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## Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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In her pivotal 1979 essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” Barbara Smith lamented the lack of black lesbian representation in U.S. literary criticism. She explained that “All segments of the literary world—whether establishment, progressive, Black, female, or lesbian—do not know, or at least act as if they do not know, that Black women writers and Black lesbian writers exist” (132). The unprecedented amount of writing by and/or about black lesbians that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s made the question and value of black lesbian writing’s existence of fundamental importance to African American literary studies in particular. Four seminal black lesbian texts—Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cypress, & Indigo*, and Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*—were published in 1982.<sup>1</sup> Lesbian-identified writers Ann Allen Shockley, Cheryl Clarke, Alexis De Veaux, Jewelle Gomez, Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, and Alice Walker each began and developed their careers between 1970 and 1990.<sup>2</sup> Writers like Octavia Butler, Gayl Jones, Jamaica Kincaid, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, and Ntozake Shange who did not openly identify as lesbian or same-sex desiring also published writing in the 1970s and 1980s that explicitly represented black lesbian characters and/or shared black lesbian writing’s general interest in women’s same-sex relationships.<sup>3</sup> These writers were at odds with major male writers of the 1960s and 1970s Black Arts Movement like Amiri Baraka and Eldridge Cleaver because they critiqued what E. Patrick Johnson calls “the politics of hegemonic blackness,” an ethic that defined the Black Arts Movement and conceived of the “representation of effeminate homosexuality [within black writing] as disempowering” because the vulnerability associated with both femininity and homosexuality was considered “ineffectual in the fight against oppression” (51).<sup>4</sup> Composed by black lesbian writers like Cheryl Clarke, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and Beverly Smith, the 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement explained the case plainly:

Black feminist politics ... have an obvious connection to movements for Black liberation, particularly those of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of us were active in

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those movements (Civil Rights, Black nationalism, the Black panthers), and all of our lives were greatly affected and changed by their ideologies, their goals, and the tactics used to achieve their goals. It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men. (273)

The Combahee River Collective consistently critiqued not only the racism of white feminism, but also the politics of black (masculine) pride that required the supine body of a black woman for its articulation as self-determined and invulnerable to white racism. Black lesbian and lesbian-allied writers of the 1970s and 1980s insisted on telling stories about black women who were excluded from black literary representation under the politics of black pride; they “looked behind the veil and explored broken families, domestic violence, and sexual abuse” (Wall 797). The politics of hegemonic blackness considered these experiences and identities “disempowering” because they have typically been affiliated with vulnerability and shame. Black lesbian and lesbian-allied writers brought attention to the fact that sexualized shame often dictates what is representable in African American literature. Their exploration of what are usually considered *shameful* issues complicated the calls for black *pride* that defined the Black Power and Black Arts Movements.

Together, black lesbian and lesbian-allied writers cultivated what this article calls “black lesbian shamelessness,” an amended version of the calls for black pride that circulated in the Black Power and Black Arts Movements. Black lesbian shamelessness is defined by its celebration of the fact that same-sex relationships sustain and nurture the lives of countless black women, as well as by its acceptance of vulnerability and mutual dependence as fundamental conditions of human relationships. The ethic of black lesbian shamelessness, as represented by a number of black women writers from the 1970s and 1980s, does not position identities like “black,” “woman,” “white,” and “man” against one another in a re-structured hierarchy, but rather conceives of blackness as an experience through which the vulnerable, inter-subjective qualities of gender, racial, and sexual identification are clearly seen. In this article, I consider Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and its particular treatment of black lesbian shamelessness. I focus on *The Color Purple* because its 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and National Book Award mark a significant moment in the history of black lesbian writing. The novel’s popularity and critical acclaim suggested that black female same-sex desire as an object of literary representation could be regarded with seriousness and sensitivity by a

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widespread audience. However, the swift backlash against the novel's use of realism for its cultivation of lesbian shamelessness also reveals that genre determines the spirit in which celebrations of African American sexual queerness are received. This article therefore considers Walker's cultivation of black lesbian shamelessness as well as its reception.

