

The Life You Save May Be Your Own

Re-defining African American Women's Communication, Sexuality
and Creativity in
Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*, and
Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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Mis amigas;

for always believing that it could be done.

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Introduction

She, myself, walks my dreams.

(Steedman 61)

During the late 1970s and 80s, African American women writers were being published like never before. Even though black literary, social and political critics had been active since the first wave of feminism and through the Harlem Renaissance, it was not until the late twentieth century that black feminist criticism developed and black women's writing came to be recognized as influential in academic study and of literary interest and quality. This thesis is an analysis of three novels written in the 1970s and early 80s by three different African American writers, namely Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973). I was eager to incorporate all three texts in my thesis, because they have each made a lasting impression on me during my studies and because the novels never seem to disappear off the contemporary radar. Some are of more current interest than others; *The Color Purple*, for example, has transcended the world of literature and is currently enjoying great success in the form of a play on Broadway. The novels all deal with complex African American women, whom I have developed an interest in through courses taught at the University of Oslo, such as "Literature and Society in Canada and the U.S.", "Women Writing: Feminist Fiction in English" and "Homotextuality: Gay and Lesbian Literature in English." The novels were on the syllabus in the three classes respectively and naturally discussed under different headings. Nevertheless, I found myself

repeatedly drawing parallels between them and wished to investigate these further. In their individual characters' quest for self three main topics arise as pivotal in each novel.

The development of an autonomous sexuality plays a pivotal role in women's self-definition and also in the novels discussed in this thesis. I wish to explore some of the power mechanisms that enable men to assume control over women's bodies, and consequently their sexuality, as well as the reversal of power as female characters redefine and regain control over their own bodies and their own sexuality. I will therefore focus on the liberatory effect of assuming and developing an autonomous sexuality. Moreover I am also intrigued by the reversal and reformation of gender roles and the following blurring of established binaries such as masculine/feminine, black/white and good/evil in *The Color Purple*, *Kindred* and *Sula*. I will argue that throughout *The Color Purple*, the traditional binaries of masculine/feminine and the analogous man/woman is rejected in favor of sameness, a sameness highly influenced by feminine properties. The reason I include black/white in this list of binaries is that in *Kindred* the major female character has trouble justifying her loyalty in relation to her race and she is seen as a "white nigger" (167). The difficult distinction between who is really good and who is evil forms the core of my chapter on *Sula*. The latter also complicates the process of independence and empowerment for women, since one of the major female characters' approach to identity and sexuality differs from the other characters discussed in the thesis.

In searching for and in developing a sense of self, all three novels rely heavily on the strategy of communication. Communicative exchange between past and present, between individual and community and between women as friends and lovers becomes essential. My focus will be on the reciprocal value of dialogue, the powerful impact of monologues and Walker, Butler and Morrison's favoring of speech over writing as a more authentic and empowering form of communication between their characters.

My third topic of interest is the individual novel's exploration of the black woman as a creative artist. The analysis will thus tap into Walker's use of African American musical and literary artists in her creation of Shug Avery, as well as Celie's occupation as a designer of folk pants, a modification of the traditional craft of the seamstress. I will also problematize Dana's occupation as a writer when during, and after, her Maryland experiences she is attempting to narrate her own story and life as a slave. Morrison's suggestion that Sula's idle imagination could have been applied to a creative art form will also form part of my discussion on *Sula*. Furthermore, I am intrigued by Butler and Morrison's use of the black female body as a work of art and as a historical signifier. Therefore my analysis of the novels will also include comments on the symbolic power of the female body and its missing parts. I will begin my analysis by introducing each novel.

When *The Color Purple* was first published, it caused quite a stir. Critics accused Alice Walker of wanting to "divide the race" by re-establishing stereotypes within the black community through her one-sided negative portrayal of the black family in general and black men in particular (Royster qtd. in Kaplan 198). The issue of the protagonist Celie's close relationship to singer Shug Avery was also debated. Some critics rejoiced in the novel's popularity among mainstream readers and saw it as part of a breakthrough, not only for black female writing, but also for "lesbian life, characters and language" (Christian qtd. in Smith 47). Other blacks claimed that lesbianism did not exist within their community and some even "wanted the novel banned from public libraries" (Birch 222). Ambivalence seemed to become the most recognized feeling among critics of *The Color Purple*. Nevertheless, the novel received high praise for its poetic language and its innovative form and Walker was termed a "lavishly gifted writer" even by a male critic (Christian, *Alice* 83).

When featured in the popular magazine *Ebony* in late 1984, Alice Walker shared the front page with other contemporary black women writers, among them Ntozake Shange, Toni

Morrison, Paule Marshall, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gloria Naylor. According to Barbara Christian “the idea of a specific tradition of African American women writers was a relatively new one in literary and academic circles” and *The Color Purple* “accelerated the pace with which that idea was promoted in non-literary publications” (*Alice* 85). With the release of Steven Spielberg’s 1985 film *The Color Purple*, on which Walker served as a consultant, she was criticized for alienating herself from the black community by engaging and flirting with whites, and “searching for acceptance and affirmation she did not receive at home” (Royster qtd. in Christian, *Alice* 89). *The Color Purple* was subsequently accused of being a threat to the existing paradigm of African American writing and Walker was contrasted with Toni Morrison, whom some saw as more balanced in dealing with relationships between black men and women (Christian, *Alice* 89). Other critics have implied that *The Color Purple*’s focus on the domestic sphere suggests that public history is ‘something that happens to white people’, whereas black people seem to live only in the private domain and are thus effectively placed outside history (M. Walker qtd. in Lauret 95). I argue that the challenges facing female writers of today is to rewrite cultural narratives and to define the terms of another perspective—in the words of Linda Abbandonato—“a view from elsewhere” (1108). I would claim that in redefining a space for women Alice Walker initiates the process by choosing a private setting and making it public.

Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* was released in 1979 and was the author’s first non-science fiction novel. The historical narrative evolves around the protagonist Dana’s experiences as a black female slave on a Maryland farm, owned by her white progenitor, and spans from approximately 1815 to 1840. Dana is transported back and forth in time by means of repeated time travel as one year passes by in 1976 Los Angeles. In Maryland, she is forced to follow the development of her white progenitor Rufus Weylin, and ensure his survival in order for him to father Dana’s great-great grandmother Hagar, a miscellaneous child. The

novel is an experiment with regards to genre and resists easy classification. Critics however, have agreed that the novel is a neo-slave narrative (Crossley 269). I would argue that the novel functions as fictional memoir of Dana's experiences as a female slave. By employing memory as a historical and narrative device, Butler inserts Dana's quest for self-definition in a rough historical context.

Sula is Toni Morrison's second novel, published in 1973. The novel has been subjected to various interpretations by a wide range of critics, as has Morrison as a fiction writer in general. Morrison battles against being subsumed by the Western literary tradition and several critics have expressed that they would rather her narrative fiction be regarded as part of African American literary tradition (Bloom, *Toni Morrison* 2). Wainwright holds that Morrison's signifying in "repeating and then reversing major tropes of Western intellectual thought in order to deconstruct the discourse of colonization and racism" belongs in "a black vernacular, Afro-centric tradition instead of a mainstream Western tradition" (148). Nevertheless, academia and literary critics often claim Morrison's style is more influenced by Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner's aesthetic objectives than Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison's (Bloom, *Toni Morrison* 2).

Subsequent to the publication of *Sula*, the *New York Times Book Review*'s columnist Sara Blackburn stated that "Toni Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the black side of provincial American life" (qtd. in Smith 7). This reviewer seems to disregard African American culture and further claims that the novel is "beautiful but nevertheless distanced" (Blackburn qtd. in Smith 7). Nonetheless, the critical interest in Morrison's work increased with the publication of *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), and *Paradise* (1998). Morrison's latest novel is *Love* (2003).

Due to the immense focus on the racial discrimination of the black man, the literary development and self-definition of black women had long been awaited. With the release of

Sula, a wave began of African American literature written by and about women. Some critics praise Sula as the most radical character of seventies fiction (Christian, "Trajectories" 241). I will argue that in *Sula*, Morrison reveals the difficulties involved in claiming female subjectivity by insisting on existing primarily as and for oneself (Christian "Trajectories" 241).

As Collins has rightly suggested, *The Color Purple*, *Kindred* and *Sula* are important because "[b]y insisting on self-definition, Black women question not only what has been said about African American women but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to define"(114). As a result of the one-sided focus of the largely male-influenced civil right's movement, black women started to search for their place in the politics of race and gender in the 1960s and 70s. Spurred on by the feminist movement's "tendency to normalize the experiences of middle-class white women as equivalent for all women", black women of multiple ethnic backgrounds unleashed their frustration through an extensive production of social, political and literary criticism, as well as creative writing of novels, drama and poetry. When Ntozake Shange's play *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* reached Broadway in 1976, it was the first play to do so since Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* was performed in 1958 (Griffin 486).

Most critics agree that the first explicit statement about black feminist criticism was Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism", published in 1977. Smith argued that there was no "developed body of black feminist political theory whose assumptions could be used in the study of Black women's art" (Smith qtd. in McDowell, "New Directions" 188). Her somewhat vague call for a connection between "the politics of Black women's lives, what we write about and our situation as artists" resulted in debate and dialogue that still continues to this day (qtd. in Griffin 490).

Alice Walker and Mary Helen Washington's rediscovery of writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston in the 1970s resulted in a reawakening of popular and academic interest in Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which had been out of print for thirty years (Griffin 487). In her collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker explains her interest in Hurston's work as her duty: "we are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and if necessary, bone by bone" (92). *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens* opens with a dictionary-like definition of and introduction to the now famous term "womanist" as a feminist of color dedicated to preservation of black people's culture, among other things. By separating womanist from feminist, Walker created a new definition for women who felt alienated from the white feminist movement. This essay was thus highly important in mapping out a line from literary foremothers to contemporary women's writing and in initiating a way in which to write about black women's writing.

Through the 1990s African American critics and writers shifted their focus from the struggles and writings of African American women to a multicultural, international concern for women, women's rights and women's writing. By the end of the decade, Valerie Smith, among others, redefined black feminist criticism to include "the intersections of constructions of race, gender, class and sexuality" (qtd. in Griffin 494). A more recent trend in African American literary studies is an increased focus on gender and on psychoanalysis. Hortense Spillers suggested in 1996 that the psychoanalytical approach is a way of getting to a more "complex black subjectivity, not simply that which is created by oppression, domination, violence, and economic exploitation, powerful as these forces are, but subjectivity that is created by agency" (qtd. in Griffin 496). The ethical and aesthetical problems involved in subjectivity for women form part of my analysis of *Sula*.

In preparing to write a thesis on African American women writing I was greatly inspired by Linda Abbandonato's essay "A View from Elsewhere: Subversive Sexuality and the Rewriting of the Heroine's Story in *The Color Purple*". I agreed with Abbandonato that even though women in general have made progress within academia, feminist scholars still produce work that continues to exclude non-white women (1107). I found that she addressed many of the issues I had earlier contemplated when reading *The Color Purple*, *Kindred*, and *Sula*. What was interesting about the novels was that they were taught in three separate courses and each time as the single fictional text dealing with women of African American descent. I found that they dealt with several similar topics. Among them were female sexuality and gender roles, communicative exchange presented in oral and written form, the negotiation between history and memory, and black female creativity.

This thesis is based on close readings of the novels, as well as working with some of the vast amount of articles, reviews and essay collections that have been published on each novel. The analysis is influenced by black feminist literary theory, as well as narrative theory. With regard to nomenclature, I have decided to alternate between using the terms *African American* and *black* women, since much of the criticism and fictional writings by women of color of the 1970s and 80s was called black feminist, or black criticism and black women's writing. Today, however, other ethnic groups such as Latin, or Hispanic American women will tend to define themselves as such and not as part of black feminist criticism or black women's writing.

Even though they are of recent vintage, scholars and critics have produced an impressive amount of work on *Sula* and *The Color Purple*. Both novels are subjected to wide-ranging analyses spanning from psychoanalytical, literary and historical approaches to the novels' use of Biblical parables, spirituality, African traditions and symbols of decapitation. Some of these approaches will be briefly mentioned in this thesis; however, my approach is

that of literary analysis. In this respect, *Kindred* has been subjected to a limited critical interest compared to the former novels. When discussing *Kindred*, critics have focused on Butler's diffuse approach to feminism represented in the character of Dana, and compared her to other female characters in Butler's science fiction novels. Nancy Jesser has criticized Butler for representing an ambivalent view of essentialism when dealing with her female characters.

The theoretical basis of this thesis has been the work of several prominent critics, feminists and scholars, among them Patricia Hill Collins, Deborah E. McDowell and Barbara Christian. Collins's *Black Feminist Thought*, a political manifesto on the historical position of black women and the development of black women's writing in the late seventies and eighties has been most helpful in educating me about black life in general and black women in particular. I am also indebted to Harold Bloom's essay collections on the works of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, as well as Maria Lauret for her highly insightful contribution to the discussion on *The Color Purple*. Nils Axel Nissen's essay on *Sula* and Cheryl Wall's *Worrying the Line*, have also been of tremendous inspiration in working with this thesis.

Both *The Color Purple* and *Sula* have been included in a number of theses presented to this faculty. However, they rarely appear together and to my knowledge, no theses have been written on *Kindred*. Scholars have tended to focus on the topics of sisterhood and community both in *Sula* and in *The Color Purple*. Some critics have focused on the close relationships between Nel and Sula, others on that between Celie and Shug, attempting to determine whether the characters, and thus the novels, can be labeled as lesbian or not. I hope this thesis will contribute new aspects to the theme of search of identity for black female characters in all three novels by an increased focus on female sexuality, communicative exchange and women as creative artists.

The argument of this thesis is that the black female characters' quest for self is a communicative process involving exploration of sexuality and creativity. The object of this analysis is to examine the novels' focus on these strategies of development for African American women. The major female characters in the novels develop within a closed community where their roles as women are constantly being influenced by white patriarchal society. In order to chisel out their own identities, the women of the novels form female friendships through which they are both able and unable to explore their sexualities. As we shall see in the three selected novels constituting this thesis, there is a great exploration of self in the three texts.

The organization of my thesis is based on my desire to begin writing about Celie and Shug, the major female characters of *The Color Purple* and truly magnificent women. The novel was thus a natural starting point. It is also the novel dealing most directly with women's sexuality and the most recently published novel. I am furthermore of the opinion that the portrayal of self-definition grows exceedingly complicated with *Kindred* and *Sula*. The thesis is divided into three chapters, each chapter focusing on the female character's sexual, communicative and creative development. The first chapter is on *The Color Purple* and opens with Walker's use of the epistolary genre as the basis of her main female character's development. The analysis focuses on Walker's emphasis on speech as a liberatory vehicle, not only for Celie, but for generations of black women. I further argue that Walker favors speech over writing and show how communicating about sexuality can be an important part of self-discovery and self-definition. In assuming the role of entrepreneur and designer the main female character not only contributes to the reversal of established gender roles, but underscores the novel's focus on art and creativity as important vehicles contributing to personal growth. In conclusion, I also address the problematic ending of the novel and its bold utopianism.

Chapter 2 is devoted to *Kindred* and focuses on the black female character's recreation of self through a dialogue with her ancestral past. The chapter incorporates elements of racism and sexism and their influence on female individualism. I argue that through creating her own narrative based on authentic experiences, Dana builds an identity radically different from her prior idea of self. This identity is constructed through communication with her fellow slaves on the Weylin plantation. My discussion of the novel focuses on issues of memory and disremembering, interracial power relations and female sexuality, solidarity and creativity.

In the third chapter, my analysis of *Sula* will reveal the difficulties involved in creating an identity disconnected from family, friends and community. I will argue that the radical character of Sula destabilizes traditional distinctions between good and evil in her attempt to create a self. The focus of the analysis will be the relationship between Nel and Sula, their sexual awakening, their separation and the ethical binaries of good and evil. I will also suggest that dialogue is the favored means of communication, and that Morrison's focus on female creativity is displayed through the novel's thematics, through its use of imagery and in its narrative structure. What I hope to be able to convey in this thesis is how *The Color Purple*, *Kindred* and *Sula* deal with women's self-definition through a focus on sexuality as an essential part of identity, speech as the main vehicle of communication and the liberatory effect of creativity.

The issue of the journey from internalized oppression to the free mind of a self-defined, womanist consciousness has been a prominent theme in the works of many African American women writers (Collins 112). Black female characters are placed in different settings in order to define a self in relation to "community, the nation and the world" (Collins 112). Some succeed; others come only half-way and yet others perish. Collins has observed that "identity is not the goal but rather the point of departure in the process of self-definition for women" (114). Thus, the process of defining, searching for and perhaps finding a self

becomes the most important element and is dealt with in various ways in all three novels in this thesis.

All the female characters in the novels are or have been defined either by white people or by black men. This point of departure is significant in *The Color Purple*, where Celie initially believes that she is a victim of incest, then has all of her absolutes turned upside down, only to remain relatively undefined by the end of the novel. In *Kindred*, Dana's single existence in Los Angeles is lonely, because she has no defined idea of where she comes from or where she is going. Through her Maryland experience, however, she achieves greater understanding of her background and of her self. Nevertheless, by the end of the novel the future of her interracial marriage is uncertain. In *Sula*, the title character travels the nation in search of a self, but dies without ever having functioned as a moral agent. The process of self-definition begins for Sula's friend, Nel, where the novel ends. The female characters all attempt to create a space for themselves within an American culture which claims its diversity, but in fact continues to neglect, suppress and erase women of color.

Chapter I: *The Color Purple*

It was in this world of woman speech, loud talk, angry words, women with tongues quick and sharp, tender sweet tongues, touching our world with their words, that I made speech my birthright . . .

(hooks, *Talking Back* 124)

Twenty-five years after it was first published, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* remains a prominent example of African American women's self-definition in fiction. The novel has become one of the teaching novels of choice in academia and still creates enthusiastic debate among scholars and critics. This chapter is no homage to the novel. Still, I would argue that *The Color Purple* is one of the most influential works by a black woman in its focus on reclaiming eroticism as part of women's self-definition. In commenting on Paule Marshall's *Chosen Place, Timeless People*, Hortense Spillers suggests that although the novel "does not confront the reader with an opacity or impenetrability of surface, it demands, I think, as much care of the detail from the reader as the detail has received from the writer" (152). I believe this statement also prevails when discussing *The Color Purple*. By daring to expose black men's abuse towards black women, Walker rejects the loyal position of favoring race over sex, making a compelling case for feminism, or to use her own term, womanism (*In Search xi*).

