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"Tainted With the Blood of the Oppressor": Womanism, Black Power, and the Treatment of the Mulatto in Alice Walker's the Color Purple

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**“Tainted with the Blood of the Oppressor”:
Womanism, Black Power, and the Treatment of the
Mulatto in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple***



Walker, Kara. *Burn*. 1998. Cut paper and adhesive on wall.
Larry Qualls Archive. *Artstor*. Web. 20 April 2011.

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*"I am white and I am black, and know that there is no difference.
Each one casts a shadow, and all shadows are dark."*

– Walker White, *"Why I Remain a Negro"* (1947)

"Uh class tuh ourselves"

The early- to mid-nineteenth century was a tumultuous time for race and national identity in America. During this era, increasing anxiety about racial mixing (embodied by mulatto children of the time) led to the creation of policies such as the "one drop rule," which assigned any child with even "one drop" of black blood to its "lower" racial status. Cathy J. Cohen refers to this method of marginalizing a large group of people as "categorical marginalization," essentially the complete exclusion of a group. She explains that inherent in this exclusion is the legal and social codification of the group's inferiority (Cohen 55), citing, "The laws of Virginia and Maryland, as well as those of the colonies to the south...through prohibition of interracial marriage and the general restriction of slave status to nonwhites, codified and simultaneously preached white supremacy" (qtd. in Cohen 57). Perhaps the clearest legally codified example of the anxiety of racial mixing and subsequent categorical marginalization was the change in the format of the United States Census from its 1840 iteration to the version taken in 1850. For the first time, the survey's primary mode of classification was that of the individual, rather than the household (Raimon 1). Eva Allegra Raimon explains, "Whereas 1840 census takers counted only groupings of whites, free persons of color, and slaves, the 1850 schedule posed detailed questions about individual slaves and, for the first time, their 'colour'" (1-2). Regardless of physical coloring, anyone deemed black by the policies of the mid-nineteenth century was wholly excluded from the white community on the basis of his or her alleged inferiority, in order to maintain the white supremacist status quo. This problematic period for the black community is explored often in historiographic representations of the late-slavery and Jim Crow eras. The

assembly of modern texts within this categorical marginalization reflects contemporary conceptions of mulatto¹ identity, which I will explore in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

In the period of categorical marginalization of the black race, the literary trope of the tragic mulatto was born. Stories of the tragic mulatto detail the life of a mixed race character, usually female, who could find a home in neither the black nor the white community due to the color of her skin. She was often the product of the rape of a black slave woman by her white master, which had complex ramifications for her position in society. Sociologist David Pilgrim writes, "[the mulatto] pitied or despised Blacks and the 'blackness' in herself; she hated or feared Whites yet desperately sought their approval. In a race-based society, the tragic mulatto found peace only in death. She evoked pity or scorn, not sympathy" (Pilgrim). Sources differ greatly on when the trope was first employed in literature with most agreeing that it stretches back at least as far as Lydia Marie Child's 1842 short story, "The Quadroons."² Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) provides the most famous example of this trope, particularly in the character of Eliza. However, the first mention of the "tragic mulatto" as a literary concept is in Sterling Brown's essay "Negro Characters as Seen by White Authors" (1933) and soon after in his *The Negro in American Fiction* (1937). Brown specifically indicts white abolitionists like Child and Stowe who used this archetype in an attempt to attract sympathy for slaves, quoting John Herbert Nelson: "Abolitionists tried, by making many of their characters almost white, to

¹ There has been much debate on the gendered nature of the term "mulatto" and its implicit assertion of masculinity. Thus, many historical and analytical texts utilize the term "mulatta" in reference to the trope as it applies to females. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term "mulatto," primarily for the purpose of consistency and in reference to Sterling Brown's "Negro Characters as Seen by White Authors." While there was undoubtedly a difference between the experience of mixed race males and females in this era, examination of these differences is well beyond the scope of this paper.

