Although they are oppressed by the rubber company, a colonial power that little by little takes over their land, the Olinkas fall into the same vicious cycle of internal coercion that led their distant brothers into victimizing and abusing their women.

Moreover, Walker uses the Olinka tribe to expose even more brutal ways of degrading women. Nettie, on her return to Africa, finds that Tashi, an Olinka girl who became best friends with Olivia and Adam (Celie's children), had undergone the traditional rituals of scarification and cliteridectomy: "After two days it became clear that Tashi was deliberately hiding. Her friends said while we were away she'd undergone both the facial scarification and the rite of female initiation" (WALKER, 1982, p. 246). The next passage shows the historical oppression of women that is common to many traditional African cultures, and how the younger generations, regardless of their attempts to change the "rules", are still forced to acquiesce to these rituals:

But this is what the villagers are doing to the young women and even the men. Carving their identification as a people into their children's faces. But the children think of scarification as backward, something from their grandparents' generation, and often resist. So the carving is done by force, under the most appalling conditions. (WALKER, 1982, p. 246)

In regards to cliteridectomy, which is the partial or full removal of the clitoris, Walker reflects: "The rationale for cliteridectomy: no man would marry a woman whose clitoris was intact. A woman without sex drive is, I suppose, thought to be

more docile— more of the stuff of which wives are made” (WALKER, 1996, p. 159). This is another example of a behavior that has its roots in a cultural attitude that devalues black women— a phenomenon that happens in Africa, in America and probably on all continents in the world.

3.2. “Some Woman’s Can’t be Beat”¹²

After analyzing the characters and relationships they develop with each other in the first part of The Color Purple, it is important to point out that there are no saints or devils, good or bad characters. It is safe to say, however, that none of them are healthy. Celie’s submissiveness, Mister’s cruelty, Harpo’s weakness, Sofia’s bluntness, Squeak’s passiveness, Shug’s lack of ties: these traits show, as Walker confirms, that her characters are “dreadfully ill, and manifest their dis-ease according to their culturally derived sex roles and the bad experiences early impressed on their personalities” (WALKER, 1988, p.80). Their growth as human beings, she continues, start as they become more like each other, but stop before they take on each other’s illnesses. For if there is one thing that infuses the novel with hope and lifts the readers’ spirits is the possibility of emotional regeneration.

The Color Purple shows that there is hope for a man if he changes the way he treats women. However, the male characters only change when the women start to resist their continued subjugation. Harpo loses Sofia by beating her in his frustrated attempt to reassure his manhood. Years later, when he no longer tries to control her, but rather lets her be herself, their roles in the family naturally fall into place, and their marriage is restored. Another example of growth and change is the character of Mister. First portrayed as rude and violent, he actually holds a deep *love* for Shug Avery. It is because he loves her and *she* loves Celie that he has the possibility of healing. Because of his love for a free-spirited black woman who loves both men and women, not only can Albert begin really begin to observe other women and find in

¹² WALKER, 1982, p. 64

them something to appreciate, but he also starts to accept his own blackness, so rejected by his father and his slave owner grandfather.

However, the most powerful idea in the novel is that, despite their differences, and even *because* of their diversity, women are bound to each other, united and inspired by their common struggles: “Women are always together affectionately. The intense female couple you see on the street could as easily be mother and daughter, sisters, best friends, as lovers” (WALKER, 1988, p.167). From the moment they form a relationship in the novel, each woman grows and gets stronger from the experiences of the other, allowing them to resist oppression and dominance. The relationships these women characters develop form a sort of sisterhood, in which they feel protected from male violence, and where their love is reciprocated. In The Color Purple, each woman shows the other how to live, love and, most importantly, fight.

The nature of these bonds differs from one another. In Africa, Samuel recounts to Nettie that, in the polygamous tradition of the Olinka tribe, the wife bonding helps them tolerate the situation:

This friendship among women is something Samuel often talks about. Because the women share a husband but the husband does not share their friendships, it makes Samuel uneasy. [...] Samuel is confused because to him, since the women are friends and will do anything for one another [...] and since they giggle and gossip and nurse each other's children, then they must be happy with things as they are. (WALKER, 1982, p. 167)

As a result of patriarchy, these women, though bound to the same men, do not form a bond with them, for fear of being ostracized and gossiped about. Consequently, they rarely spend time with their husbands: centering their lives around work and their children, the African women create their own “sororities”, taking care of each other, sharing secrets and strengthening the connections with one another. This bond, as the novel shows, is also a means of survival for the Olinka women: because the men have total control over the life and death of their women, if one of them is disliked by the others, she can be falsely accused of infidelity or witchcraft, and sentenced to death.

Throughout the novel, it becomes clear that, much like the Olinka's sisterhood, all the women bonding in the novel serves as a means of endurance, as well as personal growth. Nettie's love for her sister, translated into words by her frequent letters, is what helps her go through the contempt and unfamiliarity of the African

culture. Sofia's sisterly bond with her siblings gives her the strength to fight her husband and the mayor. Sofia, according to Walker, is one of the first womanists, because she "fights her own battles, enjoys men, the company of other women, sex, her children and her home" (WALKER, 1996, p.54). Completely lacking voice and power as the novel starts, Celie sees in Sofia everything she wishes she had: assertiveness and self-confidence. In Walker's words, "by interacting with Sophia, Celie first had her eyes opened to the fact that her lot in life wasn't all a woman could hope for" (1996, p. 194). Celie then realizes that, when she told Harpo to beat Sofia, it was not only because she had "internalized the principle of male domination" (HENDERSON, 1988, p.71), but also because she was jealous of Sofia's strength. By being herself and showing courage, even when that got her into trouble, Sofia then "becomes Celie's first model of resistance to sexual, and later, racial subjugation" (HENDERSON, 1988, p.71), teaching Celie a lot about her own personality and how she can speak up for herself.