The argument of this chapter is that *The Color Purple* signifies on the white epistolary tradition by creating a story of a black woman's journey from abused child-bride to self-sufficient woman. By transforming the epistolary tradition, honoring the ancestral mothers of African American culture, and commenting on communicative exchange between, not only women, but also between Africans and Christian missionaries in Africa, Walker goes beyond the limits of the historical novel and creates a positive, but perhaps utopian novel. Like in the other novels of this thesis, a female African American can only obtain a sense of self through communicative exchange with the community around her. By creating a community where established gender roles no longer matter, Walker makes a bold attempt at predicting the future of the African American family. *The Color Purple* is a unique tale of female self-assertion and a celebration of African American literary and musical predecessors. Precisely because of its emphasis on survival and selfhood, the novel inserts itself not only into a paradigm of African American writing, but has also been characterized as a guide to self-definition for women. As we shall see, the novel's ending is in this respect problematic.

According to Anne Bower, the novel produces new insights into issues of reading, writing and voice, race, gender, class and genre (61). Walker plays with the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* in an almost comical ending where Celie's fortune is reversed; she is reunited with her children and is busy celebrating life with her transformed ex-husband and her female lover (Lauret 97). The focus of this chapter will be the epistolary genre, speech as superior to writing, sexuality as an important part of self-definition, creative female artists, and the exploration of utopian gender roles resulting in a peculiar ending.

Written in the epistolary tradition, *The Color Purple* dramatizes Celie's need to tell her story. Traditionally a semi-private genre, the epistolary form has mostly evolved around the domestic life of women and has thus been seen as artless (Donovan qtd. in Tucker 82). In *The Color Purple*, however, each letter becomes a work of art with its use of the black vernacular.

Epistolary narratives usually embody a desire for exchange, however, this desire is seldom fulfilled as “letters are repeatedly lost, withheld, seized, misdirected, or misplaced. . . . An addressee who is absent, silent or incapable of replying is one of the distinguished characteristics of epistolarity” (Kauffman qtd. in Kaplan 131). Since Celie’s epistles are initially addressed to God they are naturally never responded to and thus have more of a narrative than a communicative function.

Celie and Nettie are the novel’s focal characters. Their letters, Celie’s to God, Nettie’s to Celie, and finally Celie’s to Nettie, are the novel’s backbone. The sisters’ inability to communicate highlights the difficulties involved in the processes of reading and writing for women who are silenced by patriarchal power (W. Wall qtd. in Lauret 96). Janet Gurkin Altman states that: “the paradox of epistolarity is that the very consistency of epistolary meaning is in the interplay within a specific set of polar inconsistencies. The letter format has the power to suggest both presence and absence, to decrease and increase distance” (qtd. in Johnson 101). Through the letters, Celie is able to tell “someone” in her own words about the abuse she is subjected to, thus gradually increasing her confidence to speak up. The letters are laconic, blunt, and poetic, but they are not written to communicate as much to “express what the soul cannot hold within” (C. Wall 153).

As a contrast to the colloquial writings of Celie, Nettie’s letters are written in standard English. Critics have claimed that the African letters represent a weakness in the novel; the letters are seen as a naïve attempt at conceptualizing African history. I would argue that Nettie’s letters highlight the difficulties of communication between men and women, black and white, not only in America, but also in Africa and thus expand the novel’s scope (Christian “The Black Woman” 52). In terms of communication, Nettie’s letters describe the difficulties of exchange between African men and women, between the Olinkas and the American missionaries and between herself and Corrine, who is indifferent to the truth about

Adam and Olivia's origins (Kaplan 131). When the Olinkas eventually decide to fight the white colonizers, Celie realizes that she must follow her female friends' advice and fight for her own survival. Nettie's letters consequently function as a catalyst for Celie's revolt, in addition to having an important function on a thematic level.

Initially, Celie's letters are addressed to God. Her relationship to God is, however, turned from distant fear to loathing when she learns that Albert has been appropriating letters from Nettie for years: "What God do for me"? I ast . . . he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown" (173). When Celie learns that Nettie is alive and well in Africa, she begins her revolt by addressing the letters to Nettie, thereby rejecting the God she has earlier confided in. Through her letters to God, and subsequently to Nettie, Celie creates a language on the side of convention. Seen by some critics as a modernist text, *The Color Purple* "manifests itself as an artistic production in which language is essential to the shaping of vision" (Tucker 82). The colloquial black vernacular becomes Celie's personal language and through it she gains strength and independence to eventually break free from marital suppression. The power of Celie's narrative voice lies in the unidiomatic sentence structure. The language is complicated, but precise, like in this first letter to God:

Last spring after little Lucious come I heard them fussing. He was pulling on her arm. She say It too soon, Fonso, I ain't well. Finally he leave her alone. A week go by, he pulling on her arm again. She say Naw, I ain't gonna. Can't you see I'm already half dead, an all of these chilren. (3)

By reading between the lines of the short passage, the reader understands that Celie's alleged father is eager to rekindle the sexual relationship with his wife shortly after she has given birth. His interest is conveyed by him "pulling on her arm". When his wife refuses to accommodate his wishes, Pa rapes his oldest daughter: she is told to "shut up" and to "do

what your mammy wouldn't" (3). The poetic justice is complete when Pa later in the novel dies while having intimate relations with his fifteen year old wife.

Walker has claimed that her novel is "historical" "and that thinking of it made [her] chuckle" (*In Search* 355). To Walker, history "refers to the collective experience of everyday folk, their relationship with each other, with the young to the old, with women to men. . ." (Christian, *Alice* 17). Walker's definition of history favors private over public. Consequently, critics have labeled *The Color Purple* as an "historical novel of some sort" (Lauret 94). However, being full of vagueness, coincidence and inconsistencies the novel does not appear to be particularly occupied with historical facticity and is thus a problem for mimetic criticism. Critics have been eager to place the novel in the realist tradition, but having failed to do so, some have concluded that the novel is unsuccessful (hooks, "Writing the Subject" 215). I am of the opinion that such readings are counter-productive and fail to acknowledge the metafictional layers of the novel. Not only does *The Color Purple* signify on earlier epistolary novels written by men about women, such as Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, where white women suffer in "trying to protect their most precious commodity—their chastity. . ." (Lauret 99); the novel could also be seen as a pastiche of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in which Celie, as opposed to Janie, is given the narrative voice. In its focus on speech and the liberating effect of talking, Celie's letters are in fact written to undo what writing has done (Babb qtd. in Lauret 120).

The Color Purple opens with a warning: "You better not never tell nobody but God, It'd kill your mammy" (3). Alphonso imposes a bond of silence on Celie. By having to keep the abuse a secret, not only does he limit Celie's possibilities of emotional recovery, he establishes a distance between mother and daughter which prevents them from bonding. Celie's mother becomes increasingly skeptical towards her as her belly grows larger, but believing that telling her the truth would kill her mother, Celie keeps her secret and tells her

that the father of her baby is God. When sold to Mr.____ Celie is accused of telling lies, limiting her ability to speak about the assaults, making the abuse a lie. In a scene resembling a slave auction Celie is “sold” to Mr._____.

He say, Let me see her again. Pa call me. *Celie*, he say. Like it wasn't' nothing. Mr._____ want another look at you. I go stand in the door. The sun shine in my eyes. He's still up on his horse. He look me up and down. Pa rattle his newspaper. Move up, he won't bite, he say. I go closer to the steps, but not too close cause I'm a little scared of his horse. Turn around, Pa say. I turn around.
(12)

In this scene, Walker uses the institution of slavery and its legacy to highlight the oppression characterizing relations between men and women, between the powerful and the powerless (Henderson 69). The only difference between the scene and an actual slave auction is that the slave owner is a black man, practically selling his daughter to an unknown man with the added bonus of a cow. Celie's oppression circulates around the “vulnerabilities that grow from her gender, as constructed within the social space that her father respectably occupies” (Berlant 215). Threatened into silence, Celie never opposes the sale. When Nettie years later sends Celie a letter explaining who their biological father is, she begins the narration with “Once upon a time, there was a well-to-do farmer who owned his own property near town” (215). The story of Celie's father is like her own, that of the muted individual. This new information results in a shift in the novel: it abandons its “demystification of male behavior in the family and focuses on a reconstruction” of the extended family—this time under Celie's care (Berlant 218).

The South, in this case Georgia, was in the interwar years still influenced by the dominant, white, feudal social structure. This social structure is transferred to the novel, even though there are no dates establishing the actual time. Despite racial segregation, most of the sexual abuse and violence towards women in the novel is executed by black men, not white people. Eva Lennox Birch claims that the evil present in the novel “comes from the

accumulation of attitudes inculcated over centuries of ritualized oppression which are the inevitable consequence of an act of colonization, whether it be of a nation, a race or a sex” (223). By setting up an opposition between male and female wisdom, Walker highlights the influence of patriarchy on her male characters. Whereas female wisdom furthers love and magic, male wisdom claims the natural inferiority of women and the need to keep them under control (Byerman 60). While being beaten by Mr.____ Celie “make [her]self wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man” (23). Under the whip of her husband, Celie morphs herself into invulnerability by assuming the form of wood.

Yvonne Johnson has suggested that “[t]he patriarchal system itself enslaves and degrades women, for it institutionalizes and valorizes the subject-object dichotomy” (85). Celie enters the novel as the ultimate object, controlled by her father and subsequently by her husband. Mr.____, or Albert, is influenced by his father who has denied him the possibility of true love by opposing the relationship between himself and Shug Avery. Consequently, Albert has a desperate need to re-establish his power, and he does so in a brutal way. Through Shug Avery’s description of Albert as a young man, it becomes clear that he was once pleasant and loveable, but that he has changed dramatically. As a result of being mistreated himself, he now mistreats others through physical and verbal abuse: “You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddamn . . . you nothing at all” (187). When Harpo is eager to marry Sofia, Albert employs the power tactics of his own father and denigrates Sofia and her unborn child by claiming that “young womens no good these days, . . . Got they legs open to every Tom, Dick, and Harry” (31). This internalized degradation of women is also transferred to Celie, who later tells Harpo that in order to make Sofia mind he needs to beat her into submission.

Realizing that she has wronged her step-daughter-in-law, Celie is unable to sleep until she has apologized: “I’m so shame of myself, I say. And the Lord he done whip me little bit to. The Lord don’t like ugly, she say. And he ain’t stuck on pretty. This open the way for our

talk. . .” (39). Ironically, the abuse they have both been exposed to opens the way for Celie and Sofia to talk. Much like Dana in *Kindred*, Celie must construct a “counter-narrative that re-tells the story of her own life over and against the disembodied patriarchal injunction to self-silencing which speaks first in the novel and the misrepresentations . . . that those in power promote” (Kaplan 128). Consequently, Celie moves from the position of a silenced victim to that of an active participant in a female discourse.

In an interview discussion on Walker’s 1989 novel *The Temple of My Familiar*, the author claimed that a woman in the novel falls in love with a man because she sees in him “a giant ear” (Kaplan 199). Walker continued by saying that even though people may think they are falling in love because of sexual attraction or some other force, “really what they are looking for is someone to be able to talk to” (Kaplan 199). The latter statement seems somewhat generalized. Sometimes a physical attraction deserves to be identified as a physical attraction. There is no doubt, however, that in *The Color Purple*, the act of talking and listening becomes pivotal to Celie’s development.

From the first page, Celie is silenced by her step father’s warning that she must not tell anyone about his abuse, or else her mother will die. Obedient, Celie remains silent. Only mid-novel does Celie begin to talk to Sofia about the beatings she has received. Maria Lauret suggests that “[t]elling is thus confined to spoken, human communication, whereas writing to God does not count as an act of self-powerment” (102). As part of Walker’s signifying, the written text does not provide the outlet Celie needs. Lauret observes that “Celie’s writing is not in itself an act of liberation or even self-expression, but rather an escape valve when all else fails. Celie writes, in other words, when telling is impossible” (101-102). I concur with Lauret’s observation and would argue that even though the narrative is written, it is essentially Celie’s act of talking that transforms and re-defines her.

Carla Kaplan has claimed that Shug and Celie's relationship evolves primarily around talk: "me and Shug cook, talk, clean the house, talk, fix up the tree, talk, wake up in the morning, talk". "I talk so much my voice start to go". "Us talk about this and that". "Shug talk and talk" (133). As a result, Celie's liberation is mostly connected to her ability to talk with the other characters in the novel. The main vehicle for independence becomes communication. Walker's emphasis on voice becomes significant in the constant repetition of the verb "say" throughout the first half of the novel (Holloway 78). By adding a form of the verb after direct speech, Celie not only clarifies who the speaker is, but also conveys her liberty to talk and report speech. Lauret holds that Walker's insistence on the power of the speaking and singing voice is "polemically engaging with white women's literature, which tends to take writing as the mark of liberation from patriarchal oppression" (103). By honoring speech and music as tactics of survival, Walker is also honoring African American women's artistic contributions to history. As Celie's relationship with Shug develops, her discourse becomes secularized and she is able to talk her way into a self (Lauret 112). When Shug tells Celie that she wants one last fling, Celie is unable to talk: "All right, say Shug. It started when you was down home. I missed you, Celie. And you know I'm a high natured woman. I went and got a piece of paper that I was using for cutting patterns. I wrote her a note. It said, Shut up" (211). This episode makes it clear that Celie is so devastated by the news that she has lost her ability to speak about it. By making speech the elevated means of communication, Walker upgrades the status of speech to an art form, only paralleled by music.

From the novel's epigraph the reader's attention is immediately brought to music. Stevie Wonder's imperious line "Show me how to do like you/ Show me how to do it" could signal the novel's ironic imitation of earlier epistolary novels. The lines could, on the other hand, be symbolic of Celie's development guided by female role models. According to

Lauren Berlant, the epigraph can be read as the novel's most "explicit political directive, deployed to turn individuals into self-conscious and literate users/readers of a cultural semiotic" (214). The cultural semiotic Berlant refers to is in the case of this novel not only concerned with the meaning of language, but extended to speech, music, needlework, sexuality and spirituality, all important parts of African American women's culture (Lauret 101). The main provocateur of this female culture is Shug Avery.

When Shug Avery is first introduced, it is through her picture on a pamphlet. Her appearance, based on an old photograph of Zora Neale Hurston that Walker received from Hurston's brother, showing Hurston in "pants, boots, and broadbrim hat, with her foot on the running board of a bright red car—presumably hers, looking racy" is portrayed in a similar way on the pamphlet Celie finds: "I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like something tail. She grinning wit her foot up on somebody motorcar" (8; Walker, *In Search* 88).

Intertextually, *The Color Purple* is a celebration of women and of women artists, whom Walker idolizes. In her essay "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View", Alice Walker calls Hurston a singer, due to her anthropological work collecting stories told in the colloquial speech of African Americans (*In Search* 91). According to Walker, Hurston belongs in an "unholy trinity with Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday", famous black singers (Wall 140). Obviously Shug Avery is inspired by Zora Neale Hurston and is thus, not surprisingly, a singer. She is also an active shaper of Celie's character, as the epitomized womanist and moral center of the novel. Shug is a "light giver, and life giver whose power derives from her independence, integrity, expressiveness, eroticism, and spirituality" (Wall 147). By employing all of these attributes, Shug challenges the fellow characters, as well as the reader, "to live with boldness and style in the face of adversity, absurdity, and conventional morality" (Bell 159).

Shug's independence is largely connected to her profession as a blues singer, a line of work which gives her financial freedom. Her importance in the novel goes beyond the mere plot, because she evokes a "tradition of women's cultural activity and self-assertion" making her the role model of self-definition (Lauret 111). As a female artist, Shug's life resembles that of blues singers like Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, who through their performances achieved a "measure of freedom, independence and power only dreamed of by women in their audiences" (Wall 146). In fact, the relationship between Celie and Shug is initiated when Shug performs at Harpo's juke joint and dedicates a song to Celie. The song is described as "about some no count man doing her wrong, again" (70) in the novel, whereas in the motion picture directed by Steven Spielberg, Celie's song is given a lyric that emphasizes the feeling of kinship between the women: "Sister, you been on my mind / Oh Sister, we're two of a kind / Oh Sister, I'm keeping my eye on you" (Spielberg, 1985).

Shug is the epitome of the self-defined, independent woman. She likes to sleep with men; she falls in love with them, loves the attention they give her because of her sultry body and fears the day that she will no longer be attractive to men half her age. Henderson has professed that "unlike Celie, who derives her sense of self from the dominant white and male theology, Shug is a self-invented character whose sense of self is not male inscribed. Her theology allows a divine, self-authorized sense of self" (qtd. in Winchell 92). Yet, Shug needs Albert to save her when she falls ill while on the road. Billeted in Albert's house, Shug becomes Celie's restoration project. Shug has three children by Albert, her intended husband and lover. She does not, however, live with her children, but has left them with her parents in order to pursue her career. Generally, children are portrayed as a restriction on women's freedom. When Celie loses her ability to menstruate, she is relieved of the distress of conceiving another child by a man she despises. The reader is told that "God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it"

(10). Celie is not able to bear children and is thus freed from a condition she does not like: “I’m all the time sick and fat” (12). According to Sabine Bröck and Anne Koenen, “in Walker’s underlying concept of sexuality . . . the female body is regarded as women’s enemy, a trap; a girl’s first menstruation is consequently described as initiation into the terrors of patriarchal society” (qtd. in Johnson 89). Celie also believes pregnancy is a trap: “I say marry him Nettie, and try to have one good year out of your life. After that, I know she be big” (7: Johnson 89). Convinced that heaven, earth and the individuals’ life are ruled by a divine God, Celie places her faith in “him” from the first pages of the novel. Her belief in God is, however, severely altered by Mr. _____’s treachery.

Celie’s letters to God change their addressee mid-novel. Her idea of God as a white man is replaced with Shug’s animistic love for nature: “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it” (177). Shug also ridicules black folk’s inclination to award the church with all the wonders in the universe: “any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me” (174). Shug rids Celie of her belief that God is a man, because “man corrupt anything, say Shug. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain’t” (178). By changing Celie’s belief system, Shug also contributes to Celie’s re-definition of theology and thus to her self-definition. Bernard W. Bell has rightly suggested that “[b]y sympathetically delineating Shug as a blues heroine with religion, who is estranged from the orthodoxy of the Christian tradition, Walker offers her as the contemporary symbol of the ideal pattern of sexual and spiritual liberation and of transgression of traditional African American values and institutions” (159). By allowing Shug to re-define Celie’s idea of theology, Walker shifts the power of definition from the church to the black woman.