² While the term mulatto is defined as the offspring of one black parent and one white parent ("mulatto, n. and adj."), it has also been used in reference to those with even a fraction of lineage traceable to a black parent. It is from this idea that the delineations of "quadroon" and "octoroon" emerged, that is, those who were one-quarter or one-eighth black respectively. However, for the purposes of analyzing literature, in which it is often difficult to determine the exact racial background of characters, I will focus on the most common use of the term and examine characters with one black parent and one white. Thus, when I use the term "mulatto," I am referring specifically to these characters.

work on racial feeling as well. This was a curious piece of inconsistency on their part, an indirect admission that a white man in chains was more pitiful to behold than the African similarly placed” (Nelson qtd. in Sterling Brown 72). By using mulatto characters, white abolitionists appealed to the personal sensitivities and “pity” of other whites. While perhaps effective at creating sympathy for the antislavery cause in the white community, the popularity of this archetype had negative implications for the role of the mulatto within the African American community. As I will find in my examination of *The Color Purple*, the mulatto was ostracized from the larger black community due to privileges grafted onto her by white standards of beauty and changing notions of marginalization contemporary to the text’s 1930s setting.

In contrast to the categorical marginalization of the early- to mid-nineteenth century, the African American community, specifically members with lighter skin were faced with integrative marginalization in the late-nineteenth century. Rather than the overarching exclusion of a whole group, integrative marginalization privileges “a chosen few” by giving them limited access to dominant society’s resources and institutions (Cohen 58). This is not to say that these “chosen few” are considered equal by any means; instead they “are still understood as inferior or subordinate to most dominant group members” (59). In literature, this privilege came to the mulatto character in her ability to “pass” in white society. That is, the mulatto could, if she were light enough, pretend to be white and thus remove herself from the hardships of the black community. This very notion of “passing” reinforces the mulatto’s alignment with the black community in these texts. After all, mulattos operating in black communities within literature are rarely, if ever, said to be “passing” as black. The perception that the tragic mulatto was merely *pretending* to be white, implies that her true alignment is with blackness. Teresa C. Zackodnik asserts that the act of passing is “part of an African American cultural tradition of subversive

performance and should be considered in that context” (Zackodnik xxiii).³ If the whiteness granted to the mulatto through passing was a “performance,” more closely associated with “African American cultural tradition” and physical survival, it would seem that the mulatto should be incorporated into the black community. However, due to the possibility for elevation through integrative marginalization attributed to her lighter skin, the mulatto often drew wrath from the black community rather than acceptance, even when she sought entrance into the group. Critics have consistently misread the role of the mulatto in Walker’s text, and virtually none have highlighted this ostracism. *The Color Purple* takes on the passing narratives of history and conspicuously marginalizes the mulatto within the black community and the text as a whole, upholding many of the postbellum stereotypes of the tragic mulatto.

Written while much of the debate on the tragic mulatto figure was taking place, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and its protagonist Janie, examines these stereotypes of the mulatto. Not only can the mulatto pass into white society but she is privileged within the black intraracial hierarchy due to prevailing white standards of beauty, while simultaneously drawing scorn due to this attractiveness.⁴ *Their Eyes Were Watching God* tells the story of Janie Crawford, a mulatto woman, and her journey to selfhood. The themes of lightness as a distinguishing characteristic and white attributes garnering racial privilege are carried throughout the text in the perspective of Mrs. Turner, a black woman with a few white features—“her nose was slightly pointed,” “her thin lips were an ever delight to her eyes”

³ This “subversive performance” of whiteness by the mulatto suggests that blackness is innate within them while whiteness is performative. This could lead to a discussion of the social obsession with categorizing blacks as an anxiety about the stability of whiteness. For more information see the introduction to Teresa Zackodnik’s *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race*.

⁴ Straight and soft hair, rounded blue eyes, light skin, and other typical features common to whites have been perpetuated as beauty standards throughout Western history. This representation can be seen in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* among other texts, and is common even in modern society with the prevalence of plastic surgery, skin lightening, and hair modification (through extensions and weaves) in non-white communities to access and reproduce white features.