### **Articulating Sexuality and Opposing Salvation**

*The Color Purple* ruminates on issues of salvation, shame, and silence as they manifest in the lives of early-twentieth-century black women living in the U.S. South. The novel represents the pitfalls of the "salvific wish," a rhetorical gesture associated with representations of African American women that, according to Candice Jenkins, developed in the nineteenth century (125). Jenkins explains that the salvific wish "is best understood as an aspiration, most often but not solely middle-class and female, to save or rescue the black community from white racist accusations of sexual or domestic pathology through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety" (125). Jenkins points to a history of black women sacrificing sexual exploration—especially queer sexual exploration—in order to protect black communities from accusations of sexual deviance. As such, sexual propriety has operated as a shield. Evelyn Hammonds explains that black women have consistently "countered negative stereotypes" of black sexuality through "the evolution of a 'culture of dissemblance' and a 'politics of silence'" (142), both of which have required black women to hide, mute, and/or shield expressions of (queer) sexuality.<sup>5</sup> According to L.H. Stallings, this "historically politicized quiet has made it very difficult to fully discuss Black women's sexual desires" (4). Because white supremacy regards black women's open expression or exploration of (queer) sexuality as an invitation to violation, black women have frequently felt the need to sublimate both.

Black lesbian writers of the 1970s and 1980s critiqued the cultural compulsion that required black women's sacrifice of (queer) sexual articulation.<sup>6</sup> Audre Lorde theorized the uselessness of salvation via silence in her 1977 piece, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action." Rather than hide or sublimate desires and experiences considered shameful as a means of shielding oneself from judgment or violation, Lorde explained that

It is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding. Because in this way alone we can survive... And it is never without fear—of visibility, of the harsh light of scrutiny and perhaps judgment, of pain, of death. But we have lived through all of those already, in

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silence, except death. And I remind myself all the time now that if I were to have been born mute, or had maintained an oath of silence my whole life long for safety, I would still have suffered, and I would still die. (*Sister* 43)

Lorde asks that black lesbians in particular liberate themselves from the operating presumption that their silence on issues of same-sex desire can protect black people in general from heterosexist and/or racist judgment. Her suggestion that, had she been mute, she “would still have suffered” resounds because (black) women are violated in patriarchal cultures regardless of their sexual experience, expression, clothing, make-up, or any other defining feature of propriety.

Walker questions the salvation assumed to be inherent in silence and respectability on the first page of *The Color Purple*, which begins with a line the rest of the novel goes on to challenge: “*You better not never tell nobody but God!*” (1). The line is purportedly spoken to Celie by her step-father Alphonso, who repeatedly rapes her during her adolescence. While Alphonso intends to keep Celie quiet about his sexual abuse, she proceeds to write letters to God about her experience and thereby turns Alphonso’s threat on its head. As Martha Cutter writes, “the rape becomes not an instrument of silencing, but the catalyst to Celie’s search for voice” (166). Celie’s first letter to God describes Alphonso’s abuse in a disturbing manner: “He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it” (1-2). Celie’s descriptive narration of Alphonso’s assault suggests that sexual articulation can displace imposed silence as a means of coping with abuse. Celie is confused over Alphonso’s violation, which she has no reason to believe she deserved or invited: “I am fourteen years old. ~~Fam~~I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (1). Celie emphasizes her long-standing status as a “good girl,” a condition determined by her adherence to the salvific wish and the politics of respectability. Celie has been led to believe that her “good girl” behavior can spare her from the sexual violation of men, as well as spare her entire community from the racist violence of white people. Celie’s experience confronts the values of the salvific wish and the politics of silence by challenging the assumption that “good girl” behavior leads to personal safety and that, vice versa, only “bad girl” behavior leads to violation. Walker ultimately represents the politics of respectability as ineffectual means of confronting violation. Furthermore, she regards the politics of silence that dictate the reticence of Celie’s community over the history of racist violence in the United States as misguided. Celie eventually learns that her biological

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father was lynched by a white mob threatened by his success in business. When Celie's mother continuously grieved the death of her husband, "[t]he neighbors... shunned her more and more... because her attachment to the past was so pitiful" (181). Pushed to forget the past and hide its grief from her daughters, Celie's mother married Alphonso, who proceeded to masquerade as the biological father of Celie and her sister Nettie. In both situations, articulations of heterosexist and racist violation were stifled in order to preserve a semblance of familial sanctity. Celie's letters about her experiences begin to confront these silenced realities of sexuality, sexual violation, and racist violence. But their confrontation, according to Wendy Wall, is initially barely audible given that Celie "can survive these abuses only by recording them in a diary which acts as her second memory. She displaces her voice onto this silent, uncommunicated text" (263).

