

# Searching for the Black Woman's Identity in Alice Walker's Fiction

by

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This thesis explores the role literature written by African American women has in identity development and the dispelling of society--driven stereotypes. This includes the examination of the way the passing of knowledge from one generation to the next through a maternal or matriarchal channel influences and encourages the adoption of positive images. Beginning with a discussion of the role media of all types has in the perpetuation of perceptions of Black women, the thesis progresses to a more detailed analysis of the 3 predominant stereotypes of the mammy, the jezebel, and the sapphire. This exploration includes the way Alice Walker's fiction dismisses the generalizations used to control Black women in American society. Walker's *The Color Purple*, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and "Everyday Use" are explored as works illustrative of African American women's literature, and in these works the thesis identifies realistic depictions of Black women in contrast to the controlling stereotypes so often used in American society to define and limit Black women.



Searching for the Black Woman's Identity in Alice Walker's Fiction

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I dedicate this work and search for identity to my little black girls.

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I would like to thank the many educators who helped me reach this level in my education. Without their dedication and guidance, I would not have gained the knowledge needed to succeed on this level. Also, I would like to thank my family and close friends for supporting me and believing in my ability to achieve this accomplishment.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis will evaluate the women in Alice Walker's fiction and how her representations help to reconstruct the humanity of African American women. This reconstruction includes flushing out the experiences of Southern Black women and getting to the truth of what it means to be an African American woman. The first discussion of Walker will begin with her using matriarchal or female mentors to help aid the women in her novels. This exploration will look at the short story "Everyday Use" and how the mother creates an environment conducive to her daughters' needs, while also looking at the way traditions and ideals are passed from mother to daughter. This coincides with Walker's womanist views, which she defines in her collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Of the four entries, the one most important to this analysis says, "A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength...Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (*In Search* xi). Walker's texts illustrate the importance of love shared by and with women, and this womanist will be apart of the approach to analyzing fictional women in "Everyday Use," *The Color Purple*, and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*.

Walker's images of African American women are in stark contrast to the previous stated controlling images. Her women do not fall into any one category and throughout her novels some women shift from role to role with their increasing awareness of their positions in society. Lindsey Tucker examines the way Walker gives a voice to African American women through her artistic literary creations. In her essay, she gives Walker's description of the African American woman that was shared during an interview with Mary Helen Washington. She says, "Walker

describes three types of black woman: first, the suspended woman, characterized mostly by immobility; second, the assimilated woman, a woman “still thwarted,” ready to move, but without real space to move into; and third, the emergent woman, a woman “making the first tentative steps into an uncharted region (Tucker 83). These three descriptions will guide my study of Walker’s women and show how the delineation from the popular stereotypical images of African American women represent a break from the prescribed to them.

The second chapter’s goal is to evaluate the suspended women Margaret, Mem, Celie, and their foil Sophia and how their existence is marred by the captivity of their position in their homes and society. This chapter will also include an analysis of the correlation between these trapped women and the mammy stereotype. The third chapter focuses on the characters Josie, Lorene, Shug, and Celie and the assimilated woman’s position in society, as well as how the Jezebel’s sexuality relates to this figure in conjunction with examining the historical influences on Black sexuality. Finally, the fourth chapter of this work deals with the emergent woman’s freedom and the connection that exists between that freedom and the anger associated with the sapphire. Though this chapter will mainly address the lives of Celie and Ruth, it will also pinpoint the anger and rage associated with several other female characters from Walker’s *The Color Purple* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*

Much scholarship has been done on Alice Walker’s work in the past. However, with a new revival of interest in creating an identity for Black women, my thesis seeks to keep within the tradition of looking to the past for guidance. As Black women seek a self-established identity, a remembrance and knowledge of the past is necessary to move forward. The task of defining Black women was laid at the feet of the emergent women of the past whose roles in society allowed them to influence Black women and women as a whole. Alice Walker’s texts

include women that are dynamic characters who delineate from the popular stereotypes of Black women through the progression of the first two stages of suspension and assimilation to finally becoming emergent women. The emergence expressed in *The Color Purple* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is the break, the freedom, which all Black women need to experience to escape the entrapment of the controlling images prevalent in the minds of Black and White people in America. The return to these texts seeks to add a modern analysis to those that have already been done in past years, and to establish a link to the past for those Black women taking the steps to a self-established identity.

In today's political climate the movement towards the accurate representation of Black women in media has taken ground, and the use of print as well as visual media will aid the movement because of the influence the media has on the overall thinking of society. Shows and programs like *Black Girls Rock* driven by Black women are at the core of the evolution of the Black woman's identity. This show is being presented annually: Black women are shown praising each other's professional work, appearance, and philanthropic work. These women are taking on the task of encouraging and empowering the future generations of Black women. With this positivity focusing on one race, the show has also drawn many critics, suggesting the focus on Black women alone is not empowering all women. Within this argument lies an issue that probably never will be resolved because of this country's past failures at properly representing and respecting minorities, and that issue is demanding inclusion when it is not necessary or needed.

The othering or marginalizing of ethnic groups has been a prominent hegemonic practice in history. Dominant races and cultures use race and gender to create the means to define, control, and degrade minorities. Western culture, in spite of going through the Civil Rights

movement and the multiple waves of feminist movements, continues to use negatively fueled stereotypical images to marginalize African American women. Modern empowering and encouraging movements have occurred continuously for decades in America. African American women blues singers, writers, professors, politicians, and others have been working to develop a new positive image of the Black woman in spite of the historical approach to defining them.

The most debilitating tragedy the African American women face is seemingly lacking the power or position in society to define themselves. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire points out, “One of the basic elements of the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed is *prescription*. Every prescription represents the imposition of one individual’s choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed into one that conforms with the prescriber’s consciousness” (46-47). The white oppressive culture from the past has created dehumanizing images that continue to limit African American women. These images not only influence the collective minds of society distorting their view, but they also control the way Black women see themselves and each other in respect to their position in society.

Again, it is not surprising to see that media have taken to this “new natural” image of the African American woman. In the past Black women have had to deal with “Schools, print and broadcast media, government agencies, and other institutions in the information business reproduc[ing] the controlling images of Black women” (Collins 101). Even with the introduction of positive images into mainstream America, it is hard to escape the dominating and controlling images of the strong black woman, the over-sexed whore, and the in your face angry Black Woman. In her work, “Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and Their Home Girls: Developing an Oppositional Gaze toward the images of Black women,” Carolyn M. West says, “In addition to

care giving Mammies, African American women are often portrayed as sexually irresponsible, promiscuous Jezebels and as angry, combative Sapphires” (288). These three images remain as stereotypical categories that American society has tried to use to define African American women for years and the negative effects of these definitions linger through history from generation to generation.

Through the examination of Alice Walker’s fiction, this thesis will examine the ways one Black writer has veered from the dominant controlling images of the mammy, jezebel, and sapphire and created Black women who struggle under oppression, resist sexual restrictions, and demand respect from the men around them. This work will focus on the women depicted in the novels *The Color Purple* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* as well as the short story “Everyday Use.” Through this textual analysis, I seek to examine the ways Black women use writing to show the world reliable truths about Black women and to shine a positive light on the tragedies Walker chose to include for her characters to face.

One aspect of scholarly research of Alice Walker’s work suggests that she is doing African Americans a disservice. Among the criticisms of the unrealistic lives and disjointed sections presented in *The Color Purple* is the critique on how Black men are presented in the text. Many critics see a heavily negative representation of Black men and their actions in the story are somehow invading the privacy of the Black home. The privacy and “secrets” that are revealed in Walker’s work shows an attempt to paint a realistic picture of the life of the Southern Black person, who is subjected to poverty and racism, eliminating the need for confidentiality in African Americans.

Trudier Harris sees a failure in Alice Walker’s work and this failure is centered on the above stated representation of Black people. She suggests that *The Color Purple* serves to only

reinforce ideas “that Black people have no morality when it comes to sexuality, that the Black family structure is weak if existent at all, that Black men abuse Black women, and that Black women who may appear to be church goers are really lewd and lascivious” (1821). Critics like Harris find the subject matter of text like *The Color Purple* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* limiting because of what they reveal to society.

Harris brings in testimonial support for her negative response to the ideas presented in *The Color Purple*. In her assessment, Harris mentions how “one white woman commented that if she had not been told the novel had been written by a Black woman, she would have thought it had been written by a Southern White male who wanted to reinforce the traditional sexual and violent stereotypes about Black people” (1821). The main point here is that a Black woman did write this text, and it was not to reveal unknown truths or “secrets” about Black people to diminish them. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Color Purple* are two texts that show how a realization of identity and position in the world helps a person emerge and overcome the hardships and realities associated with identity. The representation of African American people in *The Color Purple*, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and “Everyday Use” should not be a challenge to accept because they are the reflection of the realities faced by Black people. Acceptance of these truths does not mean accepting the responsibility for the controlling images and stereotypes. It is possible for ideas of a people to be created from ignorance and misunderstandings, as history has shown. It is the little pieces of truth that have been misconstrued and mutated that have evolved into what Black women have to fight today.