(Hurston 140). Mrs. Turner is obsessed with whiteness, particularly that of Janie Crawford. Her “coffee-and-cream complexion and her luxurious hair” are the stated reasons that Mrs. Turner seeks Janie’s friendship, but “she [doesn’t] forgive her for marrying a man as dark as Tea Cake” (140). Mrs. Turner seeks to lighten the race and is disapproving of the beautiful, privileged Janie seemingly demeaning herself with her husband, who is much darker than she. She believes that “[e]ven if dey don’t take us in wid de whites, dey oughta make us uh class tuh ourselves” (142).⁵ Mrs. Turner would rather be part of a small, still subjugated mulatto race, than be identified as a member of the black community. However, Hurston represents these ideas as absurd, portraying whiteness as a false idol: “Anyone who looked more white folkish than herself was better than she was in her criteria...Mrs. Turner, like all other believers had built an altar to the unattainable—Caucasian characteristics for all” (145). Mrs. Turner nonsensically idolizes the attributes of what she perceives to be the highest group in the racial hierarchy. Though attempting to elevate herself through her light features, this only serves to differentiate her from the black community. Furthermore, Mrs. Turner understands that this elevation will still garner subjugation from the white community, leaving her and the others as an alienated class. Mrs. Turner becomes a caricature of the problematic nature of intraracial hierarchical identification and the privileging of lightness over blackness that follows Janie throughout *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

It is due to her admiration for Hurston’s protagonist that Walker connects herself to Janie, saying she chose her as a “model” and “example” in her own personal life (*Gardens* 7).⁶ It is this

⁵ Due to the colloquial diction used in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *The Color Purple*, *The Temple of My Familiar*, and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, I will not make use of the [sic] demarcation throughout this paper. All passages are just as they appear in the original source material (as cited), and all deviations from Standard Written English are reproductions of Hurston and Walker’s texts.

⁶ Additionally, the two authors are often linked though separated by both space and time (Walker was merely fifteen years old when Hurston died, and the two never met) and Walker demonstrates a profound connection to Hurston.

professed love for Janie and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that perhaps accounts for the intertextual connection frequently made between Hurston's most famous text and Walker's.⁷ *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel that follows its protagonist Celie from a childhood fraught with sexual, physical, and emotional trauma through her oppressive marriage to an abusive husband, Mr. _____. Later in her life, with the help of a cast of characters who become an unconventional family, Celie has a sexual and spiritual awakening, through which she gains agency and the ability to educate others. However, Celie's racial categorization is decidedly different than that of Janie: Janie is identified as a conspicuously light-skinned mulatto, while Celie is dark-skinned ("You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman" [*The Color Purple* 209]).⁸ The source of this difference is perhaps Walker's emphasis on "the black black woman" (*Gardens* 291). She deals with the topic of the dark-skinned black woman in an essay entitled, "If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?": "To me, the black black woman is our essential mother—the blacker she is the more *us* she is—and to see the hatred that is turned on her is enough to make me despair, almost entirely, of our future as a people" (291, emphasis added). While this is a seemingly empowering statement made in the context of combating intraracial stereotypes against darker women within the black community, the statement has negative connotations as well. As critic Philip M. Royster responds,

Several essays in Walker's collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* are about Hurston. Seeing Hurston as a literary guide who paved the way for her, Walker further writes that if she were "[c]ondemned to a desert island for life, with an allotment of ten books to see me through, I would choose, unhesitatingly, two of Zora's: *Mules and Men*... and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*...*There is no book more important to me than this one*" (*Gardens* 86, emphasis in original).

⁷ The critical body on this matter is vast and well beyond the scope of this paper. For more information, I would encourage examination of *Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston: The Common Bond*, edited by Lillie P. Howard, which contains essays on the relationship between the two authors by a number of scholars. Additional articles by Tadao Kunishiro, Geraldine Smith-Wright, James Robert Saunders, Henry Louis Gates, and Molly Hite on the relationship between Walker and Hurston are also included in the Works Cited section of this paper.

⁸ Celie is not the only character whose blackness is accentuated. Shug Avery is described as "black as my shoe" (*The Color Purple* 21) and "black as tar" (54); Harpo is "black as the inside of a chimney" (28). Race and color are consistently highlighted in the text, with blackness at its center.

Although she appears to be arguing against intraracism, in actuality her proposition that the darker a black woman the closer she is to being the ‘essential mother’ of the race can only serve to fan the fires of rancor and recrimination that have been raging among black people of different shades at least since slavery days. Walker’s proposition, whether or not she is aware of it, has the effect of becoming a thinly cloaked attack on Afro-American mulattoes; it shunts them aside (or places them on a lower rung of Walker’s ladder of blackness) as the outcast bastards to the slave plantation’s white adulterers and fornicators.