After marrying and leaving Alphonso's house, Celie continues to write letters that silently narrate sexual feelings and experiences, including her disinterest in her husband Albert as a dominative sexual and domestic partner. Upon meeting her lover Shug, Celie is introduced to masturbation, same-sex relationships, and letters from Nettie that Albert hid. Celie begins writing to Nettie, now in Africa, rather than to God; Walker thus represents black women's open expression of sexuality with one another as an alternative to the isolation of writing only to God. Furthermore, Walker represents black women's sexual relationships with and tutelage of one another as an alternative to being subjected to masculinist and dominative ideas of sex. Celie's same-sex experiences begin to soothe the (sexist) wounds inflicted by Alphonso and Albert.<sup>7</sup> Celie details her intimacy with herself and with Shug as follows: "I lie back on the bed and haul up my dress. Yank down my bloomers. Stick the looking glass tween my legs. Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose. [...] It a lot prettier than you thought, ain't it? [Shug] say from the door" (82). With the aid of Shug, Celie complicates the power dynamics of looking within *The Color Purple*: no longer an object for Alphonso's and Albert's sole viewing and sexual use, Celie, with Shug as the director, becomes inquisitive about her body and sexual pleasure:

...Where the button?

Right up near the top, she say. The part that stick out a little.

I look at her and touch it with my finger. A little shiver go through me. Nothing much. But just enough to tell me this the right button to mash. (82)

Celie's articulation of sexual pleasure is also the articulation of her very body and presence. Walker positions Celie's woman-directed masturbation and vulnerability

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as the means through which her burgeoning self-awareness and self-love are experienced. This vision of selfhood and self-love is very different from the calls to pride heard in the Black Arts Movement, when black selfhood and self-love were said to be experienced through men's use of "prone" women's bodies.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, masculinist intervention turns the scene of Celie's sexual self-exploration from one of consensual black female sexual companionship to one of female sexual deviance, as it ends when Albert and his son intrude on Celie and Shug: "Albert and Harpo coming, [Shug] say. And I yank up my drawers and yank down my dress. I feel like us been doing something wrong" (82).

Together, Celie and Shug demonstrate a model of sexual vulnerability and mutual dependence that has them working together consensually toward self-love rather than relating hierarchically—an interaction different from Albert's masculinist relationship with Celie. When Celie decides to travel to Memphis with Shug, Albert responds to Celie's departure by degrading her:

You'll be back, he say. Nothing up North for nobody like you. Shug got talent, he say. She can sing. She got spunk, he say. She can talk to anybody. Shug got looks, he say. She can stand up and be notice. But what you got? You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny. You too scared to open your mouth to people. All you fit to do in Memphis is be Shug's maid. Take out her slop-jar and maybe cook her food.  
(212)

Albert chides Celie as different from Shug, who can "talk to anybody." Albert's words show that Celie's silence has not shielded her from insult and accusation, as he nevertheless degrades her appearance.<sup>9</sup> Celie responds with a curse: "I curse you. [...] Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble. [...] Until you do right by me, everything you even dream about will fail" (213). Celie explains that the origin of her curse and newly-vocalized self-articulation is beyond her individual body: "I give it to him straight, just like it come to me. And it seem to come to me from the trees" (213). This particular speech act of Celie's affirms her existence and experience to Albert in a way her silent letters did not.<sup>10</sup> According to Judith Butler, "In order to attribute accountability to a subject, an origin of action in that subject is fictively secured. ... *The question, then, of who is accountable for a given injury precedes and initiates the subject, and the subject itself is formed through being nominated to inhabit that grammatical and juridical site*" (45-46, emphasis hers). When Celie curses Albert, Albert initially receives the curse as if Celie alone is its "origin of action," or author. Thus, he reacts mockingly: "He laugh. Who you think you is? he say. You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all" (213). To Albert, Celie is "nothing at all" because of her blackness, poverty, ugliness, and womanhood, but

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the curse itself attests to Celie's presence, allows her to speak her experiences and feelings, "precedes and initiates" her. Celie performs what Butler calls the "making [of] linguistic community with a history of speakers" (52). According to Thomas M. Marvin, Celie responds to Albert "like a conjure woman" (412) and links herself to a host of African diasporic religious practices and practitioners. Indeed, Celie makes Albert aware of this fact when she tells him, "You better stop talking because all I'm telling you ain't coming just from me" (213). Citing and inhabiting a history of African diasporic religious practice, Celie intimidates Albert into backing down. Before hearing her curse, Albert mistakenly believed Celie to be a non-speaking non-subject. When Celie asserts a place for herself within African diasporic religious practice that is recognizable to Albert, she affirms her existence to him, as well as their shared inter-subjective experience.<sup>11</sup>