## CHAPTER 1: LEARNING FROM THEIR MOTHERS

“De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see.”

-Nanny (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*)

The epigraph above is symbolic of the understanding that the mothers and grandmothers from the past had about their position in American society. Nanny, from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, tells her granddaughter the truth that she knows, and teaches her the position Black women have in the world they live in. This lesson and many others are shared over generations keeping a continuous line of communication open from mother to daughter about the dangers of being a black woman and the potential struggles and battles that will be faced not just because of their skin color, but because they are of the “weaker sex.” This scenario alone illustrates the importance of the matriarchal position that exists in the real world and the world of fiction because of the way it highlights the passage of knowledge and understanding.

As previously discussed in the introduction of this thesis, a major element of identity creation is developed from seeking information and knowledge from the past. Alice Walker’s search into the past led her to the works of Hurston and this helped reintroduce a key component of African American women’s literature. Hurston served then as a figurative mother or matriarchal figure for writers like Walker; with the knowledge gained through this search, Walker’s own understanding of herself and her identity were changed. African American female writers other than Walker who have participated in revisiting of the past for inspiration include Hurston, Gayl Jones, and Toni Morrison. This reexamination of the past includes delving into the lives of their mothers and grandmothers. These writers were able to capture snapshots of their true identities beyond that which was defined by society.

This particular tradition of learning from their mothers is well documented in the writing and reflections of critics who explore African American literature. Mary Helen Washington writes about how important this is in the exploration of this genre of literature. According to her, “The articulation of a black and female subculture is to be found in the early political writings of black women educators and orators and abolitionists; in the collected and uncollected narratives of black slave woman; in the religious conversion narratives of black woman, in the folklore passed on from mother to daughter” (4). In this information writers can ascertain the experiences that helped craft Black women and their true identities and not the stereotypes that were made so widely available to be accepted by America’s patriarchal society.

Like the way other ethnic groups in America face the pitfalls of identities created and crafted by generalities, Black women in America have encountered this social and political dehumanization from the days when they were first brought to this country as slaves. It is through a white male dominated society that all women of color face the struggle of creating an identity that is self—defined and acknowledged. In her speech at the Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio, Sojourner Truth presents the audience with an argument that addresses this issue. She says

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to

slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me!  
And ain't I a woman? (Truth)

White women in America may have received this treatment described by the male audience member; however, black women could not expect the same given society's negative perception of their skin color. Truth's argument is two fold in that it focuses on the notion that women are more than a definition set up by the white men in American and that Black women and their struggles have left them outside of this definition because of their place in the American society. It is the statements of women like Truth who Black women have continuously looked back to for guidance as they set out on journeys in search for identity.

Like many other Black women writers, Walker sees the writers before her as maternal leaders, which can be seen in her appreciation for the writing of Hurston. Washington says, "the woman-centeredness that is evidenced in the novels of nearly every American Black writer is the sign of a very special tradition, one capable of breaking through all the powerful illusions men hold about Black women" (6). She goes on to say that this tradition is the mother—daughter connection that helps dispel the negative stereotypes that are often reinforced by the fiction of the male writer. Walker uses this technique in her writing and it creates a realistic depiction of Black women. Another important insight from Washington to note is the mentioning of men. This goes back to Truth's understanding that men in America, no matter the race, hold the power of defining women, and it is their thinking that needs to be dismissed to create more realistic ideas of all women.

In Walker's "Everyday Use" the focus is on the identity of three women with little mention of men. Central to this story is the mother's reaction to her daughters, who create opposite identities. The oldest daughter Dee, or Wangero, lives a life in contrast to that of her

little sister and her mother. Maggie and the mother continue to exist in the world many southern women would have lived. They made their own quilts, churned their own butter, and butchered their own animals to eat. While Dee has chosen to seek out a new concept of what it means to be a Black woman during a time where the culture was changing and Black people were experiencing an identity revival, her mother and sister persisted in the lives they were accustomed to.

The mother in “Everyday Use” describes and defines herself as similar to Sophia from *The Color Purple*; she does not allow herself to be limited to the mammy image in spite her appearance. She is a bigger woman capable of running and maintaining a house, while also working outside of the home in the fields. The pride of these accomplishments is shown when she says, “One winter I knocked a bull calf straight in the brain between the eyes with a sledge hammer and the meat hung up to chill before night fall” (461). This mother is a great example of the southern woman Walker wants to present; however, she exists outside of the framework of the traditional southern woman adapted by writers and media. Again, her strength and her actions are a part of her character and her life; they are not a burden bestowed upon her by society to enable the mammy stereotype.

The story’s conflict revolves around Dee’s desire to have the mundane objects that her mother and sister put to everyday use. She wants the butter churn top and the dasher to preserve her family’s heritage, and though this appreciation appears to be only for the purpose of museum quality preservation it helps define the new identity that she has accepted. Though it is different from her life, the mother does not reject her daughter’s lifestyle and even says she likes her dress (463). The mother is accepting of the child she has brought in this world because of the freedom she exhibits.

The younger of the two daughters, Maggie, unlike her sister has embraced the lifestyle from the past. Her physical impairment and shy nature have limited her development in social situations. The mother describes her daughter's walk as "chin on chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle" (461). This daughter seems trapped by circumstance, but not by society. Maggie will inherit the heritage Dee wants to put on a pedestal. She has no doubt learned to exist in the lifestyle her mother has brought her up in, and unlike Dee she makes the choice to do so. After Dee leaves, the mother and Maggie dip snuff "and then the two of [them] sat there just enjoying, until it was time to go in the house and go to bed" (468).

What needs to be noted in this story is how the mother accepts both of her daughters no matter the identity they have chosen. This choice and affirmation from the mother liberates both Maggie and Dee, even though Dee sees her sister as being trapped by poverty. They have been allowed to be responsible for their freedom without limitations, and this is shown when the mother makes sure Dee is not allowed to restrict her sister's lifestyle by taking the quilts that were promised to her.

In "Everyday Use," Walker does not put an emphasis on the relationship(s) the mother has had with men, and it is secondary to the main idea of the text, which is that identity is about choice. Choice is what is stripped away from the Celies, Mems, and Margarets of the Black community. The mother's two daughters get to exist in the worlds that they choose for themselves, and it is because of their mother that they are allowed to make this choice. She breaks down barriers and shows them a freedom that a mother like Celie could not have. In this story we see how a parent's decision to live above societal restrictions allows for more liberated daughters. This theme or idea is exactly what Mary Helen Washington discusses when she talks about the way Black women writers look to their predecessors to help liberate them and

eventually help them make choices that filter out to their readers and their budding “daughters” searching for a self—defined identity.

The women in this short story learn and grow under the tutelage of their mother, and this continues in the other works written by Walker. In *The Color Purple*, Celie develops a lasting connection with Sug and builds a new life and identity through this bond. Her story changes once this bond is made, and others like it develop throughout the novel. What women of any race learn from each other is essential to the creation and understanding of true identities, which will be shown in the chapters to come through exploring the women in *The Color Purple* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*.

## CHAPTER 2: THE SUSPENDED WOMAN AND THE MAMMY

The dominant picture of a dark—skinned, headscarf clad, older woman with a loving appearance is the identity crippling mammy image that has permeated American culture. This stereotype is not all negative; however, it is the restricting nature of generalizing a large group of people that gives it the power to restrain Black women from developing an identity. The inclusion of a matriarch who is nurturing, deeply religious, and strong has been a defining element of American literature throughout history, particularly fiction depicting the South. The matriarchs in these novels play a vital role in the survival and guidance of their families. The Southern white grouping of all Black mothers and wives under this umbrella category defiled this image. The positives in this image and stereotype are now a debilitating aspect of the marginalization of Black women. It is this lack of a true singular identity that is paralleled by the struggle faced by the wives in Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Color Purple*. These women live in a state of suspension, where they are trapped or suspended from experiencing a true sense of self because of the marital abuse they experience. Within her works, Walker juxtaposes these suspended women with Sophia from *The Color Purple* to illustrate the turn from the restricting mammy image.

Alice Walker, in the true African American literary tradition, presents the realities of Southern living in her fictional accounts. She highlights the struggles, miseries, and agonies that Margaret, Mem, Celie, and Sophia face as wives. This includes their suspension, which parallels with the way Black women are trapped by the stereotypes used to classify and define them. Walker's depictions of Southern women naturally include characteristics associated with the mammy stereotype. However, through the lives of Margaret, Mem, and Celie, Walker highlights

the suspended effect of a lack of self-identity and departs from the mammy image by presenting dynamic characters that are more than loving, caring, and strong women.