(Royster 361)

In evaluating the problem in Walker’s privileging of the “black black woman,” Royster unveils an important flaw in her logic: by attempting to combat the hatred “turned on” dark-skinned black women, Walker is projecting this subjugation onto the mulatto. This is a reorienting of Mrs. Turner’s hierarchy, the “ladder of blackness,” rather than a destruction of it, as Walker suggests throughout the essay. Walker even goes so far as to try to recast Janie as a dark-skinned character. In the same article, she writes, “Though Janie Crawford, Zora Neale Hurston’s best-known heroine, is described as being light of skin and feathery of hair, as soon as she opens her mouth we know who and what she is, and her hands, though genetically ‘light,’ are brown from the labor she shares with other blacks” (*Gardens* 303). While Janie does indeed engage in manual labor in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, her straight hair and light characteristics are an always present aspect of her visual characterization. In fact, there is no depiction in Hurston’s text of Janie as dark or “brown.” I read this moment as Walker needing herself to believe Janie is not a mulatto, but regardless of whether this is the case, it is nearly impossible to read this text and think of Janie as “brown” as Walker does. Royster ultimately concludes of Walker’s essay,

“her intraracial remarks constitute a persecutory proposition, elevating one victim, casting down another, and *dividing the race*” (Royster 361, emphasis added). Why can’t Celie be light-skinned like Janie, a character whose attributes Walker otherwise idolizes? Why can’t Janie be inspirational for Walker as a mixed race character? In creating these delineations, Walker is reinforcing the very hierarchy she claims to be dismantling through the privileging of the dark black woman in the article. She is “dividing the race” and creating the mulatto as “uh class tuh [herself].”

In analyzing *The Color Purple*, many critics see it as an ideal depiction of her theories of Womanism, which has been widely adopted as a contemporary critical theory on race and gender. These critics assert that Celie’s journey to empowerment is a representation of how necessary it is to create a strong black community, comprised of both men and women, in a society divided by race. Yet, *The Color Purple* demonstrates that community’s inability to incorporate an important character of color: the mulatto. The only mulatto character in *The Color Purple*, Mary Agnes is continually oppressed by the black community represented in the text, primarily on the basis of the “yellow” color of her skin. I argue that this marginalization of the mulatto is a common problem throughout Walker’s oeuvre, particularly in *The Color Purple*, where the critical landscape has been virtually silent on the treatment of Mary Agnes as a biracial character. In the text, Mary Agnes consistently tries to enter the black community but is ostracized for her light skin, even garnering the nickname “Squeak” due to her mousey, passive nature. Though her one moment of temporary acceptance by the community is often read as an empowering one for Mary Agnes, the communal approval is short-lived, and she is marginalized for the vast majority of the text. In the book’s conclusion, one that highlights the strong black community to which critics refer, Mary Agnes is notably absent.

The next section of my paper will establish the historical and theoretical frameworks surrounding Walker's creation of *The Color Purple*, stressing her attempt to deviate from the Black Power Movement's emphasis on men and the Black Feminist Movement's emphasis on women to a more communal approach. In the third section, I will establish the Black Marxist framework through which I will evaluate the text, using the paradigm laid out in Eldridge Cleaver's "The Primeval Mitosis" as my foundation. This section will demonstrate that, while Walker sought to move away from previous movements' gender binaries, *The Color Purple* fits into and reproduces Cleaver's paradigmatic social structure, which leads to the marginalization of Mary Agnes. Through an extensive close reading of Mary Agnes's appearances in *The Color Purple*, I will track her failed attempts to enter the black community, the communal manipulation of her sexuality, and the events following her tragic rape, all of which demonstrate the community's consistent unwillingness to incorporate Mary Agnes. In my fourth section, through an intertextual assessment of two other Walker novels that contain mulatto characters, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Temple of My Familiar*, I will demonstrate that this inability to incorporate the mulatto is not unique to *The Color Purple*, but instead a problematic pattern that undermines an element of Walker's Womanist theory. Finally, in the last section, I will explore how this pattern of mulatto oppression becomes more pronounced in the context of Walker's own life. While *The Color Purple* was a successful and revolutionary text in many ways, its adherence to standard conceptions of the black community as existing in polar opposition to the white community contributes to the subjugation of the mulatto.