Celie re-imagines the four categories in which Albert places her when she responds to his insults with a final declaration: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here" (214). She shamelessly embraces the terms Albert intended as insults. Following her earlier work to turn Alphonso's compulsion to silence upside down by writing to God, Celie again finds a means of articulating her experiences in the face of extreme degradation. Thadious M. Davis finds that Celie's embrace of Albert's insults

echo [the words] of Langston Hughes's folk philosopher, Jesse B. Semple (Simple): "I'm still here... I've been underfed, underpaid... I've been abused, confused, misused... I done had everything from flat feet to flat head... but I am still here... I'm still here." Celie's verbal connection to Hughes's black everyman and the black oral tradition extends her affirmation of self, so that it becomes racial, as well as personal. (119)

Walker connects Celie and her cultivation of black shamelessness not only to the history of African diasporic religious practice, but also to Hughes and the work of an earlier black queer writer. In doing so, Walker positions the black shamelessness articulated by Celie as a particularly black queer survival mechanism. Darieck Scott postulates that countless African Americans have utilized this queer survival strategy from the antebellum era to the present and wonders, "If we are racialized (in part) through domination and abjection and humiliation, is there anything of value to be learned from the experience of being defeated, humiliated, and abjected?" (6). Speaking from an abject and violated position rather than a defensive and posturing one, Celie models the politics of black shamelessness by embracing and valuing a social experience regarded by most facets of society as worthless. Walker thus posits the embrace of queer vulnerability as a critical lesson

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about black lesbian identification, as well as black identification in general. Scott explains that

the abjection in/of blackness endows its inheritors with a form of counterintuitive *power*—indeed, what we can think of as *black* power. This power (which is also a way of speaking of freedom) is found at the point of the apparent erasure of ego-protections, at the point at which the constellation of tropes that we call *identity, body, race, nation* seem to reveal themselves as utterly penetrated and compromised, without defensible boundary. (9)

Regarding the vulnerability of abjection as a source of knowledge and power, Walker upsets hierarchizing tendencies that conceive of resoluteness and its attendant feeling of pride as uniquely powerful and valuable. Her work re-conceptualizes experience with and acknowledgement of violation and vulnerability as a source of power and strength rather than shame within black communities.

Celie concludes her interaction with Albert by telling him, “Anything you do to me, already done to you” (214). Celie suggests that she and Albert have a shared bodily experience. If he should hit Celie again, Albert will only hit himself. After Albert’s work to differentiate Celie from himself—and to differentiate Celie from Shug—by calling her “pore,” “ugly,” and “a woman,” Celie unites them all by gesturing to their shared historical circumstances of violation and abjection and encourages Albert in particular to value vulnerability. L.H. Stallings explains that “[r]eal resistance to stereotypes [sh]ould entail more than simply reversing the binary logic of stereotypes about Black women’s sexuality; it would mean destroying systems of gender and sexuality that make the stereotypes possible. Such action would aid in the initial construction of radical Black female sexual subjectivities” (2-3). *The Color Purple* reveals that “such action” requires the breakdown of individual egos postured against one another. According to Rachel Lister, “Walker, through her elaboration of Celie’s narrative, rejects the traditionally masculine emphasis on self-containment and strong ego boundaries and presents fragmentation as a form of empowerment” (65).<sup>12</sup> This mode of “empowerment” is quite different from those contained within the politics of pride, the politics of silence, and the salvific wish, given that it advocates shields and “ego boundaries” be dropped and vulnerability embraced.