In turn, Sofia learns a lot from Celie, as well as from her own mistakes. She reveals to Celie that the way she gets through the disgusting food and violent treatment in jail is by acting exactly like Celie does at home: "I act like I'm you. I jump right up and do just what they say. [...] They can't believe I'm the one sass the mayor's wife, knock the mayor down" (WALKER, 1982, p. 90). She maintains her silent resistance throughout all the years she has to work as a maid in the mayor's house. With the help of Celie, Sofia understood that one can comply, and still hold one's beliefs. She learned (the hard way) that fighting oppression in such an impulsive and impertinent manner can bring dreadful consequences. Later in the novel, by standing up to Mister and leaving him, Celie helps Sofia one more time, for the unexpected act of resistance brings her back "from the effects of the brutality she had suffered in prison and in bondage to the Mayor's wife" (WALKER, 1996, p.195).

Sofia's character also influences Squeak's life. When they first meet, Squeak feels threatened and angry at her for dancing with her boyfriend. The argument evolves into a fist fight, in which Squeak loses. However, when Sofia is sent to jail for slighting the mayor's wife, it is Squeak who comes to her rescue, showing that it is essentially womanish to rise above any differences to help a "sister" in need. After the rape, she demands to be called by her real name, Mary Agnes. This re-naming redefines her character, helping her discover needs long hidden. Mary Agnes then starts looking up to Shug because of her singing. Instead of being jealous of Mary

Agnes' wish to sing, or being angry for losing her husband Grady to her, Shug helps Mary find her voice, encouraging her to sing in public. This way, Mary Agnes frees herself from the impositions of male dominance, judging by herself what she can or cannot do, just like Shug. In addition, her friendship with Sofia, now bound by a sacrifice, gets stronger, so much that, when Mary Agnes goes north to pursue her singing career, it is Sofia who takes care of her children.

Walker also demonstrates how women relations can be varied and multilayered, the best example being the relationship between Celie and Shug. As the novel progresses, their relationship evolves "from a maternal, to a sororal, to an erotic attachment" (HENDERSON, 1988, p.72). Shug enters Celie's life even before they are introduced to each other. Celie, at seeing a picture of Shug, does not feel jealous, but mesmerized by the sexy vocalist in stylish dresses, "The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty than my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier than me" (WALKER, 1982, p.6). After this day, Celie starts daydreaming about Shug, wanting to be like her, wanting to get close to her. When Mister "gets on top" of Celie to have sex, she imagines that what he is doing to her is what he does to Shug. Thinking that the singer might actually like it, Celie tries to enjoy it as well.

It is clear, in the novel, that Celie shows signs of lover's affection for Shug Avery from the very beginning. She was instantly drawn to Shug's persona from the first time she saw her picture. When Mister's sisters come to visit and start discussing Mister and Shug Avery's relationship, Celie's ears "perk up" (WALKER, 1982, p. 21). All she wants is to talk about Shug, though she still has got no voice to even speak to people without being asked first. When she hears Shug is coming to town to perform, once again, it is not jealousy Celie feels towards Shug. Although she is obedient to her husband, Celie does not love him. As a result, she does not mind Mister fixing himself up for Shug; on the contrary, she shares his anticipation. Mister is nervous about seeing her again; Celie is even more ecstatic at the possibility of laying eyes on "Queen Honeybee" (WALKER, 1982, p.43), which does not happen.

When Shug comes home with Mister, after contracting "some kind of nasty woman disease" (WALKER, 1982, p.43), Celie immediately feels protective towards Shug, almost motherly-like. "Come on in, I want to cry. To shout. Come on in. With God help, Celie going to make you well" (WALKER, 1982, p.45) – these are the words Celie wants to say, but years of being invisible in order to survive make her keep her thoughts to herself.

Shug Avery, on the contrary, is initially rude towards Celie: “You sure *is* ugly” (p. 46) are her first nasty words to Celie, who is so used to being bashed that she does not mind. Shug is also reluctant to accept Celie’s and Mister’s help, perhaps being afraid of being dependent on someone’s help for the first time in her life. The scene where Celie witnesses Shug despising Mister, along with Sofia’s relationship with Harpo, gives Celie a different perspective on male/female relationships. From this point on, Celie starts to truly see Mister, criticizing his physical imperfections. In another passage, bothered by Mister’s father disapproval of Shug, Celie secretly spits in the old man’s glass of water. These small “acts of rebellion”, as one might put it, show Celie’s first attempts to judge men’s actions, leaving a little bit of her fear of “frogs” behind.

With Celie’s loyal and constant help, Shug is nursed back to health. Despite her sharp-tongue offensive remarks to Mister, she and Celie become intimate friends, with Celie alternating roles of mother, daughter, sister and passionate admirer. According to Walker, when Mister brings Shug home to be nursed by Celie, “she is prepared for death. This liberates her. Snatched out of the jaws of physical death by Celie, Shug’s spirit changes entirely. She becomes free” (WALKER, 1996, p. 140). After the recovery, Shug demonstrates to be warm and compassionate, using the control she has on Mister to stand up for Celie. When Shug decides to go on tour, Celie confides in her that Mister beats her when she is not there. She empathizes with her and promises she will not leave until she knows Mister will never beat her again.