As with many images, the historical presence of the mammy was not the image now used to portray African American women. In her research Carolyn M. West mentions that enslaved women often were beaten, overworked, and raped. In response, they ran away or helped other slaves escape, fought back when punished, and in some cases, poisoned slave owners. In order to deal with this uncomfortable reality, historians and authors rewrote history to create the image of the loyal, happy, mammy (West 289). This reimagining of the Black women shows a societal need to create their own definition or ideas that better suit what they wanted to believe about Black women, the treatment they received, and the actions they did in response to that treatment.

This particular assignment of definition has stuck in American cultural references to Black women and the mammy image continues to be used and reintroduced in various forms. Like West, bell hooks also addresses this rewriting of a historical account of Black women. According to her work the mammy stereotype developed around the desire to create an image of Black women that would not pose a threat to the dominance of white patriarchy. In spite of the reality that most housekeepers were young single women, white people chose to construct the image of the caretaker/housekeeper as fat, asexual, unhygienic, falling out of her shoes, and most importantly possessing an overwhelming love for white people (hooks 84). This new image presented little challenge to the dominant white society, and its popularity has permeated American culture for years inspiring popular figures such as Aunt Jemima in all of her head—wrapped goodness.

In the Black community, the most prominent characteristics associated with the mammy image are those that are positives, but are restricting when used to define or generalize. West

continues her analysis of the mammy stereotype by suggesting that by being nurturing, Black women have aided their race for decades (290). It is this responsibility that has added to the trial Black women face. The stereotype bolsters “the belief that Black women happily seek multiple roles rather than assuming them out of necessity, that they effortlessly meet their many obligations, and they have no desire to delegate responsibilities to others” (West 290). The role Black women play in their families even in today’s society develops out of necessity, and to believe that all Black women are strong and capable is what perpetuates the mammy stereotype.

The idea of the strong Black women is so prevalent that Black women continue to struggle with living up to this aspect of the mammy stereotype. The mammy image’s ability to permeate all levels of society encourages authors such as Alice Walker with her womanist views to deconstruct these limiting definitions for Black women and women as a whole. Barbara Christian credits the 1960’s for inspiring Black women “to illuminate [their] own situation, reflect on [their] own identity and growth, [their] relationship to men, children, society, history, and philosophy as [they] had experienced it” (Christian 16). Black women writers were beginning to portray their existence in a way that earlier male African American writers had not done. Christian mentions how Black male writers of the past depicted Black women who very nearly resemble the stereotypes popular in southern white fiction (15). However, the growth of Black woman’s experiences in fiction changed stereotypes like the mammy image; Walker shows this in the lives of Celie and Sophia from *The Color Purple* who contradicts the mammy. According to Christian, the mammy stereotype “is carefully and continually moved from the level of stereotype to that of a living human being with her own desires and needs” (16). It is this changing stereotypical image that leads to the characters in Alice Walker’s work that are trapped by their inability to fulfill their own needs and desires because they are wives.

In Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, a family living in the South faces debilitating poverty and other societal pressures that set into motion the growth of Grange Copeland and the downfall of his son. Though the men and their experiences are at the forefront of the novel, the way the men's lives affect the women around them is what the analysis of this text will focus on. The first character to address from this novel is Margaret and her suspension and movement away from the mammy image.

At the beginning of the novel, the Copeland family is set in comparison to Margaret's family from the North. The Copeland's live on a sharecropping farm barely surviving, while Margaret's family seems to be well off and pleased with their life in the north; and it is this that draws attention to Margaret's role in her family. Her son, Brownfield, comments on her behavior and actions that reference her suspension as a wife as well as the mammy qualities that she possesses. Brownfield says, "His mother agreed with his father whenever possible... He thought his mother was like their dog in some ways. She didn't have a thing to say that did not in some way show her submission to his father" (*Third Life* 5). Margaret is a subservient wife to her husband, and this bewilders her son who believes it is out of the same fear he has for his father.

Grange Copeland's position in the family dictates the way his wife behaved, as well as his son. Ann DuCille discusses this particular dynamic as a legacy of the Black marriage after slavery. The husband was the master of his wife much like the way the white slave owner was the master of the slaves (53). This master to servant/slave role suspends Margaret in a weekly cycle of work, poverty, and verbal abuse. It is an element of their position in society that suspends this entire family.

As a wife of a sharecropper, Margaret's major responsibility was to work for the survival of her husband and son. W. Lawrence Hogue discusses the limitations on Margaret's life when

he says, “She can attend to her son when time allows, remain loyal and submissive to Grange, or commit suicide” (49). Margaret’s abandonment of Brownfield at first seems to contradict her role as mother, but she does this under the limitations of the necessities of maintaining her family’s survival. This also shows the willingness of Margaret to stay true to her role as wife. However, Margaret eventually abandons her role of wife and strays from her duties and the restricting characteristics of the mammy.

Margaret has independent wants outside of what is shown in the Copeland household that are hidden from Brownfield’s perspective. Brownfield and the reader only discover otherwise when his cousins divulge information “telling him his mother wanted to leave his father and go North to Philadelphia with them. They said that his mother wanted him, Brownfield, to go to school, and that she was tired of his father and wanted to leave him anyway” (The Third Life 4-5). Margaret’s daily activities towards the survival of her family and the dutiful obligation to her husband are the elements that are a part of the central image of the mammy. Her decision to escape ultimately changes her into a woman driven to fulfill her own needs and desires.

Alice Walker veers away from the stereotyped mammy/matriarch image and adds dynamic qualities to Margaret through her escape. Brownfield reflects on the change in his mother, who adopts a new personality that takes her away from home and brings in a new mouth to feed. Margaret and Grange’s fights lead her to act in a way distinctively different from what is expected of a wife. The novel reads, “Gone were the times she waited alone on Saturday afternoons for people who never came. Now when her husband left her at home and went into town, she followed” (The Third Life 16). Margaret smelled different, acted different, and dressed differently. This transformation changes the dynamics of the Copeland household, even if just for the weekend. The master loses control of his wife and no longer is the wife trapped

under his domination. Margaret travels into the world leaving behind the obligations and demands placed upon her because of Grange and their poverty—stricken life.

Margaret and Grange both experience the freedom of the weekend, but Margaret reverts back to her role during the week. Walker writes, “On weekdays when sober and wifely, she struggled to make food out of plants that grew wild and game caught solely in traps, she was submissive still” (20). She returns to her weekly submissive duties with her husband and the weekends are reserved for a quasi-freed Margaret. It is her neglect of the illegitimate baby that shows her true devotion to her masterly husband Grange. There is love in this marriage that struggles to exist within the context of the hard life the Copelands face, and the remnants of Margaret’s submission is due to a want and need to maintain what remains of their once loving connection.

Grange’s eventual escape North severs Margaret’s tie to her role as wife, and she ends her life in response to the abandonment. Margaret’s suicide shines light on the effect of the debilitating impoverished existence of a sharecropper’s wife. The choice to end her life and abandon her legitimate son contradicts the characteristics associated with the mammy including being strong, loving, and religious. Margaret could not experience true freedom from her oppressive existence except through suicide. Walker writes, “Margaret found relief from her cares in the arms of her fellow bait-pullers and church members, or with the man who drove the truck,” (20). The cycle of misery Margaret felt ended when she committed suicide, thus gaining true the only true freedom she could find.

Brownfield’s perspective of his parents’ relationship is very limited, leaving him in the dark about the true character of his mother, his father, and the difficulties they face. This absence of awareness is shown in his perspective of his mother as the family dog and his lack of

understanding of his father's reaction to the man in the truck. This shade is lifted when Brownfield gets married and treats his own wife the way his father treated his mother continuing the master/servant cycle of impoverished Black marriages after slavery. Brownfield's marriage with Mem is marred by the same negative factors that keep Grange and Margaret from living a happy life. Kate Cochran suggests, "Just as each week in the sharecropping homes follows a cycle of depression and violence, so too does the lineage of the characters continue a pattern" (84). Brownfield's observations of his parents relationship alters his understanding of relationships and leads to the eventual entrapment of his wife Mem.

Brownfield's hope for his future life and marriage are detailed in a daydream that helps him escape his situation, and it is this daydream that shows his inner thoughts on marriage. In his dream, "The face of Brownfield's wife and that of the cook constantly interchanged. So that his wife was first black and glistening from cooking and then white and powdery to his touch" (*The Third Life* 18). This shift in imagery shows the servile role of the wife Brownfield is used to seeing as well as an unrealistic expectation of what and who the wife is to be outside of serving him. The contrast in color also suggests that black is synonymous with laborious tasks and powdery white means clean, pleasant, and free. Brownfield's color changing perspective is also accredited to his desire to want what he subconsciously knows he cannot have, the white woman.