### **Receiving *The Color Purple* and Black Lesbian Shamelessness**

*The Color Purple*’s cultivation of black lesbian shamelessness received a complicated mix of reviews throughout the 1980s. On the one hand, many critics celebrated the novel’s realist use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE)



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for the majority of its narration. Mel Watkins heralded the “authenticity of its folk voice” (9) and Trudier Harris, who otherwise disapproved of the novel, wrote that its “folk speech ... is absolutely wonderful” (156). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. championed *The Color Purple* for revealing that “one can write an entire novel in dialect” (251), which in turn affirmed that AAVE itself was a “storehouse of [linguistic] figures” (251) rather than an unsophisticated or simplistic sub-language. However, on the other hand, many critics either ignored the ethic of black lesbian shamelessness that Walker’s celebrated version of AAVE narrated or regarded black lesbian shamelessness and AAVE as incompatible given the latter’s longstanding association with black literary realism.<sup>13</sup> Mixed reception of the novel’s black lesbian content was thus entangled with the issue of genre and with literary realism in particular.

According to Gene Andrew Jarrett, “racial realism,” an artistic mode that “supposedly portray[s] the black race in accurate or truthful ways” (1), is an expectation of black-authored writing frequently endorsed and regulated by both (often white) publishers and black writers alike, including “William Howells in the 1890s, Alain Locke in the 1920s, Richard Wright in the 1930s and 1940s, and Amiri Baraka in the 1960s and 1970s” (1). This expectation is informed by the assumption that black writing is, to use Toni Morrison’s phrase, “rich ore” (2303), or a source of unmediated, even unsophisticated, information about blackness. Historically, many black writers strategically used this expectation and assumption of realism to represent African Americans in ways capable of leveling damage to prevailing discourses of racism and white supremacy, discourses which operate by presuming to know completely what blackness is. Recognizing realism as the privileged arena of black artistic expression, black writers have frequently endorsed sexual normativity within it in order to combat racist discourse of black sexual depravity. Pointing out the exclusionary politics of such a schema, Dwight McBride writes, “There are many visions and versions of the black community that get posited in scholarly discourse, popular cultural forms, and in political discourse. Rarely do any of these visions include lesbians and gay men, except perhaps as an afterthought” (207).

The expectation that black writers compose in realist forms has historically coalesced into an expectation that black writers compose at least partially in AAVE, which over time became nearly synonymous with black literary realism. In his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1921), James Weldon Johnson remembered Paul Laurence Dunbar, the leading black poet of the late 1800s, remarking to him, “I’ve got to write dialect poetry; it’s the only way I can get them to listen to me” (899). Dunbar recognized his (largely white) audience’s appetite

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for AAVE and satiated it strategically in order to build an audience with whom he could then share images of dignified and respectable African Americans—images to counter stereotypes of sexual depravity and backwardness associated with both blackness in general and AAVE specifically.

Writing nearly a century after Dunbar, and working in opposition to his normative goals, Walker, like Zora Neale Huston before her with *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), challenged assumptions of AAVE's artfulness and sophistication while simultaneously questioning anti-queer visions of successful sexual practice contained in the politics of black pride. Like Dunbar, Walker was conscious of audience when she chose to compose in AAVE. Describing her mother's interaction with *The Color Purple*, Walker writes, "She had not read *The Color Purple* before her stroke, beyond the first few pages, though it was deliberately written in a way that would not intimidate her, and other readers like her, with only a grade school education and a lifetime of reading the Bible, newspapers and magazine articles" (*Same* 24). Written to be accessible to readers like her mother rather than white readers, *The Color Purple's* strategic fulfillment of the linguistic conventions of black literary realism nevertheless queers for both groups the normative portrait of African Americans traditionally found therein, as well as the more radical, nevertheless misogynistic, portrait of black self-love endorsed by the politics of black pride. In other words, the framing of black lesbian shamelessness as a realist and realistic narrative, along with the narrating of black lesbian shamelessness in AAVE, expands the privileged arena of black literary realism to account for a happy, successful black lesbian.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, this queering of black literary realism challenges predominant masculinist assumptions of what makes black life valuable and viable.

Candice Jenkins argues that, in opposition to the politics of black respectability and pride, *The Color Purple* queers the "ahistorical *fantasies* of black patriarchy (erected, perhaps, as a defensive response to [what Hortense Spillers calls] fatherlack), of which the black community harbors many" (94). *The Color Purple's* queerness lies partly in the fact that it "contains a possibility far more bewildering than the father's absence: a father [Albert] who is *present*, but nonetheless no longer dominant or even interested in domination" (94). By the end of the novel, Albert and Celie have become friends rather than volatile husband and abused wife. The failed patriarch becomes the symbol of successful, feminist heterosexual masculinity and the shameless black same-sex desiring woman becomes emblematic of successful black female sexual articulation. Such an outcome sparked critical concern because so-called black sexual depravity is often used as the rationale for white supremacy in the United States. Trudier Harris wrote in her 1984 review that *The Color Purple*