"Purple to lavender"

Imperative in any analysis of Walker's *The Color Purple* is a strong understanding of her ideas of Womanism and their relationship to the ideological climate at the time of their

conception. The 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s were decades of social upheaval in the United States; during this era, movements for race and gender equality were centered on changing prevailing norms of oppression. In this vein, the Black Power Movement sought to propagate an aggressive black consciousness. And yet within the movement there were schisms based on the problematic treatment of women. In Maulana Karenga's famed collection *The Quotable Karenga* (1966), he writes, "What makes a woman appealing is femininity and she can't be feminine without being submissive" (qtd. in Scot Brown 56). The stereotypical representation of "femininity" as linked with submission was pushed on women within the US Organization, of which Karenga was the leader, and Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam. Ultimately, the role of women was often defined (as it was by the US Organization) as "'complementary' rather than 'equal' to the supreme status of the Black man" (Scot Brown 56), which diminished women's participation, or at least its public reflection, in the Black Power Movement. Even the less traditional Black Panther Party upheld standard notions of patriarchy and women's roles. Elaine Brown's autobiography details repeated sexual, emotional, and physical abuse of female members of the Party at the hands of their male "comrades" (E. Brown 9, 307-309, 363, 444). Kimberly Springer explains, "[B]lack liberation struggles have been, and continue to be defined, with a discourse that equates black freedom with a reassertion of black patriarchy" (Springer 107). Though some black women were certainly vocal and important members of the Black Power Movement, many others felt ostracized by the movement's masculine focus and sought a different ideology as the underlying mechanism for their struggle.

Contemporaneous to the Black Power Movement, the Second Wave of Feminism was also brewing in the United States. Black women who considered themselves feminists found difficulty with the language and views expressed by white women within the movement. Author

and activist bell hooks explains, “When I participated in feminist groups, I found that white women adopted a condescending attitude towards me and other non-white participants. The condescension they directed at black women was one of the means they employed to remind us that the women’s movement was ‘theirs’...They did not see us as equals” (*Feminist Theory* 12). These women thus saw a necessity in separating black feminist identity from the dominant white discourse in the women’s movement. Finding representation in neither the Black Power Movement or in Second Wave Feminism, they created a new movement dealing with their multiple layers of oppression within society: Black Feminism. Kimberly Springer cites Beverly Guy-Sheftall’s comprehensive definition of the premises of Black Feminism:

Black women experience a special kind of oppression in this country which is racist, sexist and classist because of their dual racial and gender identity and their limited access to economic resources. This ‘triple jeopardy’ has meant that the problems, concerns, and needs of black women are different in many ways from those of both white women and black men. Black women must struggle for black liberation and gender equality simultaneously...Black women’s commitment to the liberation of blacks and women is profoundly rooted in their lived experience. (qtd. in Springer 109-110)

The view challenges the typical language of patriarchy associated with the feminist movement, and reads upon it another layer of oppression: the power relationship between white women and black women.

It was during this revolutionary era that Alice Walker coined the term Womanism. The term is often conflated with Black Feminism, as both are centered on the black community and

women's issues.⁹ However, Womanism is more concerned with the incorporation of black men into its membership and intended outcomes—that is, the movement seeks progress in women's rights through black communal understanding, rather than a progress pursued entirely by and for females. Walker describes the term in her 1983 definition, "Womanist," writing, "Womanist...A black feminist or feminist of color...Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female" (*Gardens* xi, emphasis in original). Here she highlights the importance of men and women coming together, for the mutually beneficial survival of their "entire people." Walker further alleviates the stigma associated with Black Feminism as a purely female-centric movement, continuing, "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender" (xii), or more explicitly, feminism is a shade of Womanism and all feminists are Womanists, but one need not be a feminist to be a Womanist. This inclusion of the male as necessary for progress of the black community and its female population is unique in contrast to the Black Power Movement's focused on black men and masculinity, and the Black Feminist Movement's focus on black women. Womanism has spread far beyond Walker, and many critics who formerly identified as Black Feminists have since assigned themselves this designation.¹⁰ Several Womanist scholars write explicitly on Walker's *The Color Purple* and assert it as perfectly representative of a progressive mixed-gender black community. Perhaps the most famous critical essay on the text is Deborah McDowell's "The Changing Same," in which she writes, "[Walker] envisions a new

⁹ This conflation may stem from the desire to have a black women's movement that need not necessarily be introduced by the word "Black," as is Black Feminism. As Layli Phillips explains in her notes on Alice Walker's "Coming Home," "An advantage of using 'womanist' is that, because it is from my own culture, I needn't preface it with the word 'Black' (an awkward necessity and problem I have with the word 'feminist'), since Blackness is implicit in the term; just as for white women there is apparently no felt need to preface 'feminist' with the word 'white,' since the word 'feminist' is accepted as coming out of white women's culture" (Walker 11).