Shug’s presence in Celie’s life awakens feelings Celie never thought existed, so sad and painful that she, in her state of numbness, did not allow herself to feel before: “I look at Shug and I feel my heart begin to cramp. [...] I think I might be under the table, for all they care. I hate the way I look, I hate the way I’m dress. [...] Before I know it, tears meet under my chin” (WALKER, 1982 p.74). Celie feels confused by her feelings for Shug. She only knows heterosexual love, even if she herself has never felt it, so she “knows” that Shug’s feelings for Mister are “right”. At the same time, she cannot stop from having her heart broken at the thought of Shug loving Mister and not her. In truth, the word “lesbianism” was unknown to Celie; therefore, she could not name what she felt for Shug, for not only this kind of love for another woman was unheard of to her, but she also never felt anything like that in her life. When Celie bathes Shug, she feels like she is praying, with her “hands

trembling” and her “breath short” (WALKER, 1982, p. 49). When she looks at her body, noticing Shug’s “black plum nipples” (WALKER, 1982, p.49), she feels like a man.

Alice Walker has stated that the word “lesbian” would not be suitable to describe black women, for their bonding began before Sappho’s reign on the Isle of Lesbos. Instead, she imagines black women being womanists,

[...] referring to themselves as “whole” women, from “wholly” or “holy”. Or as “round” women—women who love other women, yes, but women who also have concern, in a culture that oppresses black people [...] for their fathers, and sons, no matter how they feel about them as males. (WALKER, 1984, p.81)

Another important message revealed by Celie’s shame is that it marks the beginning of her self-awareness. Celie starts seeing herself through other people’s eyes and questions what they see. Her body has been devalued not only by the men in her life but also by herself. However, since Shug’s arrival, Celie’s self-consciousness is awakened by the instant attraction she feels towards the blues singer. Later on in the novel, Celie

[...] not only discovers her own sexuality in the relationship with Shug, but she also learns to love another. The recognition of herself as beautiful and loving is the first step towards Celie’s independence and self-acceptance. (HENDERSON, 1988, p.73)

From this point on, an inversion of roles takes place: Celie serves Shug with her best ability — nurturing and caring for her. Now, Shug takes the opportunity giving Celie the best she has: confidence, love, independence, pride. Since her sister Nettie has gone, Celie has lacked love and encouragement. Shug fills the void left by Nettie, serving as a model for Celie since, again like Sofia, she possesses everything Celie does not. With Shug’s help, Celie learns to open up emotionally, growing from a survivor into a strong, independent woman. Shug’s constant company, even with her comings and goings, fills all the voids in Celie’s life: Shug becomes Celie’s friend, confidant, mother, sister, teacher and lover.

As their relationship grows more intimate, it is Shug that makes Celie think about “virginity”, and awakens her sexuality. Celie, despite having being sexually active since she was fourteen years-old, has never enjoyed sex or had an orgasm. This becomes clear when Shug, who declares to love sleeping with Mister, is confronted by Celie’s bafflement: “I don’t like it at all. What is it like? He git up on you,

heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain't there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing" (WALKER, 1982, p.78). Shug jokingly replies that it feels "like he going to the toilet on you" (WALKER, 1982, p.78), to which she replies that it is exactly how it feels. By learning that Celie has never enjoyed sex, Shug labels her a "virgin". Celie's inexperience is such that she has never bothered examining her own body. Shug then coaxes her to look down at her own vagina:

Listen, she say, right down there in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody. It git hotter and hotter and then it melt. That the good part. But other parts good too, she say. Lot of sucking go on, here and there, she say, lot of finger and tongue work. (WALKER, 1982, p. 78)

The moment of Celie's discovery of her own sexuality resembles a child's first findings about its sexual organs, with lots of giggling and whispering among the two, and the feeling of being naughty when the men of the house approach. The "lesson" Shug gives opens Celie's eyes to a whole new way of relating to her own body and to her own sexuality. As she touches herself, feeling "a little shiver" (WALKER, 1982, p.79), she starts to realize that also her pleasure lies in her hands. This is another step in Celie's realization that the dominant system's impositions are not the only way to think, to act, to live. Another piece falls into place, leading Celie one step closer to finding that joyous triumph she deserves.

Like Sofia and Harpo, Shug ruptures the boundaries of traditional male and female roles, subverting gender expectations. When Shug compliments Sofia on her looks, Celie notices how Shug's confident sexuality makes her "act like a man" sometimes:

That when I notice how Shug talk and act sometimes like a man. Men say stuff like that to women, Girl, you look like a good time. Women always talk about hair and health. How many babies living or dead, or got teef. Not bout how some woman they hugging on look like a good time. (WALKER, 1982, p. 82)

Later, Celie realizes that Shug (as well as Sofia) do not act *manly*, but simply different from her notions of how a woman should be like.

After Shug comes back from the road (with a new husband), her and Celie's intimacy grows deeper. One night, with no men in the house, Shug sleeps in Celie's bed and the latter starts opening up and recounting the first time she was raped:

[...] one time when mama not at 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. (WALKER, 1982, p. 113)

The power of the confession breaks Celie, who no longer is “wood”, but a woman with a heart heavy with anguish and pain. Celie then realizes everything that has gone wrong in her life:

My mama die [...]. My sister Nettie run away. Mr _____ come git me to take care of 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, Shug. (WALKER, 1982, p.114)

Celie's comprehension of her emotional status is indispensable for her healing. Celie feels neglected and unloved, finally voicing her true feelings aloud. This enables Shug not only to feel compassionate towards Celie, but also to reveal something she has been feeling — she loves Celie, not like a sister, or a mother, but as a lover. Shug then proceeds to kiss Celie on the lips, and they both enjoy it. They keep on kissing “till us can't hardly kiss no more” (WALKER, 1982, p. 115). At this moment, Celie finally loses her virginity.