The marriage at first seems promising because of the love that existed between them. All of Brownfield's hopes and dreams came true through their constant lovemaking and his worship of all the joy she brought him. This all changes the more indebted Brownfield becomes to the farmer, and it is when he realizes, "He could not save his children from slavery that he begins to trap his wife in his own depression" (*The Third Life* 54). According to Cochran, "In beating

their wives, Brownfield and Grange redirect the aggression they feel as a result of their own subjugation. Therefore, domestic violence, creating brokenness in their lives in the sharecropping system” (84). Brownfield experiences the cycle of dehumanization his father did, and the only way for him to still feel like a man is to exert his will and power over Mem.

Mem’s reaction to her husband’s abuse reflects characteristics of the mammy image. It says, “she accepted all his burdens along with her own and dealt with them from her own greater heart and greater knowledge” (*The Third Life* 55). Mem’s knowledge above all gives her awareness of what her husband faces and she shows strength and love in spite of that. Her loving, caring actions continue, and the mammy qualities she exhibits are explained. Brownfield, like his father, seeks out Josie for money and relief while “leaving Mem to carry on the struggle for domestic survival any way she chose and was able to manage” (*The Third Life* 55). Mem struggles for the survival of her family and this validates certain qualities of the mammy, but not in the exclusive sense of Black women readily accepting this image. It is out of survival that these qualities became prevalent for Black women in the South.

Brownfield subjects Mem to what he believes she deserves as a “nigger woman” because this is the type of woman he feels he deserves. Mem’s degradation is easily achieved because “she had been there before, but she does it and accepts it to please her husband” (*The Third Life* 56). She accepts her treatment and lifestyle out of love and acceptance for her husband. In the aim of keeping her husband pleased, Mem like Margaret continues to strive in spite of the abuse and the poor living conditions. This shows strength and devotion, but this is also what keeps these women trapped in their circumstance.

Brownfield knows very well that Mem’s knowledge and language keeps her elevated above him. According to Louis Pratt, Brownfield makes his wife the “scapegoat of his failure”

(51). Brownfield's goal to deteriorate his wife works and Mem begins to lose her only stronghold on her life. Brownfield's goal to trap his devoted wife into the image he wants includes altering her appearance and the way she talks. Mem's physical appearance deteriorates with every beating and she "began speaking once more in her old dialect. The starch of her speech simply went off of her and what came out of her mouth sagged, just as what had come out of her ancestors sagged. Except that where their speech had been beautiful... hers came out flat and ugly, like a tongue broken and trying to mend itself from desperation" (*The Third Life* 57). Mem is transformed into the woman any sharecropping husband would want in the eyes of Brownfield. He, however, fails to realize it is out of her devoted love for him that she allows this. Love is what allows Mem to be trapped, but it is the poverty and dehumanization that causes it to occur.

Eventually, Mem becomes barely a woman. Brownfield feeds on her sadness and desolation, but cannot stand her anger. This anger is what eventually allows Mem to seek something better for her family. Mem does take a stand demanding respect from her husband for herself and their children. She expects him to accept responsibility for his actions and this is when Walker breaks away from the mammy imagery Mem showed before. No longer accepting of sparing her husband's feelings and preserving his manhood, Mem attacks Brownfield and his way of life (90). Even when his family was finally able to experience the life he wanted them to have in town, Brownfield still worked to keep his wife trapped. Mem had overcome their poverty through her tenacity, but it is Brownfield's anger that keeps her suspended in his web. He is never able to relinquish his hatred and breaks his wife who is forced to rely on him like she did once before.

Mem's drive for independence leads to the violent end to her life. Her willingness to suffer, like Margaret, was out of love for her husband and the survival of her family. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker's women aren't flat one-dimensional concepts of the strong Southern Black woman. Hogue in agreement with Mary Helen Washington says the image of the Black woman in this text is one "who is battered, abused, scarred psychologically, who is "profound, tragic, mysterious, sacred, and unfathomable"" (Hogue 50). This image is also present in the female characters presented in that novel *The Color Purple*.

Celie's story is tragic, and the troubles she faces begin early in life with her rape and the abuse she receives from her husband Albert Johnson. Her position as a wife subjects her to the harsh reality associated with the truth behind the mammy image. In desperation for help Albert agrees to take Celie with her cow as if she was another possession to be traded and bartered over. Lindsey Tucker mentions during the exchange by Albert and Alfonso, Celie is objectified as if she was a cow herself (84). This further illustrates Celie's lack of humanity. Out of survival, Celie faces Albert's neglected children and the responsibility of cooking and cleaning the house.

Though Albert lacks the compassion to notice, his sister mentions how beneficial Celie is to her brother. His sister Kate comments on the work Celie does saying that Celie is a "good housekeeper, good with children, good cook. Brother couldn't have done better if he tried" (20). These are the qualities that are used to define a good wife. These qualities are also what make up the perception that gave life to the mammy stereotype in the Black community. In her fear of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Celie works diligently never pleasing her husband. Like Mem and Margaret, Celie is trapped by what is expected of a wife in her husband's eyes.

Despite the hard work Celie does, Albert still finds a reason to beat her. He tells Harpo he beats her "cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All woman good for" (22). Albert's

distorted view is due in part to his inability to have the woman he loves, but it is also reflective of a culture where men see their women as inferior and worthy of abuse. Albert passes these ideas down to his son, and Celie even encourages the abuse of Sophia because it is what she knows brings a woman to heel.

Celie veers from the mammy image in her lack of emotional attachment to Albert's children. She says, "I be good to them. But I don't feel nothing for them. Patting Harpo not even like patting a dog. It more like patting another piece of wood. Not a living tree, but a table, a chifferobe" (29). The dehumanization Celie goes through leaves her emotionless to her master—like husband's children. In turn her response to them lacks the emotional attachment to family that is associated with the mammy.

One of Walker's characters that serves as foils to the characters that are suspended in *The Color Purple* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is Sophia. Sophia challenges the perception that Black women lose their femininity due to the work they do out of necessity for their family. She does not allow society to depict who she is, what she should be, or what she is capable of like the mother in "Everyday Use." She possesses physical strength that is carried through to her core as a genuine attribute that she embodies; she embraces this strength at first because she has to in her situation, but eventually she sustains this strength by choice.

Sophia's presence in the story contrasts everything that Celie believes to be the correct and proper thing to do as a wife. Harpo is confounded by his wife's refusal to mind what he says. After years of seeing his father dominate Celie, Harpo tries to enforce the same dynamic in his own household. Through the instruction of his father and Celie, Harpo beats Sophia, who strikes back. Unlike Celie, Sophia rejects the ideal that a man is in charge and in control. She refuses to be trapped by her role as wife. She tells Celie, "All my life I had to fight. I had to

fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own home"(38).

Sophia fights for equality in her life and expects it in her marriage.

Sophia is willing to go head to head with societal restrictions outside of her home as well. When she works at Celie's store in town, she refuses to let the white store clerk demean her by calling her auntie. These familial monikers were used to make a mammy out of any older Black woman, and Sophia rejects it. She exhibits this same behavior again when dealing with Miss Eleanor Jane. Though Sophia developed a mutual respect for the girl while working in the governor's home, she is unwilling to let that relationship trap her. Miss Eleanor Jane fusses about Sophia's unnatural rejection and lack of love of Reynolds Stanley. Sophia tells her, "But all the colored women that say they love yours is lying. They don't love Reynolds Stanley any more than I do" (225). Miss Eleanor Jane expects Sophia to respond with love and affection for her son because of the ingrained image of the "willingly white loving" mammy. Sophia knows the truth and resists allowing it to trap her in the false reality perpetuated by other Black people scared to say they do not love white people's children.

Sophia's strength will influence Celie later in the novel; however, as long as Celie stays trapped in the small world created by Albert she will never experience what Sophia has. At the end of the novel, Albert remarks that Sophia and Shug are like men. Celie responds that they are not like the two of them. Somehow, Sophia and Shug both manage to live lives that do not leave them trapped in one category or the other like Celie and Albert, who let the world dictate their lives for so long. They show the realities of Black women outside the restrictions of society.

In *The Third Life* and *The Color Purple*, the wives are dominated by the idea that Black women cook, clean, and take care of the children. The women are trapped by their

circumstances, which leave them in a state of suspension. This position they live in warrants them the abuse they experience at the hands of their husbands. Observers, in the time after slavery, would have thought this common place and acceptable. In these two novels, Walker shows the brutality of staying strong for survival and she also illustrates Black women's loss of humanity at the hands of their husbands.