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simply add[s] freshness to many of the ideas circulating in the popular culture and captured in racist literature that suggested that black people have no morality when it comes to sexuality, that the black family structure is weak if existent at all... The novel gives validity to all the white racist's notions of pathology in black communities... Black males and females form units without the benefit of marriage, or they easily dissolve marriages in order to form less structured, more promiscuous relationships. (157)

Harris found that the novel's cultivation of black lesbian shamelessness validated white racist discourse of black sexual impropriety and deviance. *The Color Purple* came to represent the entire discourse of black sexual and domestic pathology in its representations of homosexuality and sexual assault. Harris's concern over the lack of monogamous marriages represented in the novel betrays an interest in the promotion and circulation of heteronormative propriety and kinship exclusively.

Additional critiques that took umbrage with Walker's cultivation of black lesbian shamelessness in a realist form reveal black literary realism's heteronormative politics. Albert's willingness to link himself with Celie by the end of the novel and relinquish his imagined status as an inviolate man was seen as particularly odd to Dinitia Smith, who wrote, "The men in this book change *only* when their women join together and rebel—and then, the change is so complete as to be unrealistic. It was hard for me to believe that a person as violent, brooding and just plain nasty as [Albert] could ever become that sweet, quiet man smoking and chatting on the porch" (19). On the shamelessly queer sensibility of the novel, Steven C. Weisenburger wrote that, "as *The Color Purple* neared its close, the author's felt needs—to win her reader's complicity with, and good opinion of her, consciousness-raising work—had overridden the intradiegetic requirements for mimetic verisimilitude" and that "Walker's 'womanist' errand had taken priority over the elements of narrative art" (265). Weisenburger critiqued Walker for stretching the conventions of literary realism in order to accomplish a political goal he regarded as tangential to artistic concerns. Harris's review made a similar point about Celie's shamelessness and Albert's transformation: "I am not opposed to triumph, but I do have objections to the unrealistic presentation of the path, the *process* that leads to such a triumph, especially when it is used to create a new archetype or to resurrect old myths about black women" (156, emphasis hers). At the heart of these critiques is the sense that black lesbian shamelessness is neither a viable path to triumph nor a realistic sensibility for black women's lives. The critiques take issue with Walker's combination of black lesbian shamelessness and black literary realism—two tracts which, according to the rhetoric of the salvific wish, the politics of silence, and the politics of black pride, should not meet.<sup>15</sup>

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*The Color Purple's* 1980s reception reveals how truly novel Barbara Smith's 1979 proclamation of black lesbian existence was. A great number of readers harbored normative aspirations for black communities that sought the elimination of black lesbianism by suggesting that, for African Americans, lesbianism (and shamelessness regarding it) was simply impossible. Furthermore, the backlash against *The Color Purple* reveals not only the normative politics of black literary realism, but also the normative politics that presume the viability of particular black lives. Judith Butler explains that "[w]hen we ask what makes a life livable, we are asking about certain normative conditions that must be fulfilled for life to become life" (*Undoing* 226). *The Color Purple* works to assert the viability of black lesbianism in the face of its associations with silence and social death. In effect, the novel also questions what Cheryl Clarke calls "the boundaries of blackness" and, specifically, how blackness as racial identification should operate. Clarke writes that the "prescriptions of the Black Arts Movement era were imposed upon recent converts to blackness, much like the codes of 'black respectability' were impressed upon recent migrants from the South at the turn of the twentieth century. The rhetoric of the black nationalist intelligentsia . . . sharply policed the 'boundaries of blackness' to its margins" (14) in an attempt at invulnerability. These boundaries were heavily patrolled not only to keep black queer expressions out, but also to regard the vulnerability endemic to queer social positions as incompatible with a newly self-determined, inviolate conception of blackness. Walker's insistence on the value of an abject positionality, however, suggests that vulnerability need not be disavowed for black lives to be valuable, or for that matter powerful.