When Celie realizes that Mr._____ has appropriated Nettie's letters, she is eager to kill him while shaving his beard. Shug convinces her to channel her energy onto sewing pants: "a needle and not a razor in my hand, I think" (132). Like generations of African American women, Celie manages to channel her rage into creativity, and making pants become her artistic outlet. Celie's career as a designer of folk pants is a symbol of Walker's respect for traditional women's work and careers where women assert themselves through creativity. When in Memphis, Celie is given Shug's dining room as her studio and in it she creates wonderful designs in multiple colors. Shug's financial capacity also allows her to hire two girls to do the sewing, so that she can concentrate on designing and enjoy full artistic freedom. By signing her letter to Nettie with Celie/Folkpants, Unlimited, Celie gains "the *nom du père* of capitalism: a trademark" (Berlant 227). Additionally, Berlant suggests that Celie's pants follow the "ethical and aesthetical shift from worshipping the white male God to appreciating the presence of spirit and color" (227). Celie's pants are not white, they are purple, red and have various print on them. From battered child bride to capitalist entrepreneur, Celie re-defines her self with the help of her art work.

The issue of gender roles is pivotal in the novel. Walker uses dramatic effects to highlight the differences between her male and female characters, as well as their different feminine and masculine qualities. Critics have accused Walker of painting a negative picture of the unknown figure "the black man", who plays a major part in the novel both as villain, husband, friend and lover. His development is personified through various dynamic characters, most notably Mr._____ and Harpo. What critics may have failed to realize is Mr._____ or Albert's development throughout the novel. Walker has argued that parallel to Celie's development, there is also Albert's development. In a cathartic process of dissolution, Albert goes from tyrant to friend, embracing traditional feminine needle and art work. Walker has further claimed that both Celie and Albert "suffer from an illness that derives from the

experiences that early shaped their personalities and from their culturally derived sex roles” (qtd. in Winchell 87). In reversing these roles, Walker creates a utopian family structure.

The Color Purple inverts the established categories of masculine and feminine. Early on we learn that to Celie men are synonymous with pain and torture and that to her “most times mens look pretty much alike” (16). After having been beaten for allegedly winking at a boy in church, she even states that she does “not even look at mens. That’s the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I’m not scared of them” (7). She tries to enjoy sex with Albert, simply because Shug tells her that she “just love it” (73). In an attempt to emulate Shug, Celie wraps her arms around Albert and closes her eyes, imagining that she is the singer.

At times, Celie compares both Shug and Sofia to men and she comments on how Shug “talk and act sometimes like a man” and how she attracts men with her bosom (77). Celie also compares herself to a man when she at one point has got her eyes glued to Shug’s bosom and “feel my nipples harden under my dress. My little button sort of perk up too” (77). When giving Shug a bath Celie compares her feelings with a man’s: “I thought I had turned into a man. I wash her body, it feel like I’m praying. My hands tremble and my breath short” (47). Giving Shug a bath is obviously a sexual and spiritual awakening for Celie, but in lack of words for female attraction, she resorts to identifying the feeling as that of a man, and assumes that “stimulation is a male attribute” (Byerman 64). Walker is playing with the masculine/feminine boundaries by deconstructing and challenging the psychological and behavioral traits most typically associated with one sex. The effect is that the women in the novel appear mentally stronger by the end. The men are included in the sisterhood by adapting to its nurturing philosophy, acceptance of and participation in female culture.

In developing a sense of self, Celie’s sexuality becomes one of the prominent features of the novel. The multifarious ways in which sexuality is dealt with proves the significance of sexuality both as power tool and as a liberatory device. When Shug arrives at Albert’s house,

tired and sick from traveling with a caked layer of powder on her face, Celie states that Shug looks like “she ain’t long for this world but dressed well for the next” (44). Even though Shug laconically states that Celie “sure is ugly”, the women soon establish an intimate relationship. Celie saves Shug’s hair from her comb after sorting out her hair and during a conversation with Sofia, Celie, who has no comprehension of sexual pleasure, reveals to the reader that “[o]nly time I feel something stirring down there is when I think bout Shug” (63). As the story proceeds, Celie experiences different sorts of sexual satisfaction when interacting with, or even seeing Shug and the singer finally takes it upon herself to teach Celie about her body and show her the “button”, as well as explaining her perception of what sex could and should be like:

Naw, I say. Mr. _____ can tell you, I don’t like it at all. What is it to like? He git up on you, heist up your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain’t there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep. She start to laugh. Do his business, she say. Do his business. Why, Miss Celie. You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you. That what it feel like, I say. (73-74)

When elaborating on her view of love-making it becomes clear that Celie’s notion of female sexuality is that of submission and not personal sexual pleasure (Hite 127).

In educating Celie about her anatomy, Shug redefines Celie’s conception of her body. Despite having given birth to two children, Celie has never seen her own genitals or taken a good look at her own breasts. Naomi Wolf claims that “solitary female desire is mostly non-existent” in popular culture “except in a mock-up for the male voyeur,” so the fact that Walker lets her black character watch and touch her private parts is groundbreaking in itself (125). Wolf also contends that “the second cultural inversion of female sexuality starts early, beginning with the masturbation taboo which is culturally censored. Men’s sexuality is obvious; solitary male desire is represented from high culture to low” (Wolf 118). Shug’s educational approach is thus a safe, but nevertheless modern, way to focus on female

sexuality. Shug and Celie's adventure into the female space of buttons that melt is not only a statement about the importance of female masturbation. It also re-defines the terms and ideas Celie has internalized. Hite has rightly suggested that "Shug initiates a process of redefinition that is the central tendency of the novel. . . . These redefinitions, emerging from a discussion between women, suggest that when the hitherto voiceless begin to speak, meanings necessarily change" (128). I would argue that Celie's sexual awakening and her healthy sexual experiences are pivotal to her continued development as a woman.

In creating a strong female sexuality, Walker is forced to emphasize elements in the male sexuality as flat out disgusting. The descriptions of degradation are realized in Celie's narrative of how she is raped by her alleged father and by Mr. _____. The unpleasant descriptions of sexual intercourse or seduction between Celie and Pa, as well as between Celie and Mr. ____, are designed to repulse the reader, whereas the licking and sucking between Shug and Celie is compared to a baby's mouth suckling its mother's breast. Male sexuality is here paralleled with violence, dominance and penetration, whereas sex between women is soft, gentle and loving. bell hooks reasonably claims that

[r]eaders are placed in the position of voyeurs who witness Celie's torment as victim of incest-rape, as victim of sexual violence in a sadistic master-slave relationship: who watch her sexual exploration of her body and experience vicarious pleasure at her sexual awakening as she experiences her first sexual encounter with Shug (286).

The novel's focus on sexuality as actively shaping identity seems constrained in dealing with Squeak/ Mary Agnes. Johnson makes the rather controversial claim that Squeak's rape leads to her new identity as a part of the female sisterhood and as a singer. Johnson holds that together the women plot to get Sofia out of jail by Squeak agreeing to seduce the sheriff: "[t]hey successfully manipulate the racist system that threatens Sofia's life" (Johnson 93). I would argue that Squeak's rape is problematic, because it is insufficiently justified in the novel. By sacrificing Squeak in order to rescue Sofia, the rape

becomes a peculiar solution in the name of solidarity. Berlant has suggested that the rape serves as the “diacritical mark that organizes Squeak’s insertion into the womanist order”, earning her the privilege to sing (220). Able to talk about the rape, Squeak magically transcends the superficial layer of shame and tells Harpo to “shut up”, because she is telling the story (89). By the end of her narrative, she proclaims that her name is not Squeak, it is Mary Agnes (89). In demanding to be called by her real name, Mary Agnes has sacrificed her old self, transformed herself and is consequently worthy of inclusion into the family. I believe that rape should perhaps not be praised as a positive solution in facilitating women’s self-definition. Six months after the rape, Mary Agnes has gained the confidence to begin singing in public. Inspired by her yellow skin she creates a song:

*They calls me yellow
like yellow be my name.
They calls me yellow
like yellow be my name.
But if yellow is a name.
Why ain’t black the same.
Well, if I say Hey black girl.
Lord, she try to ruin my game*

The song is a manifestation of Mary Agnes’s identity and highlights the issue of identity connected to light-skinned versus dark-skinned African Americans.

Shug is characterized as being “black as tar” and “nappy headed” by Albert’s father (52). To Celie, however, Shug’s black skin is “smooth and kind of glowy from the lamplight” (102). After Celie has told Shug about the first time she was forced into having sex with her alleged father, Shug tells Celie that she loves her whereupon “us kiss and kiss till us hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other. Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth. Way after while, I act like a little lost baby too” (103). To Celie, having someone love her is the most important thing. Her attraction to Shug is natural. She is, however, aware that her attraction and love for Shug is different than

Shug's love for Germaine and her sister Nettie's love for Samuel. Because she exists in a conceptual vacuum, Celie never addresses her own status as someone who is attracted to women. Critics, however, have produced numerous articles analyzing the relationship.

In her collection of essays and correspondence concerning *The Color Purple*, called *The Same River Twice*, Walker states that in her screenplay intended for the motion picture "it was clear the women loved each other. It was clear that Shug is, like me, bisexual. That Celie is lesbian" (35). Subsequent to the release of the movie, however, critics felt that the lesbian relationship in the film was de-emphasized in the name of sisterhood. On discussing the novel, Barbara Smith has rightly suggested that the love affair between the two women seem utopian in that it is never addressed by themselves or the other characters:

Celie and Shug are undeniably authentic as Black women characters – complex, solid, and whole – but they are not necessarily authentic as lesbians. Their lack of self-consciousness as lesbians, the lack of scrutiny their relationship receives from the outside world, and their isolation from other lesbians make *The Color Purple's* categorization as a lesbian novel problematic. It does not appear that it was Walker's intent to create a work that could be definitively or solely categorized as such (66).

Other critics have welcomed Shug and Celie's relationship. Renee C. Hoogland celebrates the same-sex relationship and sees it as pivotal for Celie's development:

Since nothing in novels – unlike real life – is either incidental or unpremeditated, Celie does not simply happen to fall in love with a woman. Her sexual orientation, her passionate investment in a female Other from whom she gradually begins to derive her sense of Self, structurally informs the story of her subjectivity, her empowerment as a subject of speech and writing, and eventually also a social agent (19).

Shug and Celie's relationship is never questioned by any of the characters in the novel. The lack of heterosexism in the utopian world of the novel could at times seem to collide with the sexism at play in other parts of the story. As hooks has rightly suggested, Albert is enraged at the possibility that his wife will be present at a juke joint, but he is never described as having problems with accepting Celie's desire for Shug. hooks thus concludes that homophobia does

not exist in the novel (“Writing the Subject” 217). By continually comparing male sexuality with power over and female sexuality with sharing, Walker is ultimately saying that sex between females is more harmless and reciprocal than sex between a man and a woman. However, she makes sure to include Shug’s interest in sex with Albert as a sign of the possibility of a loving relationship between man and woman.

The platonic heterosexual relationship between Celie and Albert is the result of sexual rejection for them both. It is through conversation, not sexual desire that they re-connect. Thus female same-sex relationships do not threaten male-female bonding. The abrupt shift from Walker’s focus on sexuality to the platonic relationships all characters seem to share toward the end of the novel have been criticized by several critics. Mariana Valverde holds that “lesbianism is. . . robbed of its radical potential because it is portrayed as compatible with heterosexuality, or rather as a part of heterosexuality itself” (qtd. in Hooks, “Writing the Subject” 218). Valverde thus sees the bonding between Albert and Celie as spitting in the face of social oppression.

Shug is also accused of betraying her sexuality towards the end of the novel. Hoogland goes as far as to claim that Shug is robbed of her radical edge when embarking on her last heterosexual adventure (20). Reduced to a “fat, aging woman, fearful of loosing her looks”, Shug decides to leave with Germaine (21). Hoogland sees this as a “demeaning restoration to the heterosexual order” without a trace of narrative critique (22). The narrative critique Hoogland calls for is complicated by the narrative voice of the novel. Such critique is impossible given that Celie is the focalizer and narrator. Therefore, I would claim that Hoogland’s request for narrative critique is peculiar given the form of the narrative. By separating the friends and now possibly ex-lovers, Walker “challenges the proprietary attitudes involved in monogamous . . . [relationships]” and Celie must survive without the support of her lover and benefactor (Birch 226). Her grief is obviously that of an abandoned

lover when she writes: “My heart broke. Shug love somebody else” (223). Subsequently, Celie goes through all the stages of an abandoned lover, she finds herself being unable to sleep, she believes that she will die, she loses her confidence and her spirits are even more distraught when she receives a telegram saying that her sister’s ship have been sunk by mines near Gibraltar. However, she manages to get her spirits back and “just when I know I can live content without Shug, [she] write me she coming home. And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn” (257). Walker lets Celie go through the trauma of believing that she has lost both Shug and her family only to restore perfection and utopian bliss by the end of the novel. By the end of the novel, Celie is the one smoking the pipe and wearing the pants.

In the novel, racial suppression becomes secondary to sexual exploitation and marital abuse. The main factor of suppression is men’s power over women presented through Mr. ____’s power over Celie, and men’s divine power to name and to kill. Marc A. Christophe holds that the novel’s most daring and enduring quality is its rejection of racial emotionalism and its emphasis on Celie’s existential fight for recognition (281). What Christophe refers to as racial emotionalism is what critics have accused Walker of neglecting, with the result that the male characters in the novel are portrayed as being inconsistent and childlike. Such criticism fails to acknowledge that strength in women does not necessarily mean weakness in men. Winchell claims that Walker has been accused of painting men in a favorable light only when they become too old to be a threat sexually. Winchell contends, though, that in Walker’s novel the “extent to which men become likeable is directly proportional, not to their age, but rather to the extent to which when they take on feminine characteristics” (97). Other critics have suggested that the men in the novel are “humanized only upon adopting womanist principles of sexual egalitarianism” (Bell 160). Furthermore, Byerman has suggested that “Walker seeks to resolve the dialectic by making all males female, all destroyers creators, and all difference sameness” (66). This notion of sameness seem problematic since Walker has

spent large parts of the novel celebrating difference, difference in her characters' sexual preferences, their physical appearance and in their reversal of traditional gender roles.

The ending of the novel may seem problematic in its attempt to provide closure. The main objection to Celie's new self is that it does not incorporate her past in any way. In the end, her new self is the result of the breaking down of absolutes. Incest is not really incest, only "normal" rape; she is continuously exploited economically by her step father and Mr. _____. Yet, she is never bitter; she seems reborn. The rebirth makes Celie's former life unimportant in a way that seems conflicting with the core elements of the other novels in this thesis, where the female characters must incorporate their experiences in order to achieve a re-defined sense of self. In a way, Celie's past is neglected in favor of a happy ending. Berlant has rightly suggested that "Celie's ascension to speech, a new realm of 'bodiless' happiness, does not include coming to terms with these events [of the past] as she leaves them behind: she is completely reborn, without bearing witness to the scars left in knowledge and memory" (227). Additionally, Berlant professes that "Nettie and Celie's feminist fairy tale (the "womanist" historical novel) absorbs and transforms the traditional functions of patrifocal-realist mimesis; and that this transformation makes possible the movement of *The Color Purple* into its communal model of utopian representation. . ." (218). In light of the utopian ending of *The Color Purple* I would argue that Walker's novel can be compared to a blues text, where the last line often softens the message in the song, and gives hope of personal, social and political change. Walker's ending is thus, in the words of Maria Lauret "a way of laying sadness to rest" (114).

Chapter II: *Kindred*

One reason we narrate is because mankind cannot fail at times to ask the question of its own being, because we know the story is there to be told—just as others have told it.

(Kerby 45)

These people are my access to me; they are my entrance to my own interior life.

(Morrison qtd. in Wall 243)

In *Kindred*, Octavia E. Butler deals with issues of identity, sexual power and communication in interracial relationships between husband and wife, master and slave. The novel is a journey through experiencing, realizing and remembering the historical dynamics of power between black and white, men and women within the institution of American slavery. In this respect, *Kindred* enacts a hybrid vision of fantasy, history and time, by blurring the distinction between past and present (K. Davis 242). Missy Dean Kubitschek rightly suggests that *Kindred* “offers an almost perfect paradigm of the strategies of contemporary African American women novelists in depicting an encounter with history as the liminal act of assuming a developed identity” (qtd. in Rushdy 136). Through her communication with the past Butler’s main female character eventually redefines herself and her identity. Kubitschek further holds that *Kindred* transforms the concept of “history” by enlarging its definition to include “memory” (qtd. in Rushdy 136). A similar approach is found in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). As the prologue to the novel suggests, the story is told in retrospect. By including what Dana remembers about her experiences as a slave in the mid-nineteenth century Butler consequently makes memory a part of her story, as well as a framing device for

the narrative. Dana immediately reveals the importance of memory in dealing with her pain: “I closed my eyes again remembering the way I had been hurt—remembering the pain” (10). Memory and disremembering thus become pivotal for Dana’s development of self.

Kindred is a blend between a neo-slave narrative and a time-travel novel. The traditional slave narrative has its own critical history. From being considered “of dubious value” at the beginning of the twentieth century, slave narratives have resurged as works of great immediate interest for historians as well as literary critics. Henry Louis Gates Jr. understands the slave narrative to be “the very generic foundation which most subsequent Afro-American fictional and non-fictional narrative forms extended, refigured, and troped”, in short “the basis on which an entire narrative tradition has been constructed” (qtd. in Kawash 26). Butler’s novel develops this rich narrative tradition, not only by including elements from the modern genre of science fiction, but also by highlighting women and their struggles. I would argue that the essential questions posed in the novel are: how can women develop an autonomous identity when they are continuously suppressed by historical mechanisms of power? How do male-dominated hierarchies of power govern women’s sexuality, communication and creativity? These are the paradoxes Dana faces when transported back to early nineteenth century Maryland.

The argument of this chapter is that in order to attain a complete identity, Dana must experience the mental and physical suffering of her ancestors and re-examine all her preconceived notions about her family’s background. This process involves the breaking down of all her absolutes, her sense of place and time, and the power over her own body. I would argue that Butler problematizes African American women’s construction of self by showing how the history of slavery continues to affect modern women, how they communicate, and how they deal with their own sexuality and creativity. This chapter will thus deal with time, memory and communication, safety and creativity, and female sexuality

and body; in short issues of race and gender, symbolised through the interracial power struggles between Dana, Kevin and Rufus, as well as the complicated relationship between Dana and Alice.