Shug also reconnects Celie with an important piece of her past: her sister Nettie. Aside from Shug, Nettie is the only person Celie has ever loved. When she ran away from Mister, he kept all the letters Nettie wrote from Celie, making her believe her sister was dead. When Celie opens up to Shug about her sister, Shug mentions Mister's mysterious habits of hiding certain letters in his jacket. When Celie realizes he has been keeping Nettie's letters, rage fills her up, and once more she feels numb with anger. With a razor in her hand and one obsessive thought on her mind, Celie wants Mister's blood. If in the past she felt like “wood”, being incapable of vengeance, now she feels cold, detached from her own body, and incapable of holding her feelings: “How I'm gon keep from killing him, I say” (WALKER, 1982, p. 144). It is, once again, Shug's love and resilience that seizes Celie back to reality.

Through Nettie's letters, Celie learns that Alphonso is not her father. Showing her newfound courage, Celie decides to visit him and inquire about her real father, confronting thus the evils of her past. Learning about the lynching but unable to find her father's grave, Shug creates a new bond with Celie, stating that they are “each other peoples” (WALKER, 1982, p.184), thus becoming a family.

Celie's letters to God reflected her fear of Him for believing she was a "sinner" and her hopes that He could hear her and change her life. Shug's understanding of God enables Celie not to fear Him, but please Him by being herself and enjoying life. Realizing that the God she was praying for was "a white man", therefore oppressive and menacing, Celie is mesmerized by Shug's concept:

God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for.[...] God ain't a he or a she, but a It. (WALKER, 1982, p.196)

This idea liberates her. Ridding herself from the mighty image she had of God, Celie is able to perceive all the things around her made by God's caring hands. The metaphor imposed by men of God being a "man" also implies that, as she comes to understand, "man corrupt everything" (WALKER, 1982, p.198). Therefore, it takes getting them "off your eyeball" (WALKER, 1982, p.198), that is, stop living according to men's rules, to truly appreciate life.

The definitive moment of Celie's liberation and self-assertion comes when she announces she's going to Memphis with Shug and Grady. Used to her silence and compliance, Mister is baffled at her audacity. He attempts to crush her spirit by humiliating her physical appearance and lack of skills, as he always did: "Who you think you is? [...]. You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. [...] you nothing at all." (WALKER, 1982, p.209). This is one of the greatest moments in the novel, where Celie, now an emotionally strong, proud black woman in control of her life, curses him, breaking free the last chain of Mister's patriarchal reign over her: "Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail. [...] The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot. [...] I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook [...]. But I'm here" (WALKER, 1982, p. 209-210).

The scene where the women laugh at a joke only they know about is a testimony of their endurance. Entangled in his sexist thinking, Mister cannot see the point in women living away from "home", i.e., where the patriarch is. Shug, however, wonders why women would care about what men think. At Grady's response, "a woman can git a man if peoples talk" (WALKER, 1982, p.203), Shug, Sofia, Celie and Squeak start laughing. Each woman learned, in her own way, the real value of what men think, and the real value of themselves. They giggle together because they have

learned something both individually and collectively about life, about family, about roles. These women's laugh represents the joyful end of a painful road. They can look back now and perceive what a long journey it has been, and how much they have grown to understand how to turn their world into a better place. On the way, they became more than friends, they became confidants, witnesses to each other's struggles, assistants to each other's growth, now rejoicing in each other's success and freedom.

The last step in Celie's recovery is the accomplishment of her economical independence. Celie inherits her family's Victorian house, building there her own sewing business. To distract Celie from her revenge wishes against Mister, Shug suggested they start sewing, something Celie does well. Soon she starts sewing pants for all the women in her family, turning her hobby into a means of self-sufficiency.

The end of the novel is marked by the beginning of a new model for interaction based on new gender roles constructed throughout the story. Harpo and Mister begin to relate more affectively, especially when Mister is nearly dying and Harpo bathes and nurtures his father back to health. Another instance happens when Mister tells Celie that pants are supposed to be worn by men. Now, broken down by Shug's free-loving spirit and Celie's newfound confidence, instead of showing the conviction in the male power he used to project in his voice, Mister's speech is a distant echo of what he learned from the men in his life. In fact, when Celie asserts him that the men in Africa wear robes, or dresses, and sew with their women, Mister confesses he also liked to sew with his mother growing up, but it became a reason for mockery, which made him stop. Now, destitute of any macho pride, Mister acquiesces to Celie's request of stitching some pockets into a pair of pants she just made. The love they both share for Shug and the heartache they both feel when she leaves them for a younger lover, along with Mister's understanding of Celie's plight brings them closer, healing the bond between them. The novel ends in high spirits, with a reunion on the 4th of July among lovers, family and friends, "symbolizing on a personal level, the psychic reintegration of personality differences and on a social level, the reconciliation of gender differences" (HENDERSON, 1988, p.79), where white people celebrate independence and black people celebrate each other. The end of the novel also represents a celebration of black women in terms of recuperation of the past and transformation of the future.