The picture Walker paints of the suspended woman shows the limitations that existed as well as the ways in which Black husbands reinforced the suspension. The humanity these women possess is snatched away just as the mammy image zaps the humanity of Southern Black women and continues to work against the possibility of a self-definition for Black women. Walker also uses characters like Sophia and the mother from "Everyday Use" to hint at the way women can liberate themselves from the restrictions imposed on them by society.

The next movement for a woman on her way to emergence is assimilation. This assimilation is a stage of more freedom, but not quite completely unrestricted as in emergence. The women in *The Color Purple* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* that are in this assimilated stage find independence in their sexual lifestyles by resisting societal norms of proper sexual behavior; however, they continue to be limited by their families and their communities. The limitation that the women experience stems from a desire to dispel the negative idea of the Black female sexuality in the form of the jezebel stereotype. The same way that Walker moves her characters away from the mammy image, she moves them away from the jezebel by illustrating diverse experiences in Black female sexuality.

### CHAPTER 3: THE ASSIMILATED WOMAN AND THE JEZEBEL

“Why do they see a colored woman only as a gross collection of desires, all uncontrolled, reaching out for their Apollos and Quasimodos with avid indiscrimination?”

--Marita O. Bonner (170)

Similar to the image of the Mammy, the Jezebel's creation stems from the desire to create and push a particular narrative. Most of what surrounds Black sexuality in reference to men or women is dictated by historical obsession with the difference of Black bodies and White bodies. Within her text, Alice Walker discusses concepts of sex and love making in the Black relationship, but it is her inclusion of the forbidden topics, such as rape and incest, that illustrates the truth of Black sexuality. Josie, Lorene, Shug, and Celie are the characters chosen to present the sexuality of the South and to bring forth the taboos of the Black community. It is through their acceptance of their sexuality and ownership of their bodies that make them fit into the assimilated stage of Alice Walker's cycle to the freed, or emergent woman. Unlike the role of the wife, the suspended woman, the assimilated woman's movement towards freedom includes a repossession of herself and the parts of her body that are thought to be owned by a man. Josie, Lorene, and Shug portray this assimilated concept throughout their stories, but Celie moves into this role with her choice of loving Shug and the lesbian relationship that exists between them. These women fit the Jezebel stereotype because of their rejection of social beliefs about what is acceptable for Black female sexually, but it is what their actions prove that differ from the limited view of the oversexed woman stereotype.

The negative perception of Black sexuality that persists today began during colonization. According to Sander Gilman, “By the eighteenth century, the sexuality of the Black, both male and female, becomes an icon of deviant sexuality in general” (228). This image, like others

coming from explorers of that time, is obscured by a discrimination against others and a superiority complex that treated people with differences as inferior. Black sexuality at this point is synonymous with all negative aspects of sexuality including deviant acts of bestiality. Patricia Collins suggests that the Black community sets guidelines for what is acceptable and unacceptable to be discussed for the sake of preserving the image of Black sexuality (124). The preservation of the clean wholesome image of Black sexuality is not an easy accomplishment because of the historical accounts and observations made during the time of exploration.

The Black woman, more than the man, has been more distinctly defined by her appearance as being wholly perverse. Simmi Gurwara suggests, “Sexual subordination is unique to an African woman as she experiences sexual subjugation not only at the hands of her own men but also colonial subjugation by the European colonizers” (39). The distorted view of colonizers made the African woman “serve as the icon for Black sexuality” because of her nudity, her large buttocks, and the lack of shame accustomed with nakedness. As Gilman points out, “The Buttocks of the Hottentot serve as a somewhat comic sign of the primitive grotesque nature of the black female” (238). It was through probing and scientific exploration that the body of certain Black women became the ground upon which othering occurred and persisted for centuries.

One example of this discriminatory action is shown through the life of a woman made into a specimen for the amusement, entertainment, and wonderment of European observers and scientists. Sarah Bartmann was taken to Europe and showcased for the difference of appearance of her sexual organs and her buttocks. It was through these examinations that “the figure of Sarah Bartmann was reduced to her sexual parts. The audience which had paid to see her buttocks and fantasized about the uniqueness of her genitalia when she was alive could, after her

death and dissection, examine both” (232). This treatment of Sarah Bartmann while she was alive and subsequently after her death begs the question of who the true deviant was. However, it is incredible historical accounts like this that continue to inform modern understanding of Black sexuality.

The sexual violence towards Black women in the past has directly influenced the perception of Black sexuality in a negative way. Carolyn West mentions that during slavery Black women suffered under “sexual terrorism” through violent acts of rape that did not end when slavery did, but continued through racial attacks by vigilante groups whose goal was to continually break Black people through acts of violence (294). She continues saying, “The Jezebel stereotype, which branded Black women as sexually promiscuous and immoral, was used to rationalize these sexual atrocities” (294). It was not uncommon for black slave women to be blamed for their own rape because of their perceived sexual depravity.

During the time after slavery, freed Black men and women explored aspects of their sexuality that were not easily done while enslaved. Black people freely participated in sexual activity without the need for marriage; this sexual liberation fed the negative perceptions that led Black women to fight back against the generalizations of Black sexuality. bell hooks’ extensive exploration of sexism and the effect on the Black woman illustrates this point. She says, “Trying to dispel the myth that all black women were sexually loose, they emulated the conduct and mannerisms of white women” (56). They hoped that following the pristine example of White women would lead them out of the darkness of sexual deviance, but it did not work.

The persistence of the overly sexual Black woman in American society is evidently hard to overcome. It is not hard to see that once embedded in American culture, Black and White people are willing participants in the continued diminishing of the Black woman. The history of

Black women's image keeps them from being protected by the violence of rape, which is an issue that comes up in Walker's work *The Third Life* and *The Color Purple*. The "unrapeable" Black woman image is perpetuated by the modern acceptance of half-naked Black women dancing in music videos or "twerking" on *YouTube*. This popularized image is broadcasted for the world, and even if a Black woman does not dress and or behave in the manner suggested by the modern Jezebel image, she still will have the negative image projected on her (West 294). It is society's idea that "even if an individual black female became a lawyer, doctor, or teacher, she was likely to be labeled a whore" (hooks 58). Walker strives to move past this notion, and through Josie, Lorene, Shug, and Celie she presents a clearer perspective of Black sexuality to the world.

The rape and incest presented in *the Color Purple* are hard elements to discuss when the reader has a distorted view of Black sexuality. However, the absence of this element would do a disservice to women whose lives included these experiences. The tragedy of Celie's life starts at the beginning of the book on page three with her rape. It is this rape that shows how the patriarchal society influenced the thinking of Black men. In the life of Mem and Celie, the brutality they face as wives comes from the master/servant dynamic created after slavery and is also a part of the patriarchal domination of the inferior.

The disregard of Celie's incestuous rape by her stepfather, the man she believed to be her real father, is the perfect example of societal expectations permeating Black life. Because she is Black and a woman she is less than human and her rape is excusable because of that. The rape of Squeak is symbolic of this same concept. Even as a mixed woman she could not escape the dehumanizing effect associated with her gender and race. Walker discusses the blunt brutality of Celie's rape leaving no room for misunderstanding. The image of the rape is

inescapable for the reader, which is unlike the view expressed by Southern white observers who suggested the animalistic quality of black women kept them from being true victims of the brutality.

In *The Third Life*, Josie's existence is marred by a decision that was looked down on by the world and her father. However, this decision leads her to an acceptance of herself that brings her to the assimilated point of owning her own body and not being trapped by the control men have over the female body. Walker pushes the limits on social views in the text by presenting a character like Josie who is sexual and feels power in that position.

Josie's first sexually immoral act leaves her with the sign of her sin. Her violent dreams and nightmares are equivalent to the reminder of mainstream America's disapproval and negative image of Black female sexuality. Her father's actions and behavior have the role of exacting these rules and guidelines on a young Black woman. Josie bought gifts for him and the family in the hopes of returning home. It says "she had thought, at last I will go home to stay, to be again a child, be again sixteen, and near his heart and hand" (*The Third Life* 39). To be a child again and innocent of her transgressions was her goal, and this childlike state keeps her trapped in the master/servant cycle of the wife, but it is limited to the ownership of her body and her purity.

The resulting pregnancy of Josie's relationship drives a wedge between her and the world. It signifies an end to a life without the scrutiny posed upon Black women. Her shame forces Josie into the world truly associated with the oversexed Jezebel. Her mother observes this wondering the amount of men who are friends with her husband that have raped her daughter's body to aid Josie's movement back into her father's graces (40). Sexually exploited and

completely incapable of changing her descended position, Josie embraces the power of her sexuality and ownership of her body affords her.