My reading of *The Color Purple's* 1980s reception finds that black literary realism is critical terrain for exploring viable approaches and responses to the legacies and realities of racism and white supremacy in the United States. Thus black literary realism is one place to examine black vulnerability and, in the words of Judith Butler, "how a collective deals with its vulnerability to violence" (*Undoing* 231). Butler identifies two familiar possibilities before exploring another, alternative response to vulnerability:

There is the possibility of appearing impermeable, of repudiating vulnerability itself. There is the possibility of becoming violent. But perhaps there is some other way to live in such a way that one is neither fearing death, becoming socially dead from fear of being killed, or becoming violent, and killing others, or subjecting them to live a life of social death predicated upon the fear of literal death. Perhaps this other way to live requires a world in which collective means are found to protect bodily vulnerability without precisely eradicating it. (231)<sup>16</sup>

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Walker offers black lesbian shamelessness as this “other way to live” by regarding inter-subjective vulnerability as a sustainable experience. Articulation of violation can lead to an awareness of individuals’ indebtedness to one another for their identities and thus become a fundamental ethic of human care. Rather than regard vulnerability and social abjection as invitations to violation that must be foreclosed and disavowed, Walker’s black queer realism conceives of social abjection as a source of sustenance that speaks to individuals’ need to preserve one another’s vulnerability. Central to this black queer realism is the black lesbian who shamelessly articulates her sexual experiences, violations, and desires and who, subsequently, links these experiences to broader histories of black violation and desire.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Barbara Christian’s “No More Buried Lives” for a consideration of their simultaneous emergence.

<sup>2</sup> Shockley’s *Loving Her* (1974) is one of the first novels to feature a black lesbian main character. Clarke’s *Narratives: Poems in the Tradition of Black Women* (1983) was her first poetry collection. De Veaux’s *Spirits in the Street* (1973) is a fictionalized memoir of her life. Additionally, her *Don’t Explain* (1980) is a biography of Billie Holiday written as a prose poem. Gomez published her first two poetry collections, *The Lipstick Papers* (1980) and *Flamingoes and Bears* (1986) during this time. Pat Parker published four poetry collections throughout the 1970s, culminating in *Movement in Black: The Collected Poetry* (1978). Audre Lorde published seven volumes of poetry during this time period, beginning with *The First Cities* (1968) and including *Coal* (1976). Alice Walker published her first collection of poetry, *Once* (1968), her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), and her first short story collection, *In Love and Trouble* (1973), during this time. While Walker identified herself as bisexual at various points in the 1990s and early 2000s, she did not make public proclamations about her same-sex desires during this time period. Nevertheless, rumors of her sexuality swirled around the time of *The Color Purple*’s publication (Jenkins 224).

<sup>3</sup> In addition to Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* and Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cyprus & Indigo*, see Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987-1989), Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975), Kincaid’s *Annie John* (1985), and Morrison’s *Sula* (1973).

<sup>4</sup> See also Wahneema Lubiano’s “Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense,” in which she writes that black nationalism’s “most hegemonic appearances and manifestations have been masculinist and homophobic” (232). Furthermore, she says that “Black nationalism is a constantly reinvented and reinventing discourse that generally opposes the Eurocentrism of the U.S. state, but neither historically nor contemporaneously depends upon a consistent or complete opposition to Eurocentrism... [O]ne consistent black feminist critique of black nationalist ideology is that it insufficiently breaks with patriarchal modes of economic, political, cultural (especially familial), and social circulations of power that mimic Euro-American modes” (233).

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<sup>5</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham first pointed to “the politics of silence” in “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage or Race” as “a political strategy by black women reformers who hoped by their silence and by the promotion of proper Victorian morality to demonstrate the lie of the image of the sexually immoral black woman” (Hammonds 143). In “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” Darlene Clark Hine says the “culture of dissemblance” developed as “the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors” (Hine qtd. in Hammonds 143).

<sup>6</sup> Hammonds advocates that black women cultivate a politics of sexual articulation in order to “overturn... the ‘politics of silence’” (152). The politics of sexual articulation, she says, should “build on the interrogation of what makes it possible for black women to speak and act” (152). In this article, I share Hammonds’s concern about the means through which black women’s sexual experiences can be articulated, especially when it comes to literary form.