The Color Purple is, without doubt, “a testament to the indomitability of the human spirit” (FEATHERSTON, 1996, p.182). It is a much needed work of art “to end the subjugation of one section of society by another in any form” (DIX, 1996, p.198). Walker’s novel is a celebration of womanhood, love and recovery. It is a people story that blurs the line between masculinity and femininity, at the same time that it broadens the possibilities of sex and sexuality. Although it is not a story centered on sexual relationships, Walker received hostile criticism on her novel, especially for the lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug. With the release of the novel, Walker noticed that, in the black community, “homosexuality was ‘subject to control’ by the community, and that love between black women was okay as long as it wasn’t publicly expressed” (WALKER, 1988, p.91). In her own life, it took Walker years to publicly admit that she was herself a bisexual. In Living By the Word, she confesses:

My adult awareness of homosexuality comes from my own feelings of attraction to other women as well as men [...] But these feelings toward women, as toward people of other races, were buried very deep, so deep, in fact, that I was friends for many years with a woman with whom I discussed everything, who actually had women lovers, but we never discussed that. (WALKER, 1988, p.164)

In 1996, feeling more comfortable with her own sexuality, she admits that she, like Shug, is bisexual. In a fictional letter to her mom, she declares:

[...] Mama, I love lesbians. Lesbians are some of the best people I have ever known. You also like them. [...] Mama, I wanted to say, though I have been in relationships with men since I was sixteen, and this is how you’ve known me, the part of me that I most respect is woman-loving. Or as I prefer to call it, “womanist”. How could this not be so, since you are the person I’ve most respected and loved in life? (WALKER, 1996, p.167-168)

However, critics had a hard time accepting that a woman could awake another woman (including sexually) to life, and “accused” Walker of being a lesbian, “as if respecting and honoring women automatically discredited anything a woman might say” (WALKER, 1996, p.22). Tony Brown, one of Walker’s most ferocious critics, even wrote that black women know very little about their “emotional and sexual salvation”, concluding that only in a heterosexual relationship both partners can share true love:

And lesbian affairs will never replace the passion and beauty of a free black man and a free black woman. In “Purple”, emotional and sexual salvation for women is found in other women. That’s not the real world, as some black women, out of frustration, seem to want to believe. (...) And because so few films are produced with black themes, it becomes the only statement on black men. (BROWN, 1996, p. 224)

Anita Jones felt Brown's opinion was biased and outdated, and that his ideas slandered the basic principle of feminism and humanitarianism: personal freedom, the right to choose. In her article, she states:

[...] in today's real world, women love women, men love men, whites love blacks, and every imaginable variation therein. In the real world, many intelligent, articulate black men are continuing to impact on the women in their lives scars of indifference. Physically invisible yet emotionally devastating. (JONES, 1996, p.226-227)

As Carl Dix observed, "the fervor of the debate underscored the importance of the questions that have been raised by The Color Purple" (DIX, 1996, p.192). The novel's strength comes from the portrayal of women's oppression and resistance, degradation and resilience, and the path they must walk towards the most needed spiritual healing. The lesbian relationship is an element majorly responsible for the recovery of many characters. Walker, loving women and men (and having been sexual with both), felt the need to write a novel that gave people "an opportunity to see women-loving women— lesbian, heterosexual, bi-sexual, "two-spirited"— womanist women in recognizable context" (WALKER, 1996, p.170). For that, as bell hooks noted, there is no homophobia in the novel. Celie's sexual desire for Shug is never a controversial subject, even if it is the medium by which she attains power. Walker, hooks states, "makes the powerful suggestion that sexual desire can disrupt and subvert oppressive social structure because it does not necessarily conform to social prescription" (HOOKS, 1988, p.217). In relation to the male/female relationships in the novel (and in real life) "in which women are oppressed and routinely denied the full expression of who they are simply because of their gender" (WALKER, 1996, p.166), it is no wonder, in Walker's mind, why so many women would choose other women as lovers, for they are "beautiful and lovable". Women, writes Henderson, "share the children, the labor, and even, at times, the men. Ultimately, it is the female bonding which restores the women to a sense of completeness and independence. (HENDERSON, 1988, p.77).

In writing the novel, Henderson suggests that Walker's purpose was "not only to create and control literary images of women, and black women in particular, but to give voice and representation to these women who have been silenced and confined in life and literature" (HENDERSON, 1988, p.67). To rob the "Celies" in the world of their voices, denying their right to choose partners and labelling their love

“unspeakable” is to retrocede to the beginning of the novel, in a time where women had no voice, their wants and needs had no value, and their presence was invisible.

Allowing women to be silenced by the same male-supremacist society that pushes them into a dusty corner is reinforcing the “Misters” dictatorship. This regime, up until this day, still go unchallenged in its “rights” to boss their women, as if this is the way things are supposed to be. It is precisely to give hope to the millions of women worldwide who are subjected to humiliation and brutality that the novel was written. Walker liberated Celie from her own story; she wanted her to be happy. When all the Celies in the world have the chance to follow Walker’s character’s path and rise to their rightful place in society, the world will discover new colors. Purple is just the beginning.

“LIVING TO LOVE, LOVING TO LIVE”¹³

When I started this work, it was out of sheer curiosity regarding the politics of the African-American community. Around January, 2007, I met with associate director Dawn Reid, from the Theatre Royal of Stratford East, as she discussed the theater’s most recent play production, Bashment, a thought-provoking story written by Rikki Beadle-Blair about a white gay rapper who aspires to be a ragga/hip-hop DJ. This rapper, JJ, takes his African-American boyfriend Orlando to a Bashment (a type of Jamaican popular music developed around 1979) competition. There, when the other black rappers learn that Orlando is not only gay, but his boyfriend is white *and* an aspiring rapper, he falls victim to a homophobic attack that leaves him permanently brain-damaged.