Josie's father's last words sealed her fate and pushed her to the limit of understanding what her life now meant. Once labeled, Josie knows she will remain impure and unaccepted. This is the first step of actual movement she makes in becoming an assimilated woman. She accepts her role in society, which gives her a little fragment of freedom. Josie's exploits were started with her father's friends and they continued to seek her out on Poontang Street. It says "fat Josie" did her job with a gusto that denied shame, and demanded her money with an authority that squelched all pity" (*The Third Life* 41). Josie embraces her choice and she "obtained the wherewithal to dress herself well, and to eat well, and to own the Dew Drop Inn" (41). This sexually driven life Josie leads gives her freedom from poverty, freedom from ownership, and freedom of her own thoughts. Here is where Walker differs from the societal view on Black female sexuality, which believes the sexually immoral should be in suffering and trapped wholly by their shame experiencing nothing but embarrassment forever.

Josie's life is not free of this shame and disgust of her choice. Her eventual decision to marry Grange upon his return is a sign of her wanting to be a respectful woman. However, before Grange's return Josie's actions serve as a way to quell the disapproval that she is reminded of by her nightmares. Josie finds solace when she has sex with Brownfield. Through sex, she released her mind from its memories of betrayals; she forgot the terrors of her recurring dreams and she entered a world of great gentleness and contentment" (63). The immoral sex that Josie takes part in symbolizes more than the negative image of the Jezebel, it validates the need for women to possess themselves and their own desires. This sex is also limiting in that Josie relies on a male counterpart to bring her to this serene feeling.

Unlike her mother, Lorene does not fall into the trap of the Jezebel. In the text it says, “anything her mother tried appealed to her” (44). Lorene was more than willing to feel and experience what her mother did unaware of the demons and witches that rode her through the night. Josie’s descent from grace keeps her from trapping her daughter in the same way. Her acceptance and approval of her own lifestyle encourages her daughter’s eventual sexual behavior. Lorene knows no shame and is not limited by the same societal response that her mother experienced. This is clear in the response from the children who aspire to grow to be like her. Unlike her mother, Lorene’s aspirations are not to escape the immorality of her life style and this freedom, her frame of mind is what women deserve to have whether they have sex once or multiple times. Lorene’s behavior exists outside the limits of social scrutiny and she is hardly affected or disturbed by what her community thinks.

Like Josie and Lorene, Shug Avery, in *The Color Purple* focuses on her sexual life and orientation. Shug struggled from early in life with her free expression of intimacy. She tells Celie, “One thing my mama hated me for was how much I loved to fuck, she say. She never love to do nothing had anything to do with touching nobody, she say” (*The Color Purple* 103). Shug’s love was expressed openly and freely, and it is this behavior that is shunned by her mother. This is the same way that society reacts to Shug’s freedom. Shug appears to not be bothered by society or her mother’s view. She is vulgar about the relationship she has with Albert, when she says, “Us fuck so much in the open us give fucking a bad name” (104). This open vulgar approach to sexuality is empowering to Shug and Albert and no other man can stay away from her.

It is Celie who gives commentary on how the community views of Shug Avery. When Shug is sick, there is an endless list of people ready and willing to discuss her lifestyle. The

most interesting element of these discussions is where they take place. The reverend and the women of the church are the owners of the gossip Celie shares in her letter to God. They pass judgment on Shug, but never sympathize with Celie and the women are always making eye contact with Albert. The preacher uses Shug as a lesson telling the congregation about “a strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin. Singing for money and taking other women mens. Talk about slut, hussy, heifer, and street cleaner” (40). This observation from others is what Patricia Collins mentions about Black women sexuality being in the hands of everyone else. As seen in *The Third Life*, Shug’s name is dirt and the rejection of her mother is synonymous with her community’s rejection of her for her choice to freely love.

Shug’s lifestyle is what keeps Albert from being able to marry her. His father’s rejection of Shug is continued through the years and is seen when he tells his son, “she ain’t even clean. I hear she got the nasty woman disease” (49). This “nasty woman’s disease” sentiment is shared with others in Albert’s family and the community that he lives in; it is the oversexed Jezebel image that they are reacting to. In the years after slavery, Black men and women hoped to create a positive image of their race, and rejected members who went against this drive towards respectability. Walker doesn’t limit Shug’s life to just her sexuality, but through the lens of society every aspect of her life points to the negativity associated with a certain level of freedom that comes with rejecting societal norms. This is a freedom that involves “mobility and sexuality” according to Tucker (84).

Similar to several aspects of the jezebel, Shug sings, dances, and is outspoken. Her use of talent allows her the opportunity to own her own home and anything else that she wants, including men. Celie realizes the control Shug has over her own life when Shug discusses the weakness of Albert and her rejection of him as a husband. She says, “I didn’t even want him for

a husband, she say. I never really wanted Albert for a husband” (105). Here Shug displays her option to choose whether to marry, which is an aspect of her assimilation. Shug’s ultimate decision to use Albert for sexual pleasure alone keeps her from being trapped, but her need to have this man sexually keeps her from an exclusive level of freedom associated with the lack of this necessity.

Shug is presented as more liberated than Josie, though she too is still haunted by her past. The eventual birth of her third child by Albert finally caused her parents to push her away, which is similar to the treatment Josie received. Unlike Josie, Shug continues to move in spite of her family’s rejection, but is trapped by her need for love. Walker shows a woman not only comfortable with her sexuality and position in society but also who is aware of her needs as a woman.

Shug cannot escape the need to be loved by a man. Later in the novel Shug finds love in a younger man, which breaks Celie’s heart because she does not understand the appeal or the draw that still remains within Shug to want or need a man. Shug’s response to why she has to be with this man is, “I got to have it Celie. I am too weak a woman not to” (212). Shug feels compelled to have this man as a sign that someone can still love her though she has aged and gained weight. Shug’s assimilation is presented through her need to be loved by a man. Her worth comes from knowing that she is still valued by a man for what she possesses.

Shug takes ownership of her life in a way no other woman in the story does. This is through the possession of her body that is not subjected to the violently dominating nature of marriage that Celie experiences. Shug Avery’s ownership of her body is most clearly seen when she discusses fucking with Celie. She encourages Celie to look at her vagina and her breasts. This awareness leads to an appreciation of Celie’s body by none other than Celie. The lack of

understanding that Celie has is placed in contrast to the advanced knowledge Shug possesses showing how limiting a lack of sexuality or ownership of body can truly be for a woman.

Celie's rejection of the acceptable heterosexual relationship is a part of the deviance stereotypically associated with Black sexuality. Celie's first sexual satisfaction is between her and Shug; this is used to illustrate a point discussed in a previous chapter on the way women gain freedom through connections with other women. The women have a sexual encounter that starts with a kiss and touching, and though they both lack experience the pleasing of each other comes natural. Celie describes it saying, "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" (97). The start of this sexual relationship is nurturing and empowering in a way that Celie's previous sexual encounters had not been.

Celie and Shug's relationship crossed the line of acceptance within their community and Harpo and Sophia work to match Celie with a man suggesting that women loving women is natural. Celie's move away from the social confinements severed her connection to the male relationships she was forced to have, and brings her to an assimilated state still thwarted, but feeling a sense of liberation. Though Celie began to move away from societies restrictions, when she views her body in the mirror she says, " My skin dark, my nose just a nose, my lips just lips,. My body just any woman's body going through the changes of age. Nothing special here for nobody to love" (220). She does not see the worth of her black body in the mirror and it is a realization that she has not quite escaped the eternalized negativity she has always perceived about herself.

Preconceived ideas and notions about Black sexuality remain a hegemonic practice of mainstream American culture. The inferiority of race and gender of Black women set the

framework for the dominating way that European colonists and then White slave owners were able to control the identity of this group of women. This subjugation is not just limited to a loss of identity, but also a loss of humanity.

The jezebel stereotype's creation was fueled by the negative connotations associated with Black sexuality, and Alice Walker's inclusion of women who reject social notions of what is sexually acceptable works to overthrow years of suppression. These assimilated women are a step past the oppressed state of the suspended woman because of the ownership of their bodies. This is essential to the final move to a freedom from oppression and the repression society uses to limit Black women. The next category of woman to be discussed is the emergent woman, who is a fundamental example of the long process of moving away from a socially defined identity to a self-defined identity through the rejection of stereotyped standards of acceptability. The modern woman's acceptance of controlling images is what Walker and others fight to deter, and it is through a presentation of the truth behind the stereotypes that educate women to move above and beyond societies ideas of the Black woman. The emergent women in *The Color Purple* and *The Third Life of Grange Copland* leave social norms behind and overcome challenges to choose their own identity.