<sup>7</sup> Some critics have found that these wounds of sexism are also represented as wounds of racism. Maroula Joannou writes, “Because the context of slavery is invoked through the particulars of Celie’s situation, her experiences bring to mind collective rather than individual memories and histories” (176). Still others have argued that Walker does not adequately contextualize the sexist acts of Alphonso and Albert in the context of U.S. racism. Elliot Butler-Evans writes that the novel accomplishes the “displacement of broad issues of Afro-American history by a specific feminist ideology” (12). Lauren Berlant argues that the stories of other characters—Sofia and Squeak/Mary Agnes—are more thoroughly contextualized in the context of dual racism and sexism experienced by black women (219). Additionally, my argument that Celie’s sexual exploration with Shug helps to heal the wounds caused by Albert and Alphonso’s violations is in no way meant to suggest that Walker represents same-sex desire as universally the result of failed relationships with men, as Ishmael Reed wrote in “Steven Spielberg Plays Howard Beach,” his critique of the movie version of *The Color Purple*.

<sup>8</sup> Stokeley Carmichael said in an unofficial 1964 statement that the only position for women in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was “prone.”

<sup>9</sup> The fact that Albert calls Celie “ugly” in order to stifle her ambitious plan to travel to Memphis recalls a relationship between ugliness and intelligence/ambition explored in the Combahee River Collective Statement, which says, “No one before has ever examined the multilayered texture of black women’s lives. An example of this kind of revelation/conceptualization occurred at a meeting as we discussed the ways in which our early intellectual interests had been attacked by our peers, particularly Black males. We discovered that all of us, because we were ‘smart’ had also been considered ‘ugly,’ i.e., ‘smart-ugly.’ ‘Smart-ugly’ crystallized the way in which most of us had been forced to develop our intellects at great cost to our ‘social’ lives” (276). Thus “ugly” is in close association with “smart” and “ambitious” for black women in particular because black female intelligence and ambition apparently play no valuable role in normative “‘social’ lives.”

<sup>10</sup> Many critics have made this point about the privileging of orality in *The Color Purple*, including Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his chapter on *The Color Purple* from *The Signifying Monkey* and Thomas F. Marvin in “‘Preachin’ the Blues.” bell hooks makes a similar point in “Reading and Resistance.”

<sup>11</sup> I import the terms “inter-subjective” and “inter-subjectivity” from Houston Baker’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, wherein he conceives of the blues as both a

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musical form and a cultural experience that “offer a phylogenetic recapitulation—a nonlinear, freely associative, nonsequential meditation—of species experience. What emerges [through blues performance] is not a filled subject, but an anonymous (nameless) voice issuing from the black (w)hole... Its [anonymity] is an invitation to energizing intersubjectivity. Its implied (in)junction reads: here is my body meant for (a phylogenetically conceived) you” (5). Baker’s theorizing of subjectivity in a black cultural context emphasizes the importance of vulnerability and willingness to not only relate to other people, but to become part of them, and vice versa.

<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Shanyin Fiske explains in “Piecing the Patchwork Self” that this ethic of inter-subjectivity is actually reflected in *The Color Purple*’s broad form: “The novel’s inclusion of so many individual stories makes it difficult to tell whether these narratives are enclosed within Celie’s account of her life or whether Celie’s story is part of a larger whole. This formal destabilization of a dominant narrative emphasizes that an individual cannot be considered apart from the matrix of his or her relationships” (150-151).

<sup>13</sup> See Barbara Smith’s “Sexual Oppression Unmasked” for an explanation of the fact that, while many readers celebrated *The Color Purple*’s language, most chose to overlook its lesbian storyline.

<sup>14</sup> The shamelessness of Walker’s characters is especially important here. Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing* (1929) is an example of a significantly earlier realist representation of black female same-sex desire that regards one black woman’s desire for another as threatening and antithetical to black social success rather than a foundational and central experience of black women’s self-love.

<sup>15</sup> A number of critics have tried to redeem *The Color Purple* by reading it not as a realist narrative, but as a romance, fairy tale, and/or folk tale. See Molly Hite, “Romance, Marginality, and Matrilineage,” Diane Gabrielsen Scholl’s “With Ears to Hear and Eyes to See,” and Margaret Walsh’s “The Enchanted World of *The Color Purple*.” However, even these more sympathetic critics end up implying that black lesbian shamelessness is not a viable means of experiencing life by relegating it to the realm of romance, fairy tale, and folk tale.

<sup>16</sup> While Butler does not specifically address an African American context here, her words recall the African Americanist work of Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death*, as well as Toni Morrison’s thoughts on black women’s self-fashioning in *Sula*, wherein Sula and Nel realize that they are “neither white nor male” and so “set about creating something else to be” (52).

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