The raw dialogues and the frank discussion of racism and homosexuality in the black male community were the main themes explored in the play, and a great part of what made Bashment such a controversial work of art. Reid recalled it being a major success, attracting much controversy and divided criticism from the audience, who actively interacted and even interfered in the dialogues and performances of the actors. Such strong reactions made me eager to know more about the African-American community and discover the causes of such passionate feedback.

What drove these black men to hate so violently? Was it homophobia? Was it racism? Where does rage begin? And, most importantly, when does it *end*? These were the first questions that intrigued me about this community. The African Diaspora has put on great effort in trying to define their own identity as a group, as a race, by rescuing and establishing their culture and values. However, as I learned more about the driving forces behind African-American society, I discovered that, more than black men’s, there was another voice that was yet to be heard: the black woman’s. Women of color, as a whole, are perceived as the least valuable component in America’s social and economic system, occupying the far bottom of their social pyramid, behind white women and even their black male counterparts.

African-American women literature is confined in the broader “black literature” label. Since the literary works of the African diaspora arose from the experience of historic slavery and subversion of their culture, they represented an attempt to create

¹³ SHOCKLEY, 1972, p.39

an identity of their own. Therefore, their literature has engaged in portraying and denouncing issues such as the role African descendants play in the colonizer's community, their roots, racism, slavery and equality. Black women and their specific struggles have been overlooked and ignored in favor of this "bigger" fight against white America.

The general concept people have when thinking about black women is the one spread by mass media, in which they are "superwomen", serving as towers of strength for their men, magicians who can stretch a dollar into a month's worth of groceries, as well as the source of a tough motherly love which is meant to teach their children how to survive the streets. I knew there was more to it than that. As Beverly Greene explains, to truly appreciate the experiences of African-American women, there has to be an understanding of the impact the dominant culture has on these women's lives. Also, it is necessary not only "to consider how unique features of African-American culture, history, and community affect women", but also to reflect on their relationships with family, community and partners, as well as the way their personalities are constructed through these relationships. There were no specific studies about the convergence of racism, sexism and heterosexism found in these literary works by African-American women, let alone its effects on the development of their sexuality and sexual identity. Historically, literature by U.S. black women provides one comprehensive view of their struggles. I felt then, that it was time to let go of the notion of this single misconceived identity and search not only what distinguishes one black woman from the other but, more importantly, what brings them together in such a strong bond, in order to form positive self-definitions in the face of the derogated images of black womanhood popularized by the media.

For this reason, I started to search for works on black women written from a black women's perspective. As I came in contact with Ann Allen Shockley's and Alice Walker's work, I realized that these women shared more than a common background of slavery and abuse by white society: they were also straitjacketed by gender, race and heterosexual norms. Black woman's sexuality was, in fact, the site where different oppressions such as sexism, heterosexism, class and race intersected. The loss of control over their self-definition has left black women at the center of multiple oppressions, including the most pervasive one — that of the black male. Soon it became clear that I could not discuss black women unless I spoke of black men as well.

The African-American community is built around the battle against racial erasure from the general American society. In this sense, the stories of African-American men and women are interwoven, for they as a community have experienced prejudice and violence from the dominant society. In the novels, Jerome, Celie's father, Alphonso, Mister, Old Mister and even Harpo represent the worst that this cyclical nature of racism and sexism can do. Celie's father is lynched for being a successful colored merchant. Old Mister learns from his slave-owner father to hate the color of his skin, passing this hatred onto Mister, who in turn passes it to his son. Jerome has learned that being of color means being subservient to white people, which he passes to his daughter in form of sneering remarks. They perpetuate the oppression they suffer from white society onto the easiest target, the black woman. Although they commit evil deeds against their women, these characters are far from being mere stereotypes. It is possible to see in the narratives that both Shockley and Walker portray them as also victims of sexism, racism and paternalism. The hardships they go through turns them into pessimists, who believe that they and their children are doomed to live in a racist society with no chance of improvement.

One of the outcomes of this behavior is, as shown in the chapter about Loving Her, the internalization of racism. McWorther calls attention to the African-American way of thinking of themselves as victims, not perpetrators. It is true that the American society is still far from being tolerant and inclusive of all races, but this mind frame where blacks always put themselves as the underdogs fosters even more violence, "justified" by this cult of victimology in which the white society is to blame for black people's cowardly behavior. In that same chapter, it becomes clear that Renay is one of the characters most affected by internalized racism. In the dialogue she had with Terry's white maid and even the first time she met Terry, her attitude is filled with resentment from what other whites have done to her ancestral in the past. The novel makes clear that this cult of victimology is an obstacle to all black people's empowerment. The characters are still "recovering" from slavery, carrying the burden of their "racial stigma", unaware at first that, within the white society, some people, like Terry, do not have an agenda ready for colored folks.

Shockley and Walker know that racial injustice is still a collective problem, which requires a collective solution. However, they find it is not acceptable to ignore or even excuse the impact sexual hostility within the black community has on their

women. It is important to remember that, as shown throughout this work, the lives of women of color have also been deeply influenced by the attitudes of the racist dominant society. With patriarchy and sexism cemented in black men's thinking, black women's plight is only aggravated. Renay, Celie, Sofia, Mary Agnes, these characters are no strange to sexism and racism. They are not only oppressed by the white hegemonic American society for being of color, but are confronted with prejudice and humiliation for being women in a culture that is firmly structured in patriarchy and male dominance. Celie's sister Nettie's experience in Africa also demonstrates that oppression — of blacks by whites, of women by men, and even of blacks by blacks — is not restricted to the United States. If these women do not even feel respected and valued in their own homes, they must encounter a new way to cope.