#### CHAPTER 4: THE EMERGENT WOMAN AND THE SAPPHIRE

The sapphire is the final controlling image that has been adopted to portray the antagonistic emotional response of Black women. In the modern world, outside of Walker's text, the idea of the angry black woman is prevalent and often creates a false image of a whole group of women. According to West, Black women "were characterized as strong, masculinized workhorses who labored with Black men in the fields or aggressive women who drove their children and partners away with their overbearing natures" (295). This observation creates the perception that is used to define the emotions of Black women; it also bears witness to the lack of insight into the lives of slave women, which truly limited understanding of the anger that existed within them then and now. Alice Walker's inclusion of the tragedies of the Black woman has taken harsh criticism because it may reinforce negative views of the Black community; however, the inclusion of the trials and tribulations these women face help explain the anger that exists in these women. Celie and Ruth are the two female characters that exhibit the final move towards freedom in their respective narratives. Self-love, respect, and a rejection of the patriarchal society bring about the freedom they experience. The sapphire stereotype is addressed through Celie and Ruth's actions, and it is also through Sophia's response to her husband and others that set up the true understanding of the anger that resides in Black women.

As a Black woman in America, I can attest that there is still much to be angry about. The history and background of this specific group of women leave them trapped not only by race, but gender as well. This is one to the many troubling issues that is hard to address when it comes to umbrella feminist movements. White women, at the least, have somewhat of a safety net that protects them from the realities Black women face. It is the color of skin that has allowed and continues to allow Black women to be seen as unrapeable and as mere concepts of categorization

such as the previous stated mammy, jezebel, and sapphire stereotypes. These controlling images limit what is okay and acceptable for Black women. In the case of the Sapphire image, it dictates how and when a Black woman can respond to anything.

At any point in her life, the Black woman can experience being labeled a sapphire including in everyday encounters at home, work, or the grocery store. According to bell hooks, “The sapphire identity has been projected onto any Black woman who overtly expresses bitterness, anger, and rage about her lot. Consequently, many Black women repress these feelings for fear of being regarded as shrewish sapphires” (86). The resistance and retaliation against social views of Black women exists in America today, but it is overshadowed by the negative concepts associated with this response. Some use the spunky sapphire attitude as a source of entertainment, while the women restricted under this stereotype struggle to process emotions. In lieu of appearing ghetto, trashy, and bossy, some women act as Celie does harboring and nurturing anger. This emotional repression is psychologically unhealthy, and leads to more and more women accepting the social control of their identity. West’s argument places blame in the hands of entertainers and media, Black and White, for making the anger of Black women laughable and amusing (295). This amusement adds to the lack of attention to the women who are legitimately angry about the treatment they receive or the experiences that they have that cause them to struggle to be whoever they are in America.

In *the Color Purple*, Sophia’s rejection of society is marked by her anger and ability to stand up to a man whenever she is wronged. Walker’s inclusion of this character is essential to Celie’s eventual movement. Celie admires Sophia’s actions and envies her ability to fight back. To the white southern observer Sophia’s actions would qualify her to fit into the stereotype of the sapphire; however, Alice Walker knows the truth of the matter and shows an empowered woman

who does not appear to be limited by the restrictions set up by society or role as wife. In fact, Sophia's actions are in direct objection to the suppression of women and her advice to Celie is encouraging to Black women because it is the instruction needed to reject and retaliate instead of remaining submissive and weak.

The triumph of Celie and Ruth, in spite of their harrowing experiences, is a roadmap for any woman trapped by the overwhelming power of society to oppress and degrade. Celie's journey begins with an aspect of womanism that Alice Walker and many other Black feminists believe in. Patricia Collins says that it's the relationship between Black women that empowers them (102). She goes on to describe how this is achieved. She says, "In the comfort of daily conversations, through serious conversations and humor, African-American women as sisters and friends affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist" (102). This oneness with each other is essential to the growth and development of not only women, but also the Black race as a whole, which is a fundamental argument of many African-American leaders from the past. Walker presents this idea in her short story "Everyday Use" by presenting two very different identities that are empowered by the mother's understanding of her daughters and her affirmation of their life choices.

Celie is first drawn to Shug through curiosity, but she openly admits to an inclination towards women. Celie writes in her letter to God, "I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women tho, cause I'm not scared of them" (7). This is the first inclination of Celie's feelings of fear and inferiority in a male dominated world. She has no fear of women because the dynamic is different from experience. Even though her mother cursed her, there is no violence associated with that act. Celie goes so far as to defend herself to God saying, "That's

the truth” as if even God is unbelieving in her. Later in the story, Celie gives up God after associating him with the patriarchal society that she struggles to exist under.

Celie first finds comfort in writing to God, but later rejects him as a worth recipient of her letters because of the image she has of him. She tells Shug exactly why she has stopped writing God saying “Yeah, I say, and he give me 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” (164). Celie’s rejection of the old white man that sits in the sky “being deaf” is her first sign of moving past the patriarchal ideas that have restrained her.

This is just one instance in the novel where Shug’s instructions lead Celie further away from oppression into freedom of mind, body, and thought. Shug’s visual of God in nature brings Celie from her small world. Celie says, “Now that my eyes opening, I feels like a fool. Next to any little shrub of bush in my yard, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s evil sort of shrink” (168). Celie’s anger towards Albert hinders her insight into world; However Shug helps her and removes the shades that keep her bound to her oppression. Shug is able to help bring Celie back to her humanity “because [she] is not confined by societal mandates (like paternalist misogyny or compulsive heterosexuality) that distort or forbid expressions of love” (Bealer 32). She does this first through and emotional sisterly love and then through an intimate sexual love.

Celie finds solace in writing to her sister, and doesn’t write God until the end when she addresses several other elements of nature in her joy of having Nettie and her kids back in her life. This is a sign of how “Celie moves from an object in a patriarchal society to a subject in a womanist space” (George 120). Celie is evolving into more of the type of woman that Walker

encourages all women to be. Rejection of the patriarchal society is the most imperative step to being free in the world.

Though the treatment Celie experiences in life show her how corrupt men can be, Shug continues to teach Celie about man and his ability to control. Shug tells Celie, “Man corrupt everything, 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” (168). It is through these types of lessons that “Walker represents black women’s sexual relationships with and tutelage of one another as an alternative to being subjected to masculinist ideas of sex” (Lewis 162). Celie’s whole life has been dominated by a man, and has felt no control under the God like presence of her step dad and her husband. Celie’s anger grows when she finds the letters from her sister, but she eventually chooses to lash out against her oppression, which subverts the dynamic of the Johnson household.

In one scene in the novel, the actions of Shug, Celie, Squeak, and Sophia confound the men and challenge the traditional views of the male dominated society. The family dinner is interrupted by the announcement of Celie’s impending departure to Memphis with Shug. Albert calls Celie a bitch and proceeds to remind her of her low position in society. He reminds her of her place in the house and what people may say. This illustrates the dominance he believes he has over her. The women laugh at the Albert, which angers Harpo as well. Celie’s choice to go to Memphis with Shug severs her from the man that has oppressed her most of her life. Albert’s insults are synonymous with what has been thought about Black women throughout history. He tells her “You black, you poor, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all” (176). This concept is essential to the oppression of Southern Black women. Because they are Black and a woman they are made to rely on their husbands. Under this dominance, Celie is

subjected to a cruelty that hinders her growth to be anything other than a “mulish” wife.

Through her relationship and with Shug, Celie rejects Albert’s words and is just glad to be alive.

Though Celie finds freedom through the help of Shug Avery, the push to be acceptable socially is a pressure she experiences from other women in the novel. Darlene, one of the women who help Celie with her pants business, encourages Celie to learn to talk proper. She tells Celie that, “colored peoples think you a hick and white folks be amuse” (*The Color Purple* 183). The encouragement is meant to help Celie blend in with the acceptable language of society. This is an element of how society influences the mind of others to push for a change or adaptation. Shug does not push for Celie to change and this is reflective in her own life being whoever she wants to be in spite of the world around her.

Because Ruth experienced the dominated life her mother suffered under her father’s rage and anger, she knew how troubling her future could be as a woman. The day she gets her period she reflects on her womanhood, “What scared her was that she felt her woman’s body made her defenseless. She felt it could now be had and made to conceive something she didn’t want, against her will, and her mind could do nothing to stop it” (*The Third Life* 193). At this early age in her development, Ruth is aware of the way that her body can be used to trap her in the life that her mother had, as well as other women around her. To make surer his granddaughter does not suffer the way he or his son did, Grange works diligently to secure a more positive future.

Unlike Celie’s emergence, a man aids Ruth’s eventual freedom from the cyclical hardship of the Copeland family. And though her future life is not detailed in the novel, Grange sets in motion a plan that will undoubtedly save Ruth from the life many southern Black women faced. First in this plan was to give her self-worth and an existence free of the debilitating slave master relationship. Grange refused to let her pick cotton in the field telling the child, “you not

some kind of field hand!” when she makes a fuss about riding on the back of the truck to take the cotton to the gin (125). Grange and Brownfield both know the reality of seeing a child labor in the field, and this will never be a reality for Ruth because of Grange’s efforts.