A noted science fiction novelist, Butler makes extensive use of time travel in her novel. In the duration of the novel, Dana is transported back in time at six different occasions. The first time is on her twenty-sixth birthday. As the story proceeds, her visits to the past are stretched out, leaving her there for months at a time, while in 1976, only hours and occasionally days pass by. Even though *Kindred* is not a science fiction novel, it borrows the vehicle of time travel. There is, however, never given any explanation of how Dana is transported back and forth in time other than that she is described as becoming dizzy and nauseated just before she leaps back and forth. I would argue that the ways in which the time travel is conducted becomes less important than Dana's narration of the Maryland experiences, a narration influenced by memory (Rushdy 137). Butler has stated that the time travel is not intended as a science fiction element; should that have been the case she would have used a time machine: "the time travel is just a device for getting the character back to confront where she came from", Butler says in an interview with Randall Kenan (496). Nevertheless, the predominant story element of the text is Dana Franklin's recurring lapses back in time, from her 1976 L.A.-based urban home to antebellum Maryland and the Weylin farm. Whenever her great-great grandfather Rufus Weylin is in danger, she is transported back in order to save his life and consequently ensuring the birth of her great grandmother Hagar. Only when her own life is in danger is she transported back to 1976. The story is complicated by the fact that Rufus Weylin is the white son of a slave-owner and Dana a black woman.

As the story proceeds, the lapses become longer in time and Dana finds that she cannot control the time travel. The main story-line is Dana and Rufus's encounters at various times in

his life, beginning when he is only four years old and rescued from drowning. The parallel subsidiary story-line is that of Dana and Kevin's life, told in retrospect by Dana. Dana's first leap in time can be claimed to be a kernel event for the multilinear story, since it transports her to a Maryland setting. Events take place at various times, involving various characters, but are told retrospectively in Dana's idea of a chronological order. However, the subsidiary story-line of Dana and Kevin's lives is told parallel to past Maryland events. The chronology is furthered complicated when Kevin is left in Maryland for five years, whereas only eight days pass by for Dana, who is transported back to 1976 alone. The novel thus moves extensively back and forth in time all the while maintaining its main objective, Dana's apprenticeship in shaping history. As Kerby has rightly suggested "time and memory, do not themselves constitute personal identity, they rather serve as the environment from which narrative structuration is possible" (40). With the help of time and memory, Dana reconstructs her own narrative as well as the history of her ancestors.

The novel opens with a prologue stating that "I lost an arm on my last trip home" (9). In light of Dana's extensive traveling back and forth, home becomes a dubious entity. Already during her third visit to Maryland, Dana identifies with the Weylin farm as home; she sees the lights of the house, immediately feels safe and is surprised to catch herself exclaiming: "home at last" (127). She realizes that her affection for the Weylin house has made it her home ["it was so much like coming home it scared me"] and she must remind herself that it is not a safe place for her: "I could recall feeling relief at seeing the house, feeling that I had come home. And having to stop and correct myself, remind myself that I was in an alien, dangerous place, I could recall being surprised that I would come to think of such a place as home" (190). Home becomes more than a place in *Kindred*, it becomes a site for self-definition where Dana can both find as well as lose her self. Ashraf Rushdy has suggested that "[f]or Dana, it also marks the place between present relations with Kevin and past relations with Rufus" (140).

The definition of home is therefore also extended to wherever Dana feels in control of her relation to her husband, her body and sexuality. Toward the end of the novel, Dana considers how her perception of the Weylin house has changed. The paradoxical feelings of connection to a place where she has experienced so much pain leads to questions about the American institution of home and the importance attributed to having a home. Holmgren has suggested that the Weylin house serves as a chronotype of white, male power (162). Whenever Dana has disobeyed Rufus, he tells her to “get in the house and stay there,” signaling that Rufus’s authority becomes exceedingly connected to his house as he grows older (239). Dana also believes that talking to Rufus was “like talking to the wall of the house” (238). When returning to Maryland in the twentieth century, Dana finds that “[t]he house was dust, like Rufus” (262; Holmgren 166). The couple’s new house in California seems exceedingly unwelcoming at every return and as Kevin struggles to re-adapt to 1976 life, he mutters: “If I’m not home yet, maybe I don’t have a home” (190). Caught between their lives in the 1830s and 1976, Dana and Kevin are displaced, unable to deal with the normal routines of modern life and Dana contemplates why: “I felt as if I was loosing my place here in my own time. Rufus’s time was a sharper, stronger reality. The work was harder, the smells and tastes were stronger, the danger was greater, the pain was worse . . .” (191). In substituting her present life with the Maryland past, Dana becomes gradually more confused and powerless. Both she and Kevin’s sense of place and identity are in the process of changing.

Identity is strongly connected to time and place. People define who they are based on their surroundings, the time and place in which they live, their profession, their lovers, and their family. Dana is a modern-day, integrated, independent women. She has rejected her family in favor of Kevin, and she has no children. Before she meets Kevin the lack of positive family ties makes her feel “lonely and out of place” (52). She has buried herself in the twentieth century quest for success, “hoping to ignore the void she feels as a result of what

she lacks” (Campbell 1). Initially, Dana’s race is not disclosed to the reader. The fact that she is African American is not revealed until page twenty-five, when Dana says “I’m a black woman” (25). We are later informed that she married Kevin, a white, slightly older man against her aunt and uncle’s wishes, and she has thus disconnected from them. Dana’s conception of her own identity is based on her profession as a writer. She is used to creating narratives of other people’s lives. She also defines herself based on her relationship with Kevin, her intellectually “kindred spirit” (57). Dana’s interest in her family and of African Americans in slavery is rather limited until she is forced to educate herself by narrating her own slave story. Believing that she is an autonomous subject in control of her life, Dana must re-define who she is through her narrative. Ricoeur has suggested that

Our own existence cannot be separated from the account we can give of ourselves. It is in telling our own stories that we give ourselves an identity. We recognize ourselves in the stories that we tell about ourselves. It makes very little difference whether these stories are true or false, fiction as well as verifiable history provides us with an identity (qtd. in Kerby 41).

Dana’s sense of self is generated through her retrospective narrative, through her own recounting and hence understanding of herself (Kerby 41).

The hierarchies of race and gender are expressed through the power struggles and interracial relationships in the novel. The most obvious power struggle is developed between Dana and Rufus Weylin. However, Dana’s white husband Kevin is also a part of the hierarchy. In modern day L.A., the couple have a fairly balanced relationship. Christine Levecq has claimed that the couple’s relationship is a symbol of “the race and gender communion that history is supposed to be progressing toward” (538). There are, however, issues related to this communion that appear problematic, not only to the reader, but seemingly also to Dana, who struggles to justify her love for Kevin once they become residents at the Weylin plantation. The marriage between the black, young woman and the white, older fiction writer adds to the emphasis on past versus present and the complicated

relationship between master and slave in the novel. When living together in present-day Los Angeles, Kevin's marriage proposal signals his view of women: "Yeah, don't you want to marry me? He grinned. "I'd let you type all my manuscripts" (109). He also repeatedly tries to convince Dana to do some typing for him, which she refuses. She is later offended by Kevin's suggestion that she should quit her job and let him support her, which would limit her independence and perhaps also her possibilities of becoming a successful writer (108). These episodes might seem like minor incidents. Nevertheless, they are symbolic of Dana's resistance to be controlled by her husband and, initially, also by Rufus. Her oppositional behavior towards her husband is contrasted by her subsequent obedience as a slave, especially after she has received a severe beating. Later, Dana takes care of Tom Weylin's correspondence, thus performing a secretarial function she earlier refused to do for her husband.

In the 1976 setting, the couple's romance, and ultimately their ceremony in Las Vegas without friends or family, seems restricted and in a way hidden. Their love seems to be based on equality, respect and restraint, the total opposite of Rufus's violent love for Alice. The dialogue between Dana and Kevin is marked by scepticism from Dana. When one of their alcoholic co-worker mocks them, claiming they should "write some poor-nography together", Dana tries to hide her contempt by "breathing as shallowly as possible" (54). The co-worker's comment about "chocolate and vanilla porn" underscores the unpleasant reactions facing an interracial couple in 1976 (56). Initially, Dana seems sceptical towards Kevin and his flirting. It appears that she rather unwillingly falls in love with him. Their courtship is not given much narrative space and their second date is described casually as "a good evening" (57). The following love scene is described a posteriori without romantic details.

Dana's narrative about her past life with Kevin functions as repeated analepsis, providing background information on Kevin and Dana's life together, all the while unraveling

problems related to their careers and traditional gender patterns which create tension in their relationship. The background information establishes a challenging relationship in the eyes of the reader, and eventually also in Dana's. It seems as though Dana to a certain extent resents her husband because of his whiteness and his lack of understanding of his wife's, as well as his own, historical background. Reed claims that "though Dana knows Kevin is a compassionate, fair-minded man, a part of her cannot see beyond his whiteness. This irrational part of her leads her to hold him responsible for every injustice committed by a white person against a black" (70). When Dana is confronted by her concerned cousin after she has been beaten, Kevin is mistakenly suspected of the crime, him being her husband as well as racial superior, although it is in fact Tom Weylin who has abused her. In this way "Butler's imagery merges the white slaveholders with Kevin" (Long 466). Dana continues to compare Kevin with Rufus and other white men throughout the novel. When waking up in present time Dana mistakes Kevin for a white patroller and punches him in the eye. She also compares his acquired southern dialect to that of the Weylin masters'.

Dana's relationship to a white man is mirrored by Tom and Rufus Weylin's relationship with the slave women, a connotation which makes her uncomfortable. She cannot help but to link Tom and Rufus Weylin's violent behavior and abuse with Kevin, and his similarity with Tom Weylin further complicates her feelings towards her husband. Dana even compares Kevin's appearance to that of Weylin senior, claiming that their eyes have the same paleness to them; "distant and angry," eyes used "to intimidate people" (90). This notion is also strengthened by Dana's guilt for sleeping in Kevin's room. In an attempt to restore normalcy in their relationship, Dana moves into Kevin's room, only to realize that it further alienates her from her fellow slaves, in addition to provoking Margaret Weylin. When encountering Tom Weylin in the hall, she feels as though she is "doing something shameful, happily playing whore for my supposed owner" and walks away "feeling uncomfortable"

(97). Weylin, on the other hand, “almost smiled – . . . And he winked” (97). Weylin’s reaction signals that a sexual relationship between a white man and a slave woman is common practice and can therefore be tolerated. Even though Dana remains in control of her sexuality she cannot help but feel like a prostitute for sleeping with Kevin. Subsequently, Kevin becomes Margaret Weylin’s love interest, a desire that further complicates Dana and Kevin’s relationship on the farm and leads Margaret to call Dana “a filthy, black whore” for sleeping in Kevin’s room (93).

Margaret Weylin is the only white woman in the novel. Her lack of solidarity with the slave women is caused by her lack of influence in her own household. Treated as a feeble, hysterical child, Margaret Weylin sees the women of her house as possible threats to her assumed authority. The slave women are the only ones Margaret can exploit, harass and punish. Despite her knowledge that some of the slave women are her husband’s concubines, her loyalty lies with the slave master, not with the female slaves. By keeping her position, Margaret Weylin supports the institution of slavery. Seeing Weylin’s offspring run around “her” house only adds to her unstable behavior and consequently leads her to treat all the slave women with disgust. This lack of female solidarity substantiates Butler’s versatile portrayal of women.

I would argue that one of the main objectives of the novel is to show how easily one can be made a slave. Initially, Dana’s conception of the ideology of slavery is naïve. That is until she witnesses some children play slaves and slaveholders at a make-believe slave auction: “The ease. Us, the children . . . I never realized how easily people could be trained to accept slavery” (101). Butler has stated that the novel was written as a reaction to black people who were annoyed at prior generations for not having improved conditions for African Americans faster. As a result, she wanted to “take a person from today and send that person back to slavery” (Kenan 496). By complicating the relationship between Rufus and Dana,

Butler highlights the position of not only slave women, but abused women in general, and their anguish at having to relate to an oppressor knowing that their lives are never sacred. This psychological battle is further complicated by Dana's race, her awareness of historical facts and her own committed relationship to a white man.

Both Dana and Kevin struggle with the power dynamics related to their marriage and its effects in 1824. Dana's main concern with regards to her husband is his lack of understanding and critique of the routines of beating on the Weylin farm. She states that she is afraid that "a place like this would endanger [Kevin,] in a way I didn't want to talk to him about. If he was stranded here for years some part of this place would rub off on him" (77). Her suspicion is strengthened after Kevin expresses his rather naïve interest in the development of the country at the time and states that "this could be a great time to live in" (97). Kevin can be claimed to "minimize the brutality of the [slave] system," since he is not a participant in the daily routines, never sleeps in their quarters or witnesses the beatings (Levecq 539). His existence is practically carefree, due to the color of his skin color and the fact that he is a man. His existence is not threatened unless he himself jeopardizes it. Additionally, Dana struggles with her own sense of complacency, since she receives better treatment than the other slaves

Butler accelerates the pace of the story by devoting a short segment of the text to a long period of time. The narrator and focalizer remain trapped in L.A. for a few days worrying about her husband, whereas in Maryland five years pass by. "Ordinarily, the most important events or conversations are given in detail (i.e. decelerated), whereas the less important ones are compressed (i.e. accelerated)" (Rimmon-Kenan 53). This is not always the case, as one can see in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. The first chapter of the novel takes place during only one day, but spans dozens of pages, from the perspective of multiple characters. The next chapter, entitled "Time passes", covers ten years filled with important

events in the lives of the characters, in addition to war and death, but only constitutes a few pages in the novel. Butler accelerates Kevin's experiences, so that while Dana stays in L.A and Maryland for only a few months, Kevin is trapped in the past for five years. This narrative grip includes Kevin in the history making process and demonstrates the individual's influence in shaping history. Due to his position as a white man Kevin is able to help run-away slaves by working as an abolitionist. In this way, Butler speeds up the historical process while all the same complicating Dana's life when she returns to find Kevin gone. The separation is an attempt to force both Dana and Kevin to communicate and learn each other's history through lived experience and to "accept the results of the interaction of their ancestors, which, in turn, helps them understand the power dynamics informing their [own] relationship" (Paulin 179). Butler has rather mischievously declared that Dana was given a white husband in order to "complicate her life", signalling the challenges, but still possibility of an interracial marriage in 1976 versus the impossibility of one in 1824 (Kenan 497).

The headstrong Dana of 1976 and the obedient slave in Maryland are clearly contrasted in order to emphasize the differences in self-reliance and behavior. In 1976 Dana at times appear cynical, with a lack of sensibility and vulnerability and as a result, may appear rather unsympathetic. Paulin has suggested that "the intellectualization of the couple's relationship reinforces the notion that a relationship between a black woman and a white man is acceptable only if in the abstract" (179). The relationship between Dana and Kevin seems abstract in that they share the intellectual profession of creative writing. In their first scene together they are placing books in shelves in their new, shared apartment. The new start is mirrored by the new insight the couple must gain in order to maintain their relationship. Dana states that "together, we never would have fitted into either of our apartments. Kevin once suggested that I get rid of some of my books so that I'd fit into his place" (108). Kevin seems eager to make Dana fit into the image he has created of her. When first arriving in Maryland,

Kevin responds to Rufus's question if Dana belongs to him with the answer: "In a way. She's my wife", a somewhat disturbing statement (60). Kevin obviously believes, as he did at the beginning of the story that Dana belongs to him (Rushdy 150). She later states that "he had only half understood me" (246). Both writers make attempts at writing about their experiences, hoping that it will enable them to recreate a sense of place and home. However, they are both unable to articulate themselves in writing. I believe Butler's point is that only through communicative exchange can white and black Americans come to terms with the past and with the institution of slavery. Since writing is an isolating activity for them both, Dana and Kevin need to communicate with each other through dialogue in order to deal with their sense of place in history.

The female characters of the novel struggle with claiming eroticism as a mechanism for their personal empowerment. Dana and Kevin's relationship lacks passion and spontaneity. I would suggest that with such an important historical theme, perhaps, Butler is afraid of saying too much. One could suspect Butler of omitting sexual details and passionate display of emotions in order to avoid the cliché of the hypersexual black woman, based on white, historical interpretation and the creation of slave myths concerning black women's sexuality. Collins holds that because black women were regarded as "whores" in antebellum time, white women were made "virgins" (145). She further suggests that "this race/gender nexus fostered a situation whereby White men could then differentiate between the sexualized woman-as-body who is dominated and "screwed" and the asexual woman-as-pure-spirit who is idealized and brought home to mother" (qtd. in Collins 145). The lack of focus on sexual relations could be an attempt to avoid stereotyping the black woman as a hypersexual being, especially when in a relationship with a white man. Sex is thus mostly connected with something negative, especially in the relationship between Rufus and Alice. In order to clearly contrast the relationship between Kevin and Dana with that between Alice and Rufus, Butler

deemphasizes sexuality from the former and transforms it into a destructive force in the latter. Unlike her great-great grandmother, Dana is in a consensual relationship and is never forced into sexual relations. When returning to the present with Kevin after he has been gone for five years Dana initiates a sexual reunion with her husband. I agree with Angelyn Mitchell who suggests that this rekindling of their sexual relationship functions as an act of liberation for Dana (56). In order to ground her self in present time and reclaim power over her own sexuality, Dana ignores the pain of her bruised body and has sexual intercourse with Kevin who was “so careful, so fearful of hurting me. He did hurt me, of course. I had known he would, but it didn’t matter. We were safe. He was home” (190). Sexuality thus functions as a liberatory device for Dana. Because her bruised body constantly reminds her of suppression she must regain control over it. In this scene, her power over her body is expressed through her sexuality.

Dana’s ambivalent relationship to Rufus as he grows older becomes psychologically troublesome when considering his attitude towards women. In dealing with this emotional connection, Butler blurs the distinction between progenitor and possible sexual object. Even though Rufus knows Dana is married and his great-great grand-daughter, his lust for and interest in her continues to develop throughout the novel, eventually becoming a major threat to Dana’s body and mind. Subsequent to Tom Weylin’s death Dana regains her access to the Weylin library, a considerable collection of books accumulated by Tom Weylin’s first wife Hannah. In the library she shares some of her most intimate moments with Rufus. The library is originally a male domain, a source of knowledge and education, thus prohibited to the women in the house. Nevertheless, Dana occasionally manages to stay alone there, writing “things because I couldn’t say then, couldn’t sort out my feelings about them, couldn’t keep them bottled up inside me. It was a kind of writing I always destroyed afterward. It was for no

one else. Not even Kevin” (252). Dana clearly exercises a male, white privilege by retreating to a study, a room of her own and hence, a private interior self (Holmgren 170).