And that is where woman bonding comes to place. If there is one thing I learned from Walker, Shockley and many other black female authors is that black women really *are* strong. Not in the mythical sense of "towers of strength" who feel nothing and endure everything. Quite on the contrary: these women are strong because they *feel* too much, they go through so much, and are still able to rise above and carry on. Often times, these women disrupt the boundaries of traditional gender roles in order to assert themselves. Shug's free spirit and Sofia's boldness, for example, are major examples of such discrepancy between what is expected from them and what they really are. Although this blurring of gender lines sometimes brings some unexpected consequences, not all of them pleasant, like Sofia's arrest and Shug's bad reputation, Walker takes a huge step forward by subverting traditional gender norms in order to defy what we understand men and women to be.

The women Walker and Shockley draw are not strangers to us, at least not to me. I can recognize friends, relatives, my own mother and grandmother in their works. We praise them and admire them not because of some forged "extra" strength, but despite the weaknesses common to all of us. These women refuse to accept society as it is and fight hard to change it. Yet, few dare to ask them what sort of toll life has taken on them, what scars still hurt, what demons insist on plaguing them. These women do not exist in a vacuum. They live and love in the same circumstances which have shaped their African-American society over the past four hundred years, juggling together the white power structure with the black male's insecurities. African-American female bonding comes as a means to survive this

complicated system, to allow them to resist oppression and dominance. Supportive relationships among women form a safe haven, providing the long wanted reciprocal love that the world, filled with male violence, has failed to give them.

These supportive ties take on many forms: some are of mentor and pupil, some are motherly or sisterly, and some are simply friendships. Some relationships are mixtures of all these previously cited types. Examples abound in the novel: Celie and Nettie's, Mary Agnes' and Sofia's, Celie's and Sofia's, Sofia and her sisters, Renay's relationship with Fran, and the strong bond between the Olinka women, the only thing that made polygamy bearable to them. All of these ties, however, are reciprocal and self-enhancing, as one learns and grows from the other's advice and examples. The novels show that, by helping one another, women can stand up against unfair treatment. The women in the novel bond together in a sisterhood to support one another. It is the high level of commitment to the other that suffices them the courage to tackle life's obstacles, addressing and validating their experience of mutual exchange.

Some of these ties extend even further, becoming sexual. The introduction of the black lesbian in these works added another layer to my research, arising more questions: who is the black lesbian? How does black society view the black lesbian? It is important to stress that none of the authors nor myself believe that lesbianism is derived from male oppression, nor an inevitable product of a close friendship with other women. As Walker demonstrates, female bonds can be diverse and multilayered, as the relationship between Celie and Shug evolves from a motherly to sororal to erotic. In this sense, Shockley also presents a lesbian relationship which develops from a brief estrangement to a deep sense of protection, love and finally, mutual attraction. The homosexual feelings in Celie and Renay laid dormant for the most part of their lives: the closeness of these female characters with other women helped them *realize* who they actually were, not become something they were not. When Celie sees the picture of Shug for the first time, she is in awe by her beauty, but believes her adoration for her husband's mistress is only of an idol/fan kind. When Terry tells of her feelings, Renay feels hesitant in the beginning, only to discover that something inside her stirred, like she always knew deep down of her homosexual desire. Shockley and Walker understand sexuality and sexual orientation as a range of possibilities rather than as binary choices. Thus, like Renay realizes that the binary world of blacks and whites often suffers incursions of one

race on the other, sexuality can be difficult to define, for it is more complex than the dichotomy of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Apart from Terry, who claims she knew she was a lesbian from childhood, Celie and Renay start the novel as heterosexual women, trapped in compulsory heterosexual marriages. The relationships they develop with their female lovers happen in their adult lives, and have its basis on friendship, gratitude, and admiration. The sexual component, of course, is crucial to the definition of these characters as lesbians, but it is just as important as the feelings of tenderness and peace they feel while in these women-oriented relationships.

There are many more similarities between the characters of Celie and Renay. Celie, who was given to Mister as part of a negotiation, thought she had no other choice but to serve him. Renay, who dated Jerome because of social pressure, was forced into marriage by an unwanted pregnancy, consequence of a sexual relation she did not consent to have. Their lack of interest and further lack of choice was taken as conformity to the roles they were supposed to play for society's sake — that of a slave-wife.

Both characters were constantly degraded in mind and spirit to ensure the firm grasp of the dominant's hand. Both Mister and Jerome are "rulers" of the household, resorting oftentimes to emotional abuse to keep their women down. Deriding their passion is also a way to undermine someone's spirit. Shockley and Walker criticize the nature of "true" black art proposed by black nationalists, turning the tables on what is considered "good" art by showing that art made by women, such as Celie's sewing and Renay's playing of the piano (as well as the authors' own art — writing) as not only escapism for the spirit, but also for the body, as they proved to be rentable, successful businesses.

For all the subjugation they suffered, Celie and Renay both share an inner resentment towards their partners. Not only they did not have the right to choose, but these men turned out to be serial abusers. For Celie and Renay, marital sex is not only unwanted — it is an act of violence. Neither Shockley nor Walker embellished what happened between their walls. Renay coped with it by gritting her teeth and laying there like a dead woman; Celie also pretended she was not there, since it made no difference for Mister, who just did his "business" and went to sleep. As Shug concludes, Jerome and Mister "go to the toilet" on them (WALKER, 1982, p.78).