Grange continues to empower his granddaughter by unknowingly teaching her appreciation of her body and her heritage. It says, “Grange taught her untaught history through his dance... Through her Grandfather’s supple limbs she learned how marvelous was the grace with which she moved” (134). The love and intimacy shared in these moments of connection are opposite of the fear Ruth felt when she lived with her father. This creates a positive image of the young girl and will help her ascertain what kind of man she may eventually take as a husband.

Brownfield knew his wife’s education made her superior to him, and he worked hard to break her down. However, when Grange has Ruth he strives to educate her in many aspects of life. Ruth learns about the past and present elements of American history. She learns about the ways white people dominated Black people and is made aware of how even the most harmless looking white people can still be dangerous. Among the lessons about how people cause harm, Grange teaches Ruth to shoot for food and defense (138). Along with the education, Ruth is given a tool to protect herself that will aide her in a way that many women did not have during this time with little protection from the world. Grange knows how trapped even a man can feel.

Grange’s hatred towards white people is the overpowering force that guides his instruction of his granddaughter. Grange accepts responsibility for not guiding and leading his own son away from the horrors of the share-croppers life; however, he also lays blame at the feet of the white man who was able to destroy his life as well as his son’s. He tells Ruth, “I want you to fight ‘em every step of the way when they tries to abuse you. An’ they will, ‘cause you’ll be a nigger to ‘em” (211). Ruth’s position as a Black person in the South warrants these lectures

from her grandfather. It is through these discussions and talks that Ruth's ability to live above the lives of her parents and Grandparents continues to grow stronger and stronger.

Ruth's anger towards her father is reflective in their discussion about the past, but her father's rejection of it is metaphorically representative of social rejection of the Black woman's anger. In the face of his transgressions, Brownfield blames his past life for how he treated his wife and kids. Ruth sympathizes with her father, but continues to stand her ground against his responses. She continuously shakes her head dismissing her father's mentions of love and feelings (219). All of Grange's efforts to make an independent, world conscious granddaughter show when Ruth tells her father "I'm not yours" (219). She does not feel possessed by her father and firmly rejects the notion that she belongs to him.

The way Brownfield sees his daughter is the way that many men see their wives. He tells her "you belongs to me, just like my chick or my hog"(220). Here Brownfield treats his daughter as if she is a materialistic possession that can be possessed not as a child to love and lift up. He goes on to insinuate that a man owns property or things to be a man. Ruth's rebuttal is a response that is credited to her Grandfather when she tells Brownfield "A man takes care of his own when he's got it" (220). Ruth's awareness of what a man should be is thanks to Grange. She is and will continue to be a free woman because of this affirmation.

Freedom for Celie came through instruction and love from Shug, while Ruth gained her freedom through the love and dedication of her grandfather's growth after rebirth. As Robert Butler suggests, "Although Walker is deliberately vague about the end-point of Ruth's journey in order to stress its open, indeterminate quality, she emphatically points out that it will be radically different from the failed journeys undertaken by several other characters" (74). Ruth's journey is not explicitly mapped out, but she will not be trapped by the existence her parents and

grandparents faced. The essential message of this movement toward freedom points to the need to choose an identity that is self—defined and is not limited by social standards, cultural obligations, and ill-informed stereotypical representations. Through self-love, self-appreciation, connections with family, and rejection of the patriarchal society Celie and Ruth emerge out of the trap society attempts to place them in. Their anger is what fuels their move forward and aids in their rejection.

The sapphire stereotype is misplaced on many women; especially in the South, where Black women were rightfully angry about the position they found themselves in. Walker justifies this anger through the presentation of the hardships those women faced. However, the modern day image is used as a tool to make light of anger fueled responses or associate antagonistic behavior with negative connotations that restrict the emotional response of Black women. Essentially, the Black woman must take back her right to be angry regardless of what is socially accepted and reject any aspect of her culture that seeks to trap her or own her. Through her choices, can gain freedom and experience the emergence presented in the lives of the characters previously discussed.

## CONCLUSION

The previous chapters illustrate the way Alice Walker addresses controlling images in her texts *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *The Color Purple*, and “Everyday Use.” In each chapter the discussion centered on Walker’s reintroduction of humanity to the dehumanizing stereotypical concepts of the mammy, the jezebel, and the sapphire. Historically, Black women have faced the hegemonic othering practices of a white dominated society. It is through these images that literature has been produced, and texts by White and Black authors have perpetuated the controlling images encouraging their constant evolution through time. Walker, in contrast to the controlling images, sets up her novels presenting women on different levels of understanding the self and ending with a realized self-identity.

Critics and scholars have negated Walker’s purpose by suggesting that her work adds to the notion that Black women and men are exactly as described by White southern observers. The stereotypes that were used to exploit Black women and further degrade them in American society were not created by their own kind, but by a group of people who created the image of the mammy, the jezebel, and the sapphire to restrict Black women and keep them from challenging the status quo of the White male dominated society in America. Walker’s work illuminates this aspect, while also presenting the truth that is disregarded when people only view Black women through the lenses of these particular stereotypes.

In “Everyday Use” we see the overall intention of the goal of the Black female writer on her audience. Some may suggest that this story serves as a warning to those who only see Black heritage as museum quality exhibits to be admired and not truly appreciated. However, the mother in this story raises her daughters into women who are free to delve in the creation of their own identities. Dee throws herself into the counter culture movement and embraces the new

ways Black people were defining themselves, and the mother accepts this. Maggie chooses to live the life that she has watched her mom work at and the mother accepts this as well. It is in the mother's action of refusing to let her oldest daughter impose on her little sister that shows the role Black female writers play in helping Black women find an identity. These writers have the task of not only passing on advice and guidance, but to also play as a go between for Black women and any group of people hoping to impose and restrict them by presenting truths the way Alice Walker has in her literature.

In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* Walker examines at the forefront of her novel the generational problems that exist because of the oppressive society that existed post slavery. Through Grange and Brownfield's lives, Walker illustrates the effects of this existence on the women in their lives. As a suspended wife, Mem and Margaret are broken down in a similar way that the master servant dynamic breaks their husbands. These women suffer in a way that Josie, Lorene, and Ruth do not. Open sexuality free Josie and Lorene, and Lorene experiences more freedom than her mother because of her life outside of the scrutiny of society. Josie faces this in the form of nightmares that remind her of her transgression, but she experiences a quasi-freedom because of the lack of limitations on her movement in a world where wives cannot exist. However, it is Ruth whose future has been set up by her grandfather to allow her to know a reality without the oppression, subjugation, and dominance of society.

*The Color Purple* follows the life of Celie through her epistolary reflections on her life. It is through the letters that her progress from the oppressed wife to the emergent woman is illuminated. In this novel, Walker presents a variety of women on different levels of understanding the self. Shug aids Celie's move to the assimilated stage through her sexual freedom, but is limited by her self confessed need to be appreciated by a man. Sophia's strength

is inspiring to Celie, and her rejection of society often is pointed to the anger associated with the sapphire. However, this anger presented in the novel is warranted and not a trope to deny or assign a particular emotion to Black women. Celie's eventual denunciation of social restrictions releases similar feelings of dissent. The cycle of progress from entrapment to freedom is significant to the goal for all women who are trapped by society.

With the emergence of a movement geared towards an acceptance of the natural aspects of the Black woman, there needs to be a movement in society working to reevaluate the lessons shared by authors like Alice Walker to further encourage opposition to stereotypically defined identities. The mammy, jezebel, and sapphire stereotypes evolve and continue to be enabled through the prejudice and ignorance that exists in American culture in regards to ethnic people. The use of these controlling images may come to an end if people are willing to see how limiting they are and realize their participation in carrying them out.

A lack of knowledge of the truth of these images allows Black women to be in the dark and never realize that they are giving the patriarchal society the position and power to determine who they are. Scholarship needs to continue the work started by leaders in the past who new the detrimental effects of not having a self-defined identity. Also, Black culture as a whole will need to accept not only the positives of the culture but the negatives as well. Walker addresses her role as Southern writer saying, "We must give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love" (Walker 21). Similar to how Southern Black writers accept the responsibility of sharing every aspect of their experience living in the South, Black culture needs to accept the rape, incest, and abuse that has become taboo topics in Black culture. The secrecy compounds the degradation of Black women suggesting that it has not and does not occur, and limits a true understanding of identity and self. This thesis seeks to

encourage and demand the movement towards a self-defined identity, which includes the positivity and negativity involved. Eventually, this will return to Black women the power and strength to be more than a stereotype and to return the humanity that was taken away from them when society deemed it necessary to subject Black women to a degrading position that allowed people to see them as less than human.

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