The obvious power dynamics of the novel, which are those of black versus white, as well as man versus woman, are severely disrupted by the close relationship between Dana and Rufus. Paulin has rightly suggested that the two share a “mysterious bond that releases them, at least temporarily, from the race and gender-based hierarchy of power which governs the relations between blacks and whites, men and women” (181). This bond, however, is fragile. Long has claimed that “Dana loves Rufus despite his cruelties,” making a “compelling case for the inherently interracial and incestuous nature of the American national family, and for the intricate web of love, pride, need, self-loathing, and coercion that bind the fates of kindred folk” (Levecq 469). Even though this statement is strong, there might be some truth to it. Spurned by her family for marrying Kevin, Dana is eager to attribute Rufus, another white man, with sympathetic qualities. It may seem as though she desperately wants to shape him in a positive image. By attempting to change Rufus, Dana is also attempting to influence and change history, a dilemma that will endanger her own existence. Still, she is never able to hate Rufus; instead she contemplates the possibility of planting ideas in his head that might eventually free the slaves. When telling Kevin about her plans, he warns, “You’re gambling. Hell, you’re gambling against history” (Reed 67).

Dana shortly realizes the irony of her role as a mentor for Rufus: “I was the worst possible guardian for him – a black to watch over him in a society that considered blacks to be subhuman, a woman to watch over him in a society that considered women perennial children” (68). Dana cannot help but to identify Rufus’s suffering under the whip of his father with the suffering of the slaves, hoping that his insight will eventually turn him into the sympathetic white man she envisions. Unfortunately, Rufus does not fulfil her hopes. When Dana tries to leave with Kevin, Rufus will not let her. As with his other slaves, he has come to

view Dana as his property. After Hagar is conceived, Rufus sells Sam out of sheer jealousy. When Dana tries to prevent it, he hits her: “And it was a mistake. It was the breaking of an unspoken agreement between us – a very basic agreement – and he knew it” (239). This incident makes Dana realize that despite their mysterious bond of trust, she has lost her grip on Rufus.

The notion of a love-hate relationship between master and slave is also detectable in the descriptions of the other slaves in the novel. Dana even comments on this prior to the birth of Hagar: “Strangely, they seemed to like him, hold him in contempt, and fear him all at the same time. This confused me because I felt just about the same mixture of emotions for him myself” (229-330). It would be controversial to suggest that Dana feels more connected to Rufus than to her own husband; nevertheless slavery does offer a variety of psychological and emotional complexities that one cannot possibly understand without having taken part in it.

As Rufus grows older his interaction with Dana is gradually characterized by fear, threats and attempts at manipulation from both sides. Their relationship is initially eased by the fact that Rufus’s best friend, and later the mother of his children, Alice, is a black girl and Rufus’s openness towards Dana even lets her convince him to drop the word nigger when talking about blacks (25). Dana’s color and sex is mainly a problem for Tom Weylin who “don’t want no niggers ‘round here talking better than [him], putting freedom ideas in [their] heads” (74). Consequently, the fact that Dana claims she is from a free state and speaks as though she has received some education appears to Weylin as a threat to the atmosphere of the plantation and the continued oppression of the slaves. Rufus later tells Dana that his father thought she was “the kind of black who watches and thinks and makes trouble,” signalling the difference between her and the seemingly obedient slaves on his plantation (255). Weylin’s attitude toward his slaves is that they are non-human, not deserving basic items like food, hot water, or decent clothing. They are basically animals who need to be tamed. It shortly

becomes clear that Rufus has adopted the same attitude when he refers to Alice's boyfriend, Isaac as a "buck nigger" (123).

Dana is attributed with several so-called masculine or male qualities. Her gender, passion and sexuality are, as mentioned before, continuously de-emphasized. In order to stand out from the other female slaves, who wear long dresses; she decides to wear pants each time she returns to Maryland. At one point, she even states that if she is lucky, she will perhaps be able to pass for a man, leaving her less vulnerable for patrollers and other whites. By dressing as a man, Dana also embraces the traditional, masculine qualities of her personality, such as her courage and independence. She initially believes that she will have the physical ability to fight back if attacked. Dana also believes that if forced, she will be able to kill an attacker by using a knife she has brought from home. Her survival instincts are those normally connected to men or hunters. Later, when forced to wear a dress, she immediately conforms to the role of obedient slave, bustling about the plantation, performing duties normally associated with women, such as cooking and cleaning. She also begins to feel safe in the cookhouse and takes a fatal risk when attempting to teach the children how to read.

As a slave, Dana eventually takes on several tasks she abhorred prior to her Maryland experience. She assumes the role of a teacher when trying to teach Nigel and some of the other children how to read; she becomes a nurse on several occasions, helping Rufus heal his broken leg and later, Alice's mangled body. She also performs a secretarial function, writing letters for both Rufus and Tom Weylin. Ironically enough, these are all occupations she had earlier repudiated. Butler "fictive appraisal of traditionally female occupations offers real socio-economic commentary on how patriarchy shaped and continues to shape the lives of black women in both centuries" (Mitchell 57). The blue-collar "slave market" Dana works in before she meets Kevin serves as an ironic reminder of continuous socio-economical discrimination toward African Americans of a certain class.

Rufus and Alice's relationship serves as a foil to that of Dana and Kevin. Having grown up as friends, Rufus destroys all possibilities of a loving union with Alice when he rapes her for the first time. Despite Alice's background as daughter of a free woman, she is bought by Rufus and as a consequence, belongs to him. Her body is subjected to beatings, enforced sexual relations and she gives birth to four children by Rufus. His view of slaves as animals is interlinked with the fact that Rufus "never articulates the nature of his desire for Alice, he only demands that he has the right to possess her" (Paulin 185). When Dana later claims that she cannot advise Alice and says: "It's your body", Alice answers: "Not mine, his. He paid for it, didn't he?" (167). As the story progresses, the sexual lust in Rufus leads him to tell Dana that she needs to convince Alice to sleep with him voluntarily, unless she wants to be beaten. After she has been forced to have sex with Rufus, Alice "adjusted, became a quieter more subdued person. She didn't kill, but she seemed to die a little" (169). By being forced to give up her body to Rufus, Alice no longer functions as an individual. Exempt of the power to control her body, Alice loses her sense of self-worth. Unable to discuss with Rufus, Alice can only let her frustrations out on the other slave women, among them Dana.

Dana struggles throughout the novel with forming friendships and gaining the trust of the other slaves. From the beginning, she is perceived as Rufus's messenger, as the "white nigger" who helps "white folks keep niggers down" according to Alice (160: 167). Because of her close relationship with Rufus, Dana operates in a grey area with regards to her race and she is difficult to define. By calling her a white nigger, Alice melts the two binaries together, forming a new identity Dana struggles to accept. By remaining loyal to her progenitor, Dana is seemingly betraying her own "family", the slaves. This results in an increased skepticism toward her. Through her recurring visits to the past, however, the reader is introduced to a group of women all having a function in Dana's life and helping to secure her survival. Even though Dana seemingly does not appear as a victim in the story, she constantly feels lost,

weak and cowardly. She finds solace in listening to the talk of the slaves and “fight her way through their accents to find out how they survived” (94). Dana shortly realizes that Sarah and the other women “without even knowing it, prepared me to survive” (94). Sarah even “spoke to Marse Tom” for Dana, in order to defend her ignorance for women’s slave work. Through a communicative exchange Dana’s survival is ensured. Beverly Friend claims that “contemporary women are not educated to survive”, Dana is in fact “as helpless, perhaps even more helpless, than her predecessors (qtd. in Shinn 211). Dana’s sense of helplessness is strengthened when she returns to find Kevin gone.

Dana is a modern-day woman with a habit of wearing pants and keeping her hair short. Her appearance suggests that she could be seen as rather androgynous. She does not have children and thus does not strike the reader as an explicitly feminine or nurturing woman. Yet, Dana becomes a bona fide mother figure as a slave. Not only does she assume the role of mentor for Rufus, she also controls the death and rebirths of her ancestors. In ensuring their, and her own, survival, Dana becomes an ancestral mother herself. When nursing Alice after her escape, Alice, in her semiconscious condition, repeatedly calls Dana “Mama” (153). Dana describes taking care of Alice as taking “care of a very young child, incontinent, barely aware of us” (153). Like the Magistrate in Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Dana tries to interpret and decipher Alice by healing her scars and dog bites. Slowly, the women grow closer. The healing process thus functions as a learning process for Dana, as Alice’s mangled body with its scarifications becomes a site for her historical interpretation (Rushdy 138). Her own body is subsequently exposed to the same dismembering, allowing her to use it for remembering and narrating her own story. Later, in an angry fit, Alice accuses Dana of wanting to run the house and take over responsibility for her children: “they be calling you mammy in a few years” (167). By assuming a role as Rufus’s helper, Dana is naturally seen as a concubine by the other slaves. The fact that she is married to Kevin does not improve her

standing with the female slaves. To them, having a loving relationship with a white man is unrealistic.

The female slaves depicted in the novel are treated with contempt by the field slaves because of their special positions in the Weylin household. They have all gained certain advantages depending on what they can offer the slave masters, advantages that exempt them from working in the fields. As long as they perform whatever duties are requested of them without making trouble, they may “receive fewer whippings, temporarily avoid being raped or sold, and receive sufficient food” (Paulin 183). The female slaves depicted in the novel are all performing a specific function due to their interaction with the slave masters. In her portrayal of the slave women Butler makes use of several feminine archetypes; the most obvious one is the character of Sarah. She is one of many women who has been raped and subsequently used as a slave incubator, producing sons who have later been sold. Tom Weylin has kept her under control by letting her keep one daughter to care for and protect. Deprived of all power over her own body, including the power to decide who to sleep with and who to have children with, Sarah serves as the Uncle Tom Negro, with no conception or dream of a life in freedom. As some sort of reward for her loyalty, she is given control over the cooking, administering food for the master and his family, as well as for the slaves.

In contrast, Carrie, the mute daughter of Sarah, can be seen as having a better life than many of the other slave women, since her disability makes her undesirable as a sex partner for the slave masters. Neither does she pose a threat to Margaret Weylin, since “she doesn’t have anything Miss Margaret wants”, and she is therefore treated better than those of the slave women who are sexually attractive to the white slave owner (95). Thus, Carrie is the only woman in the novel who is able to explore her own sexuality through genuine intimacy with a fellow slave and subsequently establish a family of her own, temporarily sheltered from the harassment and beatings. Still, the distribution of privileges and power gradually “perpetuates

the inequality among the slaves and weakens the slave community as a whole”, leaving the slaves more vulnerable to external repression (Paulin 184).

Due to her special position in the Weylin household, Dana struggles with guilt throughout the novel. Her role in securing the survival of Hagar means sacrificing Alice and hiding the truth from Rufus. After she has been away from Kevin for what to him is five long years, he asks her if Rufus has hurt her whereupon she denies that he has. Kevin does not seem to believe her. Dana feels guilty for not being beaten. She also feels guilty towards the other slaves because she is treated better and she struggles with her feelings towards Kevin for placing him in a complicated position. After her attempt to escape from the plantation she feels guilty for having failed. She also feels guilty for sacrificing Alice in order to secure the birth of Hagar. When Alice hangs herself in the barn, Dana shortly after copies the suicide and cuts her wrists. Guilt consequently functions as a catalyst for female behavior.

Alice and Dana serves as foils to each other, each having an important position in Rufus’s life because of their differences. The two women represent a Madonna/Whore dichotomy, where Dana is the intellectually stimulating conversational partner, whereas Alice must satisfy Rufus’s sexual needs. In Rufus’s twisted mind, Dana becomes the white woman with whom he can converse for hours, whereas he needs Alice to fulfil his sexual needs. Nancy Jesser has suggested that Alice and Dana’s experiences are contrasted in order to “empirically” test the experiences of an African American woman (38). Jesser’s biological approach to Butler’s fiction suggests that Alice and Dana both exhibit a need to over-ride their self-interest and act for the good of their children and kin because of their genetics. Only when they have exhausted all other possibilities do they contemplate “selfish” acts like suicide (Jesser 38).

One could claim that Rufus loves Alice, “to her misfortune” but that his love for her is doomed because of the fact that “there was no shame in raping a black woman, but there

could be shame in loving one” (124; Paulin 186). Because of the shame involved, Rufus can never let Alice control their relationship since that would undermine his authority as a man and slave owner. Nor can he marry her, as marriage between interracial couples was prohibited by law. The resemblance between the two women are striking and Rufus even states that they are “only one woman”, a statement Alice later elaborates on by saying “he likes me in bed, and you out of bed, and you and I look alike. That means we’re two halves of the same woman, at least in his crazy head” (229). Dana is much a part of Alice and Rufus’s relationship, despite the fact that she does not sleep with Rufus. She is ultimately the broker of the sexual merger between them.

The notion of sisterhood does not immediately seem applicable to the relationship between Alice and Dana. Life in slavery apparently offers no joined empowerment for women as depicted in *The Color Purple*. Whereas other female characters might unite in sisterhood, friendship or love and manage to escape from abuse and oppression, Alice and Dana never join forces against Rufus, leaving them both open to his manipulation. Their relationship is complicated by Dana’s position as Rufus’s confidante, breakfast partner, and protector. Consequently, Alice sees Dana as an enemy because of her close interaction with whites and her friendship with Rufus. Since Dana appears as a hybrid between a black and a white woman, she is indefinable to Alice and she expresses her confusion with regards to Dana by calling her “white nigger” (160).

Dana’s obvious affection for Kevin is interpreted as a betrayal to the rest of the slave women, who are forced to have relations with the masters. Her apparently consensual sexual relationship with her master makes her an outcast. Alice is of the understanding that Dana has submitted to Kevin, something she, herself, would never do without a fight. She even resents Dana for saving her life, which results in her enslaved position as Rufus’s lover. Nevertheless, when Liza betrays Dana by revealing her escape to Tom Weylin, Alice is responsible for

Liza's punishment by severely beating her. Later, she nurses Dana during her recovery aided by the other slave women. I would suggest that this act of compassion furthers a closer relationship between the women of the novel. At the same time the roles of power between Alice and Dana are reversed and Alice begins to appreciate Dana's presence, despite her contradictory black/white identity. Furthermore, Alice knows that her life and situation would worsen should Dana disappear or die. She functions as a buffer between Rufus and Alice, preventing Alice from killing Rufus. Unfortunately, she cannot prevent her from killing herself.

The conflicts between the women in *Kindred* differ from the conflicts in the other novels in this thesis. Dana's communication with her fellow slaves is influenced by scepticism and her dialogue with Sarah and Alice is occasionally marked by jealousy and contempt. Leveqc claims that "these alternating struggles and reapproachments" between the women "combined with psychological and physical violence signals the novel's distance from an important paradigm of black women's writing" (545). I would suggest that Dana's survival is ensured because of her elaborate communicative exchange with her fellow slaves. Although the relationships between Dana and the female slaves are not developed to the same extent as in *The Color Purple*, they contribute to highlight the complications involved in African American women's quest for self. I would argue that the portrayal of various female characters is an important part of the novel's strength. In signalling the power mechanisms within the slave community and among the slave women, Butler signifies on the image of women as a homogenous group of friends and the idea of African Americans as always being united. Even though the relationships between the women of the novel are not as affectionate and loving as other fictional characters', they are equally important and representative of black women. Butler seems aware that her historically deeply rooted novel limits the possibilities for happy endings. By allowing the women of the novel to represent their true

motives she also allows for the less positive qualities of personalities and individuals to be projected. I would suggest that the female slaves not only help ensure Dana's survival through communication with her past, but makes her realize that her "family" is in fact the slave community.

After Alice's suicide, Dana finally loses her sympathy with Rufus and realizes that her sense of self is connected to the community she has become a part of; "her 'family' is in the quarters and not in the big house; her sense of family is wrought from a common experience, and is not simply a matter of blood" (Rushdy 147). In addition to her disgust towards Rufus, Dana must suffer the torment of contemplating that she might be raped. Her vulnerable position has made her a sexual object, desired and defenseless. The final murder of Rufus Weylin is necessary because the "nature of their relationship constantly destabilizes their positions as master/slave, friend/enemy, parent/child, and lover/rapist. In order to avoid complete physical destruction and sexual domination Dana must sever their tie" (Paulin 186). In order to avoid rape, Dana must kill Rufus. The symbolic killing resembles that of Eva's killing of Plum, a kernel event in *Sula*. Fear of being raped functions as a catalyst for murder in both novels. After Alice's death, the sexual pressure is transferred to Dana who, scared that she would forgive Rufus for raping her, kills him while he tries to assault her. In order to return to her own life in the present without being raped, or to avoid the psychological defeat of forgiving Rufus for raping her, Dana has no other choice. The killing eventually secures her lineage and possibly her own relationship to her husband.

Long questions Butler's technique when dealing with history and bodily pain and claims that "without the bodily transubstantiation of distant suffering, there is no apprehension of the past" (461). She further claims that "Butler offers up bodily pain as a universal, ahistorical signifier of authenticity" (461). I would argue that apprehension of the history of slavery is exactly what is being problematized by Butler. Hitherto, Dana's

awareness of her ancestors and their struggle to survive has been non-existent. She has not been aware or appreciative of the sacrifices made in order for her to be independent and integrated in modern-day America. In order to face her own history, Dana is transported back in time, subjected to violence, and forced to re-think all her former perceptions of American slavery, its victims and its history. The symbolic loss of her arm serves as a constant reminder of her past, evidence of her experiences and the absence of her ancestors. In a wider context, the missing arm can be compared to other Native and African American narratives involving scarification as signs of belonging to a tribe and as signs of an identity. The loss of Dana's arm is also mirrored by Eva's loss of a leg in *Sula*. Nevertheless, I believe, it is eventually Dana's counter-narrative that becomes the primary source of historical authenticity, whereas her missing arm functions as a symbol of historical absence and her scarred body a symbol of change.

Butler has commented on the loss of Dana's arm by stating that "I couldn't let her come all the way back. I couldn't let her return to what she was, I couldn't let her come back whole and that, I think, really symbolizes her not coming back whole. Antebellum slavery didn't leave people quite whole" (qtd. in Kenan 498). In Dana's case, her body is the only proof of her experiences in Maryland. There are no records of what happened to her friends and family. Ruth Salvaggio has suggested that the loss of Dana's arm becomes "a kind of birthmark", the emblem of a "disfigured heritage" (qtd. in Crossley 267). By losing an arm to the past, Dana sacrifices a physical part of herself, signifying that in order to flesh out a past, one must let go of the present and leave part of one's being there (Rushdy 139). Her missing arm and her scars thus function as evidence of permanent change and as visible, but silent signifiers of identity.

Immediately after her recovery, Dana returns to Maryland in order to search for evidence of her ancestors' existence. She is disappointed when she finds that all the slaves

were sold after Rufus's death and that there are no further records of what happened to them. Old newspapers mention the death of Rufus Weylin as well as a notice of the sale of his slaves, "listed by their first names with their approximate ages and their skills given" (263). Kevin sums up the couple's thoughts about why they returned: "'You probably needed to come for the same reason I did . . . To try to understand. To touch solid evidence that those people existed'" (264). Eventually, what are left of their experiences are her memories and the missing arm. Butler's attempt to make history personal is manifested not only in Dana's mind, in her memory, but also on her body. Kerby sees the narrative subject as an "amalgam of self and body". He further holds that body must be seen as "the enduring locus to which a life history accrues, and hence to which the character of that history is indissolubly associated" (111). Dana's body has now become a site for historical interpretation, a memory of her experiences, and ripe with significance.