Renay and Celie, while heterosexuals, completely give up their bodies' potential for joy. In truth, they are unaware that their bodies can be a potential source of joy, since sex as they knew it was never a pleasurable experience. Until they meet that someone who would show them how special and unique they were, their lives were just a continuum of bleak days and terrifying nights. Trapped inside their compulsory marriages, never having felt the right touch, sexual satisfaction was denied to them. Until they meet their first love.

The entering of Terry and Shug in our main characters' lives brings about Renay and Celie's redemption and sense of self. Although there is a time distance of more than half of a century between Celie's and Renay's life, both characters find in their female-oriented relationships what they could never find in their relationships with men. Terry and Shug appear not only to "rescue" these women from hell, but to also show them that they can stand up for themselves. As exposed in the previous chapters, a lot has been said about lesbianism in these works. The discussion of delicate themes such as racism and homosexuality is not new, but the debate stumbles across an enormous amount of prejudice and denial when it focus on the black community. The oppression that affects black lesbians, explains Barbara Smith as she includes herself, "is pervasive, constant, and not abstract. Some of us die from it" (SMITH, 2000, p.125). African-Americans, she continues, have tried to ignore homosexuality, avoiding a deep analysis of homophobia within their community. This happens, as Eliane Berutti clarifies, because the African-American community is basically straight, marginalizing same-sex oriented relationships (BERUTTI, 2000, p.106). Therefore, lesbians are the least visible group not only in arts, but also in popular media, "where the message conveyed about the Lesbian of color is that she does not even *exist*" (GOMEZ, 2000, p.110). That Celie and Renay discover themselves to be in a lesbian relationship is unquestionable — but that is beside the point.

What needs to be understood is that these women characters are human beings in need of love, in need of feeling cared about. Adrienne Rich's theory comes to play an important role in this understanding: by labeling all women-oriented relationships, from mother to daughter, sister to sister, or lover to lover "lesbian continuum", she implies that lesbianism is not some foreign relationship, sick or weird in any way. What Terry and Shug do for their lovers is no different than what other female characters do for the women they care about — with the addition of the

sexual component, of course. Shug and Terry bring out the life in Celie and Renay, helping them regain the authority over their body and image. Once they reclaim and self-define their eroticism, their sexuality becomes a place of resistance. When their everyday life undergoes change, they become empowered. A renewed consciousness of self stimulates them to embark on a path of personal freedom. When these women meet others who are undergoing similar journeys, they can change the world around. The personal growth experienced by Celie and Renay illustrate this rejection of externally defined images that trap black womanhood. When Renay stands up to Jerome, announcing that she has survived his male deterioration, and Celie defies Mister, stating that she might be poor, uneducated and ugly, but she was *there*, it is impossible not to join the chorus with Shug and say “Amen”.

Despite the continuing resistance to lesbian-centered African-American texts, Shockley’s and Walker’s works contributed significantly to the proliferation of writings by and about lesbians from the 1980s on. These authors helped conceive lesbianism as a valid sexual identity, one that did not erase black women’s race nor gender. Walker’s and Shockley’s diligent attention to the details and essences of African-American living prove, as Jewelle Gomez explains, “that women-loving-women is not a recent outgrowth of student rebellions, ‘free-love’ of the sixties or the feminist movement” (GOMEZ, 2000, p.118), but something that has happened for centuries, even before the label “lesbianism” was created.

The possibility of life as a black lesbian in modern society had to be constructed, however reluctantly, through a convergence of movements, rebellions, speeches, studies and art. Black women had to force their way into society to guarantee their rights, and black lesbians were right behind. These new writers, as Margaret Reynolds concludes, are now free to discuss their lesbianism, creating new self-definitions that transcend the stereotypes. Thanks to Shockley, Walker and many others, black lesbian literature now has the choice to explore different themes in their lesbian-centered works,

extending from openly erotic celebrations of same-sex passion, to imaginative revisions of history, to lyrical yet highly political essays indicting the homophobia and sexism both in black communities and in the dominant U.S. culture. (KEATING, 1997, p.13)

The novels discussed in this research helped rescue love between women from the villainous status which it was relegated for centuries, creating a new atmosphere in which love between women is no longer deviant, but natural. Such works help heterosexual women to understand what makes some females identify with other females. Today, more women who are heterosexual are willing to rely on each other, to see other women as kindred spirits and battle allies.

For black men, the coming out of these works reveal that the publication of feminist/womanist literature does not signify male bashing, but a desire for fairness and safety in their lives. Also, these works will help men perceive that the black lesbian as a social being does not represent a “threat” to their male egos. Hopefully, black men will realize that the nationalist patriarchal way of thinking is outdated, and that there is no such thing as “the perfect family model”. Society now has new demands, and having a strong, self-confident black woman by their side is a better, healthier choice than having the slave-wives from last century.

Traditionally, in American society, it is the responsibility of the members of the oppressed, objectified groups to reach out and bridge the gap between their lives and the consciousness of the oppressor. Black and Third World people are expected to educate whites as to their equality. Women are expected to educate men about their rights. Lesbians are expected to educate the heterosexual world about their sexuality. Black women’s literature contains many examples of how individual black women become personally empowered by a changed consciousness. As I let black women speak for themselves, talk about their lives, share their struggle and the lessons learned, I became a part of all these groups, in the hopes that this research will help society overcome their prejudice, casting aside for good this strai(gh)tjacket, which will, one day, no longer enclose the brightness and colorfulness of black women’s spirit.

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