Levecq has accused *Kindred* of "rebell[ing] against both black and white texts by not inserting itself into a paradigm of female solidarity" (549). I would argue that the novel is indeed a feminist text even though female solidarity may not be the main theme. Butler manages to create, as well as resolve, issues of female identity in the novel, emphasizing the intricate mechanisms of power between black and white, men and women. Barbara Christian holds that "[i]f we want to be whole, we must recall the past, those parts that we want to remember, those parts that we want to forget" (qtd. in Rushdy 139). As a result, *Kindred* functions as an example of the ongoing process of understanding one self through history. Self-definition is most commonly associated with freedom and with the possibility to define yourself without limitations. What is interesting in *Kindred* and separates it from the other novels of this thesis is that the process of self-definition involves making memory part of history, thus showing how the present continues to shape the past. In Dana's case her self-

definition is cultivated in a closed community, where she is deprived of her earlier notions of freedom. Within the institution of slavery, Dana finds a self that she was not looking for.

Chapter III: *Sula*

I'm interested in characters who are lawless. . . . They make up their lives, or they find out who they are.

(Morrison qtd. in Duvall 1)

Sula, Toni Morrison's second novel, tells the story of the friendship between two young girls, their separation and their attempt to reconcile. The multifaceted novel develops several parallel storylines; however the main one is the relationship between Nel and Sula. Like the other texts in this thesis, *Sula* is a novel about friendship and kinship. In this case the former intertwine with the latter. Despite its initial theme of friendship, the novel is far less altruistic and optimistic than *The Color Purple* and exceeds *Kindred* in violence and deaths. *Sula* is in fact permeated with sadness, tragic and brutal deaths, destruction and deceit. Critics have consequently argued that *Sula* is an anti-war novel (Reddy, 1988), a historical novel attempting to reshape the idea of African American participation in American history (Hunt, 1993), a lesbian novel (Smith, 1998), as well as an allegory of identity (Duvall, 2000).

In keeping with the theme of this thesis, this chapter will focus on the relationship between Sula and Nel, with emphasis on their understanding of self in relation to the other, the awakening of a sexual self, dialogues and monologues as powerful vehicles of expression, as well as Morrison's use of the female artist as image. Critics have seen *Sula* as inspired by parables and myths (Hunt, 1993; LeSeur, 2002). I will thus also tap into Morrison's extensive use of symbolism. In the relationship between Nel and Sula, their budding sexuality unites them as they grown up. Ironically, it is a sexual encounter that later drives them apart. Sula's

sexual betrayal leads to a collapse in the communicative exchange between the former friends, as well as between Sula and her surrounding community. In a society where dialogue and talk function as the main vehicles of communication, Sula's action-driven behavior alienates her from her community and having exhausted all the perspectives, she dies.

Sula tells the story of Nel and Sula and their lives in the African American neighborhood the Bottom in Medallion, Ohio from approximately 1919 to 1965. The novel also covers the lives of several other characters, making it difficult to establish a main character. As Deborah E. has suggested, Morrison implicitly critiques such concepts as "protagonist", "hero" and "major character" by emphatically decentering and deferring the presence of Sula, the title character ("The Self" 80). Not only is the reader denied a central character, the novel also "denies the whole notion of character as static essence, replacing it with the idea of character as process" (McDowell, "The Self" 81). As we shall see, the novel blurs the distinction between the characters of Nel and Sula, allowing continued development for one part of the self, while the other perish. The process of becoming as well as the process of losing self proves to be extremely pertinent in the novel. The novel thus functions as a work in progress, and its evaluation of its characters and of good and evil can be seen as "an ongoing and potentially indefinite activity" (Nissen 277). In *Sula*, the title character eventually dies alone, alienated from family and community, and abandoned by her childhood friend. The purpose of this chapter is to show how the female individual's loss of communication with her self, her friend and the surrounding community results in her death. The loss of self leads to Sula's actual death mid-novel, whereas the symbolically dead Nel finally moves on after twenty-eight years of denying the loss of her childhood friend.

Of the novel's most remarkable narrative features are its multiple characters and complex focalizers. According to Axel Nissen, the novel's narrator functions as both omniscient and figural (271). The implied narrator shines most clearly through in the

character of Eva Peace, whose supremacy is largely undisputed by the narrator. Nissen further holds that “classical signs of the narrator’s omniscience in *Sula* are her prophetic powers (“It was the last as well as the first time [Nel] was ever to leave Medallion” [29]); her ability to foreshadow (“after 1910 Eva didn’t willingly set foot on the stairs but once and that was to light a fire” [37]), (“Yet there was one time. . . when she held on to a mood for weeks, but even that was in defense of Nel” [53]), and her ability to pass in and out of various minds at will” (271). The novel has a total of six focalizers. Keeping in mind the main storyline, however, it is Sula and Nel who are the important focalizers of the action (Nissen 271).

The novel’s structure is episodic and focuses on major incidents in the lives of Sula and Nel. Each chapter marks pivotal events in history, as well as in the Wright and Peace households. Headed by years from 1919 to 1965, these “allusive, broad dates serve as public markers for the narratives of private loves and griefs” (Grewal 44). The episodic structure emphasizes Morrison’s focus on the lives of her characters paralleled by important historical events. Robert Grant claims that the novel engages on the structural and thematic levels memory, dialectic, and discontinuity. These characteristics have formed part of the discussion on *The Color Purple* and *Kindred* in the preceding chapters of this thesis. Grant further suggests that *Sula* is in “form and content ‘about’ gaps, lacks, missing subjects, and physic space, all of which must be filled by the reader” (94). I would argue that such a reader-response approach to Morrison’s novel fails to acknowledge the importance of the gaps and the missing subjects in the text. Phillip Novak has rightly suggested that “some absences are just absences and should be reckoned as such” (190). I agree that the plot does indeed evolve around multiple characters that go away, return after long periods of time, die or disappear. These characters are, as we shall see, missed, remembered, hated and sanctified.

Morrison has stated that she “wanted Sula to be missed by the reader. That’s why she dies early. There’s a lot of book after she dies, you know. I wanted them to miss her presence

in that book as that town missed her presence” (Morrison qtd. in Novak 191). I would argue that the latter part of *Sula* functions as a eulogy, not only over Sula, but over African American culture and way of life. Hence, the process of mourning becomes an ongoing activity that should not be terminated, since doing so would close up the gaps and devour the missing subjects of African American history. By allowing her characters to mourn their losses, Morrison’s therapeutic approach celebrates African American culture.

Regarding the multiple time gaps of the novel, the boldest ellipsis is that between 1927 and 1937; an extensive gap in terms of actual time. However, within the time and space of the novel, the ten years in which Sula and Nel are separated are not nearly as important as the five years they spend together as girlfriends prior to the separation. Nel and Sula are physically separated in 1927 when Nel marries Jude and their separation is complete when Sula sleeps with Jude ten years after. Gurleen Grewal has suggested that “historic time is best understood through the duration of private lives, where personal experience acquires its significance only within a historical process” (44). The six decades in which the narrative takes place are first and foremost important to Nel, Sula and the community of the Bottom. Nevertheless, National Suicide Day “becomes a more significant marker of time in the Bottom than the historic events toward which the dates that differentiate the sections of *Sula* gesture” (Wall 169). Even though the novel is influenced by significant historical events, the World Wars and the Depression become less important in the Bottom and in the lives of Sula and Nel than their private struggles.

Historically, African American communities have been, and still are, subjected to organized racism through destruction of neighborhoods, launched by politicians with a love for renewal plans. The Bottom thus functions as a fictional symbol of any black neighborhood in any town in America during the period in question; the novel’s prologue establishes the setting by telling the story of its destruction. Shortly, one realizes that the future of the Bottom

is already foreclosed. The segregated neighborhood no longer exists; it has been eliminated in order to make room for an exclusive golf course. Arguably, lyrical descriptions of something that at the time of narration no longer exists contribute to the epic beginning of the story. Nevertheless, as the story progresses it becomes evident that the destruction of the Bottom is caused not only by external forces, but also by internal negligence and ignorance.

In developing a concept of self-definition for African American women, the conceptualization of self has been distinctive (Collins 113). The autonomous self has traditionally been nurtured and developed within family and community, a tradition Nel follows meticulously and Sula denies categorically. Historically, women have been perceived as the Other, whereas man is seen as Self. Women remain objects, while men are subjects. To which extent this distinction is useful when discussing African American literature is debatable since it is the African American man who traditionally has been labeled as the other in relation to the white man as self. Thus, the focus of African American literary discourse has been on racial discrimination of the black man. Consequently, the black female has been subordinate in all discourses on blackness and can be seen as the double other. It would be safe to say that the 'face' of the race, the 'speaking subject', has long been considered male (McDowell, "The Self" 79). I would claim that *Sula* offers a harsh, but realistic example of the attempt to create a self outside of society and the difficulties involved in attempting to do so. Hortense Spillers professes that in analyzing *Sula* "no Manichean analysis demanding a polarity of interests – black/white, male/female, good/bad will do" (qtd. in McDowell 80). The novel does transcend the polarities of good and evil. One should not, however, dismiss the importance of Nel and Sula's creation of self, and the importance of both characters in developing the so-called moral of the narrative, namely that the distinction between who is good and who is evil proves difficult to determine. Allegedly, like all other binaries, the self

cannot exist without the other, and with the loss of her friendship with Nel, Sula also loses her self and dies.

Sula is a woman-centered novel in that it deals with female relationships and matriarchal families. Grewal professes that “the novel parallels two distinct matrilineal genealogies of class and color” (47). Eva, Hannah and Sula Peace are representative of working-class history. The light skinned Rochelle, Helene Wright and Nel Wright Greene “represent the bourgeois ascendance from and disavowal of subaltern black origins rendered shameful and inaccessible by the bourgeois morality of domesticity and respectability” (47). Morrison goes to great lengths to describe the matriarchal influence on the characters of Nel and Sula. In doing so she also establishes a moral backdrop for the African American community of the Bottom in general, and the Wright and Peace families in particular.

Nel is introduced prior to Sula through the story of her mother, Helene Wright, the daughter of a Creole prostitute, who was brought up by her grandmother “under the dolesome eyes of a multicolored Virgin Mary” (17). Helene meticulously follows her grandmother’s advice to be “constantly on guard for any sign of her mother’s wild blood” and attempts to inculcate into Nel the same ideas of propriety and orderliness (17; Bjork 60). The Wrights’ journey down South serves as a rite of passage, as Nel witnesses the symbolic decapitation and public humiliation of her, thus far, flawless mother. Contemplating this experience, Nel decides to “be on guard—always, “to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly” (29). Although her awakening to the harsh reality of black women leads her to re-think her life, Nel will eventually follow the same track as her mother, and the trip “was the last as well as the first time she was ever to leave Medallion” (29). Sula is subsequently introduced as a girl Nel “never played with, because her mother said that Sula’s mother was sooty” (29). Bjork suggests that the antithesis to Helene Wright’s oppressive neatness is the bedlam of the Peace

house, where men pass in and out, but never stay for long (63). With the exception of BoyBoy, Eva and Hannah love all men, and “it was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters” (41). By witnessing her mother’s active love life and multiple affairs, Sula is raised with an awareness of female sexuality, which taught her that “sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable” (44). Consequently, this easy-going attitude will permeate all her subsequent sexual relationships with men and will eventually separate her from the only self she ever knew, videlicet Nel.

Female friendship has long traditions in Western literature. Long before “Chloe liked Olivia,” the mysterious bond between women, sexual or non-sexual was confined to diaries, poems and personal letters (Woolf 81). The term romantic friendship is now commonly used about such friendships between women. In terms of Nel and Sula the term girlfriend would be more appropriate, since “girl” is a term most commonly used when referring to young women belonging to a certain age group. The term is also appropriate in the sense that it limits their close relationship from the ages of twelve to seventeen when they both establish separate, new lives as young women. “Girlfriend” is also a slang expression deriving from African American culture, most commonly used by women about their female friends. Kevin Quashie claims that the concept of a girlfriend is an intimate (though often not sexual) friend of the same sex with whom one has a deep connection (190). When Sula and Nel first meet at the age of twelve, they are instantly melted together. They consequently grow up feeling as two halves of one girl, despite of their different backgrounds and obvious physical differences.

Naana Banyiwa-Horne holds that “the convergence of their divided selves creates in Sula and Nel a singular identity that becomes a ‘balanced, healthy personality’” (qtd. in Bjork 68). This personality comprises what the girls lack when alone. In Sula’s company, Nel feels raunchy and stops wearing her mother’s clothespin in order to minimize her nose. In Nel, Sula

finds the calmness she lacks. Through the use of lyrical prose, Morrison establishes the spiritual connection between Sula and Nel:

They had already made each other's acquaintance in the delirium of their noon dreams. They were solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into Technicolored visions that always included a presence, a someone, who quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream. (51)

When together, the girls experience total harmony, and in each others' houses they both feel more comfortable than in their own. In groping for each other in their dreams, the girls' unconscious self is groping for the conscious part, embracing what she herself, is lacking (Banyiwa-Horne qtd. in Bjork 68). I concur with Bjork, who holds that "[t]ogether, they affirm their mutual strengths and recreate themselves as one" (68). Morrison's knowledge of black women's position serves as a catalyst for Sula and Nel's relationship:

So when they met . . . they felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't), they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for. (52)

The intimate connection between the girls can be seen as a unification of the divided self (Bjork 68). However, a convergent critical analysis interprets their connection as that of sexual attraction.

Barbara Smith sees the intimate relationship between Sula and Nel as a lesbian relationship "in the feelings expressed, in the definition of female character, and in the way that the politics of heterosexuality is portrayed" (17). In her reading of *Sula*, Smith holds that Morrison rejects the importance of marriage and heterosexual relationships and favors matriarchal households and female friendships. Morrison, on the other hand, has rebutted this approach. She has expressed concern that "contemporary thinking has rendered problematic

certain objects of love” such as love for a friend, your race, for God and for family (qtd. in Duvall 53). Morrison may be correct in assuming that love is now viewed with a certain skepticism and cynicism. Nevertheless, she cannot limit individual readings of *Sula*. I would argue that the relationship between Sula and Nel is at times described in a poetic language which creates a sense of the erotic: “[i]n concert, without ever meeting each other’s eyes, they stroked the blades up and down, up and down. Nel found a thick twig and, with her thumbnail, pulled away its bark until it was stripped to a smooth, creamy innocence” (58). This incident can be seen as an incipient sexual awakening for both Nel and Sula. By sharing an erotic experience the foundation for their intimate friendship is placed. The innocent digging of a whole in the ground also functions as a contrast to the horrible accident that will follow. I would suggest that these scenes both represent a loss of innocence for both Sula and Nel.

As a middle course, John Duvall has suggested that “there may be no homosexuality in *Sula*, but there very definitely is a representation of female homosociality in the friendship of Sula and Nel” (54). The homosociality Duvall speaks of is closely related to Nel and Sula developing an identity as part of a social construct. Their communication is characterized by their effortless connection and they are described as meeting regularly “without even planning it” (56). In each other’s company they find relief, each completing the other and functioning both as friend and family at the same time.

When Sula in 1922 overhears her mother, Hannah, telling their neighbor that she loved Sula, but did not like her, her reaction is that of perplexity. The reader is told that “the pronouncement sent her flying up the stairs. In bewilderment, she stood at the window fingering the curtain edge, aware of a sting in her eye” (57). It is finally Nel’s call that pulls her “away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight” (57). After Sula accidentally throws Chicken Little in the water, Nel again functions as Sula’s logical partner. Whereas

Sula is distraught after her visit to Shadrack's shack, Nel is calm enough to notice that Sula has lost the belt to her dress. These incidents signify the oppositional roles played by Nel and Sula. Whereas Sula's mind tends to float into darkness and despair, Nel remains calm and focused. I would argue that Sula's inconsistency is shaped by these pivotal events as a young girl. The reader is told that the "first experience taught her there was no other that you could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either" (119). Since Sula never manages to be consistent with herself, she is never able to create an identity.

Quashie claims that selfhood is "an issue of community, a negotiation of and balance between the individual and the people around her" (187). This view coincides with Collins's claim that black female self-definition is best achieved in close connection with family and community (113). By basing her identity solely on Nel, Sula never becomes part of the greater community. Sula never shows any love for her biological family members, nor does she care for or contribute to her surrounding community. Her concept of self-definition stems from her interaction with Nel, with whom she "could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on *their own perception* of things" (55; italics mine). Retrospectively, she realizes that "[s]he had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both an other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same thing" (119). If Nel and Sula's perception of things is unanimous growing up, why does their fellow identity change? When does the single pair of eyes become two?

Sula and Nel's separation is continuously foreshadowed throughout the novel. When Nel marries Jude at the age of seventeen, the girlfriends' bond is broken. Jude joins Sula as another of several characters trying to define themselves through the eyes of others. He marries Nel so that he "can see himself taking shape in her eyes" (Davis 9). He expects that "the two of them together would make one Jude" (82). Jude is a symbol of the disenchanting African American man, who is desperately seeking fulfillment wherever he can get it. When

he is denied a job on the New River Road he decides to involve Nel in his pain, since all women want is “they own misery” (83). Nel is “selected away from Sula” by the thought of “being needed by someone who saw her singly” and is thus aware that her marriage will probably distance her from Sula (84). When Nel watches Sula, the “slim figure in blue”, leave the wedding party she is in fact saying goodbye to her own self. By leaving her union with Sula behind she enters a new where her only mission, according to Jude, is to contribute to make him whole. Moreover, Nel seems oblivious to the fact that marriage will limit her development to the extent that she, after ten years of marriage, will base her identity solely on her relatively restricted role as mother and wife.

McDowell has suggested that Morrison “equates marriage with the death of the female self and of imagination” (“The Self” 82). Nel’s marriage is indeed described in the imagery of death. Jude is told that in order to ensure an affirmative answer to a marriage proposal one should “ax em to die for you and they yours for life” (Stein 147). By marrying Jude, Nel succumbs to her mother’s rigid middle-class morality, a way of life she earlier repudiated (Lounsberry 126). She also willingly steps into the role of the other to man’s self, and like a spider caught in a web she only occupies a small, but safe, space (Stein 147). As a symbol of blissful ignorance, Nel’s veil is described as “too heavy to allow her to feel the core of the kiss he [Jude] pressed on her head” (85). Morrison continues to ridicule the black man’s quest for self through domination and control over black women. When later discussing Jude’s statement that “a Negro man had a hard row to hoe in this world”, Sula is given a long monologue to rebutt and ridicule black men in general (103). Jude tells Nel and Sula “a whiney tale that peaked somewhere between anger and a lapping desire for comfort”, whereupon Sula claims that the whole world evolves around the black man (103). This short summary of Jude’s “whiney tale” is followed by a long monologue where Sula again, like so often before, is given the upper hand and all the good lines (Nissen 278).

Whereas Helene Wright's life is elaborated on early in the chapter 1920, Eva and Hannah Peace's are continuously surrounded by secrets, myths and deaths during the narrative. Whereas Hannah cultivates her appetite for men in the kitchen pantry, Eva survives the loss of her leg because of her intense hatred toward her estranged husband, BoyBoy. The mysterious circumstances through which Eva loses her leg also contribute to the sense of mystery surrounding her character, as well as her place in the narrative. What in fact happened to Eva's leg becomes "an open space for communal storytelling, for oral interpretation within the Peace family and the community at large" (Grant 96). Consequently, Eva's remaining leg is described as "magnificent" and "glamorous" (31). In a wider context, Eva's missing leg can be seen as a symbol of absence, of personal loss and of missing pieces of African American history. The missing leg functions as a reminder of sacrifice and is thus admired by her gentlemen callers and neighbors in the Bottom.

Throughout the novel, Morrison favors dialogue as the main vehicle of communication. As in *The Color Purple* and *Kindred*, talk and conversations become essential in solving conflicts between the characters as well as the overall ethical dilemmas (Nissen 277). The most powerful dialogues are not, however, those between Nel and Sula, but rather between Eva and Sula. Nissen has rightly suggested that

[i]n the implicit debate in the novel between those favoring a personal ethics based on perception through dialogue and those holding firm to principle and universal ethical laws, the Peace women—Eva and Sula and to a certain extent Hannah—would seem to stand on the side of ethical improvisation and the Wright women—Helene and Nel—on the side of convention. To some extent, the conflict is whether the mind or the emotions should have pre-eminence in our ethical deliberations. (280)

Not only does Morrison's focus on dialogue point the reader in the direction of Eva as an important character in the novel; the emphasis on dialogue as a favored means of communication also suggests that in order to develop the true meaning of self, black women must continuously negotiate their roles in community and challenge the laws that limit them.

Through her dialogue with community, Eva follows the symbolic middle-course; she assumes total control of her own situation, but makes sure to keep her solidary position as part of the African American neighborhood.

Eva's trials and tribulations establish her as the Bottom's main oddity. The matriarch of the Peace household is undoubtedly a fierce woman. Yet she leads her life in accordance with the community. Her divine rule leads her to name all of her three foster children Dewey, making them known as the Deweys. This term is also adopted by the narrator, again emphasizing the close connection between Eva and the narrator of the story. Eva does not strike the reader as a sympathetic character. Nevertheless, she is the center of the Peace family and she also functions as the ethical center of the novel (Nissen 282). She is the only character who outlives two of her children, as well as her granddaughter, and she is responsible for one of the most symbolically charged deaths in the novel.

Death is used as an aesthetic image in the novel and is dealt with in every chapter. The multiple deaths underpin the novel's theme of ethical choices as the narrative proper begins with the horrific death of an unknown soldier. The image of his death is focalized through Shadrack, a fellow soldier, whose life is forever marked by the gruesome sight of the headless soldier's body running over the battlefield. Phillip Novak claims that the image of the soldier is aestheticized, "presented as an image, an object of more or less disinterested observation" (185). This disinterested observation is repeatedly found throughout the novel. Shortly after Chicken Little has disappeared below water, the spot where he drowned is described as "peaceful. There was nothing but the baking sun and something newly missing" (61). As Nel watched Chicken Little drown, she later admits that she had a "good feeling" and that it had "felt so good to see him fall" (170). The culpability in regards to Chicken Little's death is often exclusively seen as Sula's, since she is the one who drops him into the river. The disinterested bystander is thus not to blame. Or is she? The explanation is deferred to 1965,

when Nel visits Eva in the nursing home and Eva accuses her of killing Chicken Little. Nel's response is to blame Sula, whereupon Eva says, "You, Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched, didn't you? Me, I never would've watched" (168). Nel tries to deny her "implication in the aesthetic gaze of disinterested interest", but Eva sums up her participation with saying that there "never was a no difference between you" (169; Duvall 65).

The other major incident where the aestheticized gaze is employed is when Sula watches Hannah burn. Sula copies Nel's reaction when Chicken Little drowned: she watches. Later, Eva claims that Sula did not watch her mother burn because she was in shock, but because she was interested in the aesthetics of a burning person, wrapped in flames (78). On her deathbed, Sula admits that she watched Hannah burn and was "thrilled"; she "wanted her to keep jerking like that, to keep on dancing" (147). This narrative technique of gradual disclosure forces the reader to keep challenging prejudices about the characters and to embrace new perceptions and perspectives. The lack of action and reaction when faced with disaster is what contrasts Eva and Sula. Sula's disinterest in saving Hannah is paralleled by Eva's decisiveness in burning her only son.

Plum's death in 1921 is only one of numerous deaths in the novel. The multiple symbolic and actual deaths are all equally important in shaping Nel and Sula's lives. Death is present in every chapter, beginning with the death of an unknown soldier. However, it is the burning of Plum that establishes Eva as an important character. According to Karen Stein, the novel's mythic elements involve "multiple deaths by fire and water, rituals of naming, signs and dreams" (146). The novel is structured by a "recurring rhythm of birth, death, and rebirth, every chapter describing an actual or symbolic death" (146). One would think that the multiple deaths make the novel a rather sinister reading experience. On the contrary, the tragic sensibility involved in particularly one of these deaths is symptomatic of the novel. Stein even holds that some deaths are "seen as positive, such as in Eva's burning of Plum, a ritual of

release and purification” (Stein 146). Plum’s death is in all its glory an homage to the mother of all mothers, Eva Peace, as well as a study in surrealism and absurdity. The scene is also ripe with symbolism. Bessy W. Jones holds that Eva Peace is psychologically disoriented throughout the novel and suffers no guilt for her actions (54). Despite Eva’s surreal behavior, Jones’s attempt at psychoanalyzing a fictional character is highly simplified and inaccurate. Eva loses two of her children, her leg and finally her home. She may not feel guilty, but she definitely grieves her losses.

The coup de grace Eva commits on Plum is executed with the belief that his addiction to narcotics will lead him to rape his own mother. Plum is described as being reduced to an infant trying to climb back into his mother’s womb. Eva’s dreams of him crawling up the stairs lead her to the decision, and in order to save herself she sets fire to her only son. Sula later decides to die in Eva’s bed; also attempting to return to a safe place. The mercy killing is surrounded by a blurred haze. When rocking Plum back and forth, Eva has trouble seeing through the tears streaming down into her mouth and she mistakes bloodstained water in a glass for a strawberry crush. Having saved Plum’s life once as an infant, Eva decides when he must die. The narrator’s description of the scene is filled with warmth, light, transcendence and bliss. In Plum’s narcotic haze:

He felt twilight. . . . He opened his eyes and saw what he imagined was the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him. Some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing, he thought. Everything is going to be all right, it said. Knowing that it was, he closed his eyes and sank back into the bright hole of sleep. (47)

To Plum, the burning feels like a baptism, like regeneration into absorption. The imagery used in this scene gives the sense of rebirth through baptism. Traditionally a bird of strength and courage, the mythological eagle is prone to carry its prey to heaven and move from one world to the next (Chevalier 324). Through Plum’s blurred vision, Eva’s God-like qualities manifest themselves in an eagle. Thus when Eva says she could not bear to carry him in her womb one

more time, she feels that she is in fact saving him from this world and, like an eagle, carrying him into the next.

Preceded by a flock of less majestic birds, Sula returns to the Bottom in 1937. According to Eva, the dead robins are symbolic of Sula's evil presence. With the return of Sula, the Bottom exposes all its insecurities, its traditional view of religion and its need for structuring elements and order. Sula becomes such a structuring element as the common denominator of evil. Instead of trying to communicate with her community, Sula returns to the Bottom representing new perspectives and new order. Upon her return she is preceded by rumors of her extensive traveling, her promiscuous behavior, and her college education, which makes her even more of an outsider. These assumptions lead to an increased skepticism towards her, since she represents an even more threatening and uncontrollable force than in her younger days. What Morrison eloquently suggests is that the new perspectives can in fact be as structuring and limiting as the old. Sula's new perspectives are never materialized, despite her more sophisticated conception of reality. Having seen everything and done everything, exhausted all the perspectives, there is nothing left for Sula but death (Lounsberry 129).

Sula's presence is identified as yet another test from the Lord and in the traditional way the black folk of the Bottom see "the presence of evil [as] something to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over" (118). In addition to the mystical mark over her eye, Sula's mere presence brings about the belief that she has magical powers, and she is linked to several accidents in the neighborhood. Subsequently, she becomes the center of evil and people "displace their fear and anger onto her; thus defining themselves as better (Davis 14). Sula's birthmark adds to her mystique and is a source of constant speculation and fable making. Shadrack sees it as a tadpole, whereas Jude sees a copperhead snake. Whereas the tadpole morphs into a new being, the snake is seen as a

symbol of seduction and destruction. Nel, however, sees a stemmed rose and her children a frightening “black thing” (Bjork 72).

Looking exactly like she did ten years earlier, Sula is contrasted with her female neighbors. In their silent acceptance of life, their beauty has vanished and “[those] with husbands had folded themselves into starched coffins” and had “their sweetness sucked from their breath by ovens and steam kettles” (122). Sula, on the other hand, has hardly changed her physical appearance and looks mysteriously good. In her repartee to Eva, she establishes her interest in having babies as non-existent; her only goal is to make herself (92). Therefore, Sula’s life is a rejection of the traditional role of woman as mother and benefactress.

Ultimately, the straw that finally breaks Sula’s back is her decision to place Eva in a nursing home. This violation against an established African American code of conduct, namely that one should take care of one’s elders, places Sula on the outskirts of society.

Initially Nel is excited about the return of her old friend, with whom “talking . . . had always been a conversation with herself” (95). The news of Sula’s arrival brings a sense of magic into her life and this playfulness is reflected in her lovemaking (95). While waiting for Sula to stop by, Nel recalls her and Sula’s relationship as a “constant sharing of perceptions” (95). For a brief time they recapture the sweetness of their adolescent companionship through witty conversations and humorous characterization of their childhood neighbors (Stein 148). However, their conversations immediately reach a dead end when Nel discovers Sula and Jude “down on all fours naked” (104). Nel’s reaction is again one of controlled disappointment. Her main concern is that Jude’s fly is unbuttoned, which makes him look naked. Sula, on the other hand, “somehow didn’t look naked” to Nel (106). Even though both Jude and Sula are naked, Nel is more bothered by Jude’s appearance and the possibility of dust underneath the bed than by Sula’s presence. It is almost as though Sula fits in, but

somehow Jude does not. In her disappointment and grief, however, Nel does not acknowledge that the loss of Sula is in fact as devastating, or potentially more so, than the loss of Jude.

Nel's interior monologues after the event are among the strongest passages in the novel and the only ones in their style. They are also ripe with symbolism. Nissen claims that they differ from other examples of interior monologue, however, since they are well organized and could thus be seen as deceptive (273). Nel is able to organize her thoughts into a gloomy narrative where Jude and God are the implied receivers. The effect is dramatic and results in an emphatic reaction from the reader. As a result, Nel gains sympathy, because she is finally given a powerful form of expression. The purpose of the monologues seems to be to create an awareness of Nel's loss of self through her loss of Sula. The fact that Nel does not acknowledge the loss, but rather calls the feeling "the stupidity of loss" shows her lack of introspection (107). Furthermore, the absence of a subject is evoked through an object; in this case, Jude's absence is strengthened by the presence of his yellow tie. Additionally, I would argue that Nel's conception of her own sexuality is largely connected to Sula. The final paragraph of run-on lines in Nel's stream of consciousness passage, a favorite of Morrison's, describes Nel's thighs as "truly empty and dead too, and it was Sula who had taken the life from them and Jude who smashed her heart and the both of them who left her with no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away" (111). Nel's thighs function as a metaphor for her sexuality, a sexuality rejuvenated with the news of Sula's return; a personal sexuality now lost with the loss of Sula. All she has left is her brain raveling away; her body is disconnected.

In her soliloquy contemplating Jude's departure, Nel's "raggedy girdle" functions as a unique symbol of her marriage (105). The girdle signals Nel's comfort and assurance as part of a male/female couple, but also her submission to and dependence on the same relationship. While in the bathroom, Nel waited as "the mud shifted, the leaves stirred, the smell of overripe green things enveloped her and announced the beginnings of her very own howl. But

it did not come” (108). Instead the howl manifests itself in a grey ball of fur, comprising, what she believes is her grief over the loss of her marriage. Nel’s failed attempt to let out her grief in form of a cry on the bathroom floor resonates in the last passage of the novel, where “leaves stirred, mud shifted; there was a smell of overripe green things” (174). In this final scene, however, the soft ball of fur breaks, and Nel realizes that her loss of Sula has been the reason for her mourning.

Sula’s reasons for sleeping with her best friend’s husband are complex. Some may see it as evil. Arguably, she just wanted to see what it was like to be Nel. Maureen T. Reddy has suggested that “Sula’s deepest desire is to be Nel” (37). Since childhood, Sula preferred Nel’s oppressively neat house, she only returned to the Bottom to see Nel, and it is Nel who keeps her there. Sula’s lack of a “center . . . around which to grow” leads her to Nel, since her friend has always been her center (119). Sula’s faith in the strength of her union with Nel allows her to believe that sharing the affection of other people, namely Jude, would be acceptable. However, in a social context, the act is seen as betrayal. Nel’s idea of monogamy and possessiveness will not allow that to happen. John Duvall holds that the reasons for sleeping with Jude are subordinate to the “representation of the unconscious, both individual and cultural, that motivates Sula and Nel’s misunderstanding” (61). Consequently, the incident is a metaphor for the continuing deliberation on right and wrong. After Sula’s affair with Jude, Sula realizes that despite their joined sense of self, Nel is no longer a part of the equation. She now “belonged to the town and all of its ways” (120). Robert Grant has rightly suggested that the “cognitive-psychological essence of Sula remains a mystery” (93). She has eventually become the epitome of the other, also to Nel.

Duvall has suggested that the women of the novel are all trapped in expectations which lead them to never develop as artists or pursue their real potential (49). Although Sula seems creative and is well-educated, she never develops these gifts, as she discovers that each

town she visits is similar to Medallion. Wherever she goes, she is continuously reminded of her position as a black woman. The idea of Sula's possible career as an artist is presented rather late in the narrative. Morrison chooses not to establish a rigid form of female creativity by allowing Sula to fit into an art form. Lack of definition and absolutism seems to be Morrison's feminist approach. Sula's sense of displacement is after all her main feature. Thus, Morrison refrains from defining Sula's possibilities further. Her "idle imagination" is blamed for her whims: "had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or the strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity" . . . she might have had a meaningful life (121). Instead, Sula's life is experimental; and as a woman such a life can only lead to ostracism. Ultimately, she becomes a dangerous artist without an art form (121). Her talent as a lover is the only one she develops. However, unlike her mother, who respected the men she slept with, and their wives, Sula discards her lovers shamelessly, hence further alienating her from the community. Life has taught her that "a lover was not a comrade and could never be for a woman" (121). That is until Ajax shows up with his stolen blue bottles of milk, traditionally seen as a symbol of fertility (Chevalier 654).

Unlike other men Sula has stumbled across during her travels, Ajax comes to constitute a meaning in her life. Arguably, Ajax is the only male character in the novel who acts with freedom and maturity. Like Sula he has gained new perspectives through traveling and is curious about this woman because "her elusiveness and indifference to established habits of behavior reminded him of his mother. . ." (127; Bjork 77). In her association with Ajax, Sula finds "genuine conversations", in which he "expected brilliance from her, and she delivered" (127-28). Through this relationship, Sula comes close to feeling whole, because Ajax becomes her artistic outlet. While in bed, Sula imagines herself as the sculptor of Ajax's identity by revealing his true colors (Duvall 61); "Then I can take a chisel and small tap hammer and tap away at the alabaster. It will crack then like ice under the pick, and through

the breaks I will see the loam, fertile, free of pebbles and twigs. For it is the loam that is giving you that smell” (130). This creative passage is an attempt to reveal what is hidden behind Ajax’s black skin and shows Sula’s poetic talent. What lies hidden beneath the black, the gold and the alabaster is loam, a symbol of a true essential blackness that Sula, and perhaps also Morrison, wants to reveal. Shortly after, Ajax leaves as a result of Sula’s newfound possessiveness. During intercourse she ponders the possibility of a monogamous relationship with Ajax: “I will water your soil, keep it rich and moist. But how much? How much water to keep the loam moist? And how much loam will I need to keep my water still? And when do the two make mud?” (131). Sula wonders how much water, traditionally seen as a feminine element, Ajax’s soil needs in order to make mud. Here, mud symbolizes the beginning of development, in Sula’s case, her hope of a relationship with Ajax (Chevalier 686). Mud has already formed part of Nel’s mourning and will reappear by the end of the novel as an important symbol involving her spiritual, and perhaps also sexual, re-awakening.

When discovering that Sula has tied a green ribbon in her hair, symbolic of her femininity, Ajax makes love to her one last time, and then leaves for an airplane show in Dayton. Discouraged, Sula searches for an object through which she can remember him: “Where were the butterflies? the blueberries? the whistling reed? She could find nothing, for he had left nothing but his stunning absence” (134). Later, Sula realizes that his true identity remained a mystery when finding out his real name through his driver’s license. Her following exclamation is almost identical to Nel’s stream of consciousness in 1937:

I didn’t even know his name. And if I didn’t know his name, then there is nothing I did know and I have known nothing ever at all since the one thing I wanted was to know his name so how could he help but leave me since he was making love to a woman who didn’t even know his name. (136)

Duvall claims that this moment calls into doubt Sula’s heterosexual relationship with Ajax as the grounding of her authentic self (62). As it turns out she did not really know him, or

herself. The run-on-lines echoes Sula's earlier claim that "Nel was the first person who had been real to her, whose name she knew" (120). Thus I concur with Duvall's claim that in Sula's desire for Ajax lies an "unconscious attempt to recover a portion of her lost relationship with Nel" (62). After this revelation Sula's idea of her own and Ajax's identities immediately dissolves, and she goes to bed realizing that she has "sung all the songs there are", exhausted all her opportunities (137).

The death of Sula is to a certain extent also connected to her attempt to remove Eva by forcing her out of her house and into a nursing home. Janice Sokoloff suggests that Eva is the mythical ancestor who will always linger in the background. According to Evans, Morrison asserts "[w]hen you kill the ancestor, you kill yourself. I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection" (qtd. in Sokoloff 430). By attempting to eradicate Eva, Sula also eradicates an important part of her self, namely her roots. Sokoloff takes Morrison's admiration of Virginia Woolf one step further when claiming that:

Virginia Woolf's determination to demolish her ancestor is present in the granddaughter, Sula, whom (to carry the analogy to Woolf yet further) the narrator describes as 'an artist with no art form'. Sula, in an act unprecedented in the Bottom, has her formidable grandmother put away in a nursing home. Following this reversal of legal guardian roles, Sula, in accordance with Morrison's statement on killing the ancestor, dies" (430).

I would argue that in the case of Sula, death is no punishment; it is rather a well-considered narrative choice. Unlike the other symbolically charged deaths in the novel, Sula's death is natural and peaceful. Despite causing initial satisfaction, her death is followed by a period of great difficulty for the neighborhood. Whereas Sula leaves the earthly world, Nel is forced to continue as part of it. Along with Nel, Shadrack is the only one who expresses his grief at the time of Sula's death. Watching her dead body in the funeral parlor makes him realize that, for once, he does not want to celebrate National Suicide Day, he just "wanted to stay with the

purple-and-white belt. Not go. Not go” (158). Sula’s importance in the Bottom is emphasized through Shadrack’s mourning: “his visitor was dead and would come no more” (158). For Shadrack, Sula’s death signals the end of permanence.

I would argue that some critics, among them McDowell, are too indulgent towards Sula as an agent of free will. According to Nissen, Sula has no center, seemingly no consciousness, and without a sense of a defined position in society she cannot function as a moral agent (276). On her deathbed she makes one last attempt at defining herself:

“You think I don’t know what your life is like because I ain’t living it. I know what every colored woman in this country is doing.”

“What’s that?”

“Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I’m going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world.” (143)

Even though Sula might think that she sure did live in this world, she never manages to define her self, rekindle her friendship with Nel, or find a self-sustaining focus around which she could grow. Despite her travels, her new perspectives, and relationships, she still lacks a center. In their last encounter, Sula presents the difficult moral dilemma of the novel.

Interestingly, her last words take the form of a question and underscore the uncertainty of her and Nel’s positions:

“How you know?” Sula asked

“Know what?” Nel still wouldn’t look at her.

“About who was good. How you know it was you?”

“What you mean?”

“I mean maybe it wasn’t you. Maybe it was me” (146).

The dialogue is surprisingly humble compared to her earlier statements, but still gives Sula the last word, in the form of a question, “not an unambiguous statement of fact or truth” (McDowell, “The Self” 84). Eventually Sula dies alone, behind the boarded window, since there is really nothing new for her to see. Without ever having loved anyone but Nel, Sula’s post-mortem thoughts serve to highlight her dependence on Nel:

Then she realized, or rather she sensed, that there was not going to be any pain. She was not breathing because she did not have to. Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead. Sula felt her face smiling. “Well, I’ll be damned”, she thought, “it didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I tell Nel”. (149)

The bemused passage is one of the most peculiar in the novel. Nevertheless, it does have a purpose. Novak holds that besides highlighting Sula’s love for and dependence on Nel, the meditation is yet another example of death as disinterested observation: “for even here, when there are no witnesses to watch over the dying, the event still registers as spectacle” (186).

In the space of the narrative, Nel spends the twenty-five years following Sula’s death mourning the loss of her marriage and exercise the role of a victimized woman. Interestingly, her epiphany in the graveyard leads to an open narrative of the rest of her life and is mirrored by her bathroom experiences in the chapter 1937:

[l]eaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze. “All that time, all that time I thought I was missing Jude”. And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. “We was girls together”, she said as though explaining something. “O Lord, Sula”, she cried, “girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.” (174)

One could claim that Sula dies defeated by society’s norms. Hope lies now with Nel, whose awakening to the real cause of her grief will hopefully expand her understanding of herself, black women’s position, and Sula’s importance in her life.

In the two other novels discussed in this thesis, the major female characters survive with the help of an extended family, mainly consisting of other women. In *Sula*, however, the presentation of a matriarchal family is controversial. Despite a strong female lineage and a close female friendship, Sula never manages to change her own situation, nor is her call responded to by Nel. Due to her lack of communicative abilities, a creative outlet and sexual fulfillment, Sula fails in her revolutionary endeavors. By contrasting Sula’s death in real life and Nel’s symbolic death as a victimized, yet integrated, part of society, the novel transcend

superficial understandings of good and evil and asks pivotal questions concerning ethical choices, the development of a female self, and the future of African American culture.

Conclusion

My aim as I set out to write this thesis was to show how three individual novels share the same strategies and problems involved in self-definition for black women. My interest in the novel's portrayal of female sexuality, communication and creativity has been thoroughly satisfied by grappling with this thesis. Through working with *The Color Purple*, *Kindred* and *Sula* my respect for their writers and characters have only grown. I have attempted to analyze the black female's quest for self in terms of the individual's exploration of sexuality and creativity through communicative exchange. This thesis has emphasized the importance of speech as communicative device, an autonomous sexuality and a creative self in searching for and in attempting to create an identity. I believe I have thus made my argument valid. On the more detailed level, this thesis exhibits each novel's presentation of the search for self through exploration of female sexuality, communicative exchange and the female characters' success and failure in assuming the role of a creative artist.

In each novel the black female body is subjected to abuse, torture and mutilation. Despite the cruel circumstances that often surround the female characters, *The Color Purple*, *Kindred* and *Sula* all manage to keep focus on the development of, and in the case of Dana, maintenance of, an autonomous sexuality. Additionally, the black female body becomes an emblem of individual lives and of great historical significance. A symbol of absence, both Dana's missing arm and Eva's lost leg serve as reminders of the gaps and missing subjects that form part of American history.

Through the established power mechanisms in each novel the authors all highlight the power men have over women and thus over their sexuality. A prevalent theme in all three novels is the black female's disengagement from the control of men and the re-definition and development of her autonomous sexual self. The development and reclaiming of female sexuality takes different forms in the three novels. Celie's sexual awakening is initiated by Shug's redefinition of the word virgin and her following lesson on the intricate mysteries of female genitalia. Celie's button becomes a site for sexual pleasure and reinvents her conception of female desire. By changing the focus from penetration to pure enjoyment Shug not only redefines sex, but opens up for female sexual pleasure as a liberatory mechanism. *The Color Purple's* exploration of same-sex, as well as heterosexual, relationships blurs the distinction between masculine and feminine, thus demolishing established gender roles and embracing sameness and sexual harmony. In the relationship between Sofia and Celie's stepson Harpo Sofia is attributed with traditional masculine qualities; she fights, she swears and she prefers repairing roofs over cooking. She is also the first female character in the novel to express her sexual desires and preferences. When subdued, Sofia is silenced by white people, not by black men.

In *Kindred*, Dana becomes the broker of a sexual merger between a white man and a black woman; a relationship that results in the birth of her great grandmother Hagar. In assuming the power of procreation, Dana holds a position traditionally associated with men. With the exception of an attempted rape by a slave patroller, Dana's androgynous appearance and deemphasized sexuality keeps her safe from sexual assaults through large parts of the narrative. When her sexual self is eventually portrayed, it is in a mutually respectful and voluntary relation with her husband. After her sexual life has been deferred and closeted through the lion's share of *Kindred*, Dana initiates sexual relations with Kevin upon their

return to present time, despite the aching pain of her tortured body. In order to reclaim control of her own body and mind Dana uses her female sexuality as a liberatory device.

In *Sula*, the black female body celebrates its budding awakening to its sexual self with a ritual-like digging of a hole in the ground. As young girls, Nel and Sula's warm bodies "shivered in the high coolness, their small breasts just now beginning to create some pleasant discomfort when they were lying on their stomachs" (58). Unfortunately, the joined experience of a sexual awakening grows pale as time passes, and life begins to wear at its memory. Eventually, for Sula, sexual aesthetics become boring (122). Her experiences of sexual intercourse will never imitate or live up to her experiences shared with Nel. Following sexual relations with random men, Sula's detachment becomes evident: "[t]here, in the center of that silence was not eternity but the death of time and a loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning" (123). In the case of Sula, the exploration of her sexual self through heterosexual relations only involves further alienation. Nel's sexual self, which is ripe with playfulness as soon as the rumor of Sula's return reaches her doorstep, is closeted with the loss of Sula.

In creating and re-defining their identities, the negotiation between the female characters and the surrounding community becomes essential. Celie, Dana and Nel all remain part of a unified whole one could call a community, whereas Sula tries to define herself outside of convention, outside of community. Both Celie and Dana's communicative process takes place within a small, private group of people. They are both distanced from the real world in that Celie's story never involves a relation to the larger black community, whereas Dana's awakening takes place in a parallel reality. Sula, on the other hand assumes the exposed position of the outcast from birth, in view of the larger black community of the Bottom. Communicative exchange through speech becomes the main liberatory device for both Celie and Dana. Talk is deemed superior to writing and activities involving speech and

voice, such as talking and singing, contribute actively to the process of self-definition. Initially silenced, victimized and deprived of someone to talk to, Celie engages in dialogue first with Sofia, later with Shug. Several critics, among them Bower, have kept their focus entirely on Celie's epistles and seen her act of writing as the main source of her development (60). I believe that Walker, by choosing the epistolary form for her novel, is signifying on the epistolary tradition. The only reason why Celie's story is manifested in a text and not in a blues lyric, or in one of Walker's poems, is the power of the epistolary form and the ability of a letter to engage and include the reader in the communicative process. I base my argument on Celie's lack of agenda throughout the novel and the fact that her writing skills are never developed. Her position as a writing subject is never addressed. When her co-worker Darlene requests that she learn to speak in a proper manner, Celie discards her book, claiming it is full of "whitefolks . . . talking bout apples and dogs" (194). Clearly, Celie's language is the most important creative feature of the novel; the text is merely a vehicle to engage the reader. Herein lie the brilliance of the novel and of Alice Walker.

The novels all emphasize the female characters' difficulties with communicating through writing. The written word is appropriated by men, thus preventing communication between women, like Nettie's letters to Celie. Nettie's letters are written in standard English, a standard of writing that seems foreign when compared to the black vernacular Walker has fervently engaged in throughout the first half of the novel. The written word is interrupted, as in *Kindred*, where Rufus never sends Dana's letters to Kevin as promised. Dana's attempt to teach Nigel and Carrie how to read with the help of a book is quickly struck down. Later, Dana, a professional writer, is unable to write about her experiences as a slave. Her dialogue with the past, with her fellow slaves, is eventually what educates her.

Nel and Sula's friendship is destined from birth and "as intense as it was sudden" (53). There is no gradual build-up of the friendship through communicative exchange, it is

predestined. In the early days of their friendship, action speaks louder than words and Sula slits off the tip of her finger to keep white boys from harassing Nel. Their lack of dialogue subsequent to this incident only strengthens the image of solidarity, but at the same time underscores the difference in their personalities. In contrast to both *The Color Purple* and *Kindred*, *Sula* not only presents the spiritual communicative exchange between friends and between the individual and her community, it also shows the collapse of communication. After Nel's wedding, Sula remains a stranger to the Bottom and the girlfriends do not communicate for several years. However, when reunited, memories of their girlhood conversations makes Nel feel "new, soft and new" (98). Eva and Sula's dialogue upon Sula's return resonates as the most powerful dialogue in the novel. The quarrel establishes the ethical position of the ancestral mother versus the fluke approach to life assumed by the granddaughter. This dialogue, along with Nel's stream of consciousness in 1937, surfaces as the most powerful vehicle of communication in the novel. Whereas written communication can be interrupted and manipulated oral narratives and dialogue, expressed through talking or singing, are seen as more authentic and thus more liberatory. Dialogue between characters and impulsive streams of consciousness are favored over the written word. In all three novels, communication through spoken dialogue influences women's self-definition more than writing.

I have attempted to prove that the creative black woman arises as an important image in all three novels. The black female is seen as a possible creative artist and both the male and female body are made into works of art. Trapped at the bottom of power hierarchies, an artistic and creative outlet becomes essential to Celie's ability to overcome her hatred towards Albert. Walker's praise of traditional women's craft such as cooking and quilting is also traceable throughout *The Color Purple*. As opposed to Shug's glamorized occupation as a traveling entertainer, Celie turns the seemingly menial chore of sewing into a flourishing

business. Her rage is channeled into a successful enterprise of designing and manufacturing unisex pants in multiple colors.

Whereas Celie succeeds in her capitalist venture as a designer of pants, Dana remains at the other end of the creative scale as a professional writer. Despite her initial determination to succeed as a writer, Dana's future as a creative literary artist is jeopardized by the physical and mental strain placed on her body and mind as a participant in American slavery. Through Dana, Butler questions the presentation of American history and African Americans' knowledge of the history of slavery. I would suggest that Butler assists Dana in her continuing creative endeavor by giving her a counter-narrative from which she can perhaps evolve as a writer.

Sula serves as a foil to the other female artists in this thesis. She never channels her energy and creativity into a positive form: "[a]nd like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous" (121). Sula tends to receive most attention when discussing Morrison's novel. However, according to Duvall, Nel is the teacher of disinterested interest. Her disinterest in saving Chicken Little suggests an awareness of the aesthetic imagery of the stillness of water. Despite her participation in engendering Sula's artistic gaze, Nel has "in the years of marriage retreated from the artist's marginality into the conventionality of the community" (Duvall 67). In the breach of communication between Nel and Sula, Nel is thus not only to blame for their separation; she is also to blame for Sula's disinterest. In her relationship with Ajax, Sula's poetic soul flashes for a few seconds only to disappear shortly after. Mirrored by the novel's prologue, where one "might see a woman in a flowered dress doing a bit of cakewalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of 'messaging around' to the lively notes of a mouth organ", Sula dies having "sung all the songs there are"(137).

The black female body functions as both a work of art and as historical signifier. Dana's scars and amputated arm serve as reminders of the past, but also as evidence of an

authentic experience. Eva's leg serves as a site for communal story-telling and is repeatedly used as a sign of identification and progress. When visiting Eva in the nursing home, Nel struggles to recognize her, since her "once beautiful leg had no stocking and the foot was in a slipper. Nel wanted to cry—not for Eva's milk-dull eyes or her floppy lips, but for the once proud foot accustomed for over half a century to a fine well-laced shoe, now stuffed gracelessly into a pink terrycloth slipper" (167). Within Nel's grief lies not only the loss of a historical institution, but also the loss of the Bottom. The multiple symbols attributed to Sula's birthmark are also significant, since they show the diversity of identity and of interpretation.

Walker, Butler and Morrison all problematize traditional women's occupations and show how they can be seen as both limiting individual creativity, but also how women's craft can be elevated to a higher status. They also highlight the emancipating effect of financial freedom and the empowerment involved in managing a trade, receiving an education, or developing within an art form. Through the character of Sula, Morrison emphasizes the skepticism toward the creative talents of black women. In a way, Sula becomes a symbol of African American disenchantment with promises of opportunity and development within American culture. Through her final surrender, Sula seemingly functions as the last instigator of change. With her death follows the death of not only the Bottom, but also of an African American way of life.

The need for closure has led to the happy, but rather undefined ending in *The Color Purple*. The novel destroys absolutes by revising conventional definitions of family; it offers new communal configurations in which biological kinship is no longer the foundation for familial connection, and in which its members share similar attitudes toward life. According to Wall, feminist and queer theorists argue that family metaphors are premised on heterosexuality (13). The family that is reunited by the end of *The Color Purple* is a family

with intersecting sexualities and relationships. Unfortunately, individual identity is seemingly sacrificed in the name of family and unity.

Through memory, ancestral influence and a highly complicated search for self, Dana eventually achieves a sense of identity. In order to fully cope with her future as part of an interracial couple, she must comprehend the past, where she comes from and how she can become whole. In finding a family outside the Weylin house, Dana finds herself. In *Kindred*, the community of slaves ensures Dana's survival; ironically, her historical intervention does not ensure theirs. Nevertheless, by being forced to rethink her preconceived notions about history and her background, Dana has reached a new level in her process of self-definition.

Sula reveals the ambiguity of community as, on the one hand, a social unit and on the other a restrictive force acting upon women. Morrison also reveals the dangers involved in egoistic attempts at self-definition. Pessimistic as it may sound, it seems as though the individual black woman's search for self continues to be hindered by social and political oppression. In order to come full circle, *The Color Purple* erases the distinctive qualities of each woman, individual qualities which have been projected throughout the novel, in order to accommodate and include men. In contrast, *Kindred* and *Sula* leave their female characters at life's major crossroad where future uncertainties are the only thing certain.

The Color Purple is, as suggested earlier, "a meta-text which signifies on the white history of the epistolary novel and white culture's (including white feminists') valorization of writing over other cultural practices. It also poses the problematic relationship between two continents, African and America, and two cultural traditions (at least), which a hybrid African American identity must negotiate" (Lauret 105). As a collection of cultural reference and an advanced literary composition, Walker has created a marvelous piece of art. As a guide to women's self-definition, however, I believe that the novel fails at the finish line. In the process of negotiation between the past and the present, Morrison and Butler both

problematize American history as well as some of the problems facing modern American society. Butler's description of the blue collar labor market and Morrison's subtle critique of 1965 America show how black women remain largely excluded from contemporary world progress. Another interesting topic for further discussion would be the more recent influence of African American popular culture and commercial music in creating new role models for African American women. For further investigation, I would recommend Patricia Hill Collins's *From Black Power to Hip-hop: Racism, Nationalism and Feminism*, published in 2006.

When summarizing the female characters included in this thesis, Shug stands out as the epitome of the creative female artist, a teacher of female sexual pleasure and a moral agent. Within her text, Walker invokes music to trigger memories of a history that was more often sung than said – and never written (Wall 244). *The Color Purple*, *Kindred* and *Sula* all present new concepts of the heroic and the poetic, a revised and expanded sense of female sexuality and beauty, and a “moral consciousness that extends outward and upward from communities of the oppressed” (Wall 14). I would conclude that the African American women's individual search for self must remain an important part of contemporary women's literature. Only through an expanded focus on women's writing can we have the opportunity to rejoice in magnificent stories about women, where we come from and where we are going. This may be a banal call for great literature, however, I believe, new African American women writers should respond to the call.

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