¹⁰ For the study on Womanism, see Layli Phillips's *The Womanist Reader*. The collected essays in her volume trace Womanism from its origins through its applications in theology, literature, history, theater and film, media, psychology, anthropology, and education. She also introduces critiques of the theory, all of which is beyond the scope of this paper.

world—at times utopian in dimension—in which power relations between men and women, between the colonizers and the colonized, are reconfigured to eliminate domination and promote cooperation” (50). In the same vein, Tuzyline Jita Allan explains, “Walker is cynical of the feminist practice of forcing the discourse of oppression into a masculine pigeonhole, calling instead for a multivarious perspective to account for the ubiquity of domination” (103). Here Allan highlights, much like I do, *The Color Purple*’s communal abuse of its women. While this is a very Womanist stance to take, it is incomplete and thus, a misreading. She makes no mention of Mary Agnes’s role as a mulatto, instead equating her with all of the black women in the text. It is with this foundation that Allan continues, “[this account] attests to the radical potential of the womanist ethic” (103). Like Allan, I believe Womanism has “radical potential”; however, I do not see an exemplary representation of its intentions in *The Color Purple* as she, McDowell, and other Womanist critics do.

When *The Color Purple* was published in 1982, there were strong critical reactions from every possible side. In 1983, the book received both the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award, clear markers of popular success and acclaim.¹¹ However, many black men sharply criticized the book for its representations of male violence, which some asserted reinforced inaccurate racial stereotypes of black men. A notable example of this critical response is George Stade’s “Womanist Fiction and Male Characters.” Stade misrepresents the stated intentions of Womanism, calling it “female chauvinism” (264), and asserts that men in *The Color Purple*, as well as “many recent novels and short stories” (266), are either depicted as violent and despicable or are fully emasculated. He explains, “The nonclerical male characters, by and large, are ‘either awkward brutes, stumbling amid female subtleties, or wistful would-be

¹¹ This combined accomplishment has only been achieved by five other works of fiction: William Faulkner’s *A Fable*, Katherine Anne Porter’s *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*, Bernard Malamud’s *The Fixer*, John Cheever’s *The Stories of John Cheever*, and John Updike’s *Rabbit is Rich*.

transvestites’—which is what Alice Walker’s Harpo and Mr. _____ turn out to be” (267).

Stade sees no mediating role for men in Womanism as a whole, but especially not in *The Color Purple*. This poses a stark contrast to both the Womanist and Feminist receptions of the text.

Feminist critics, for the most part, see the text as a successful representation of Walker’s Womanist vision.¹² They turn to the close of the text as a utopian ideal for tomorrow, one in which an unconventional family unit comes together in understanding, achieving communal growth. These critics emphasize the fantastical events that allow the community to come together, including the reform of the previously abusive and oppressive male population. Linda Abbandonato assesses the text’s closing letter as its “final utopian vision, the brave new world” (Abbandonato 1109). Even Celie’s abusive husband Mr. _____ “is ready and able to participate in Celie’s utopian community” (Collins 87). In the book’s pivotal conclusion, however, Mary Agnes is notably absent. This omission, one I will examine extensively in this paper, is one seemingly overlooked by all of these critics who find Walker’s vision a complete “utopia.” While there are certainly those feminists who are critical of *The Color Purple*, none of them highlight Mary Agnes or her treatment.¹³ It is notable that, like my own argument, Laura Berlant’s feminist reading in “Race, Gender, and Nation” criticizes the final Independence Day scene. However, hers is a critique of capitalism and reproduction of already existing American values, linked with the novel’s seemingly contradictory moments of nationalism. But regardless

¹² To call the scope of feminist criticism on this text vast would be an understatement. The most influential feminist readings are those of Linda Abbandonato, Laura Berlant, Barbara Christian, and Deborah McDowell included in the Works Cited section of this paper.

¹³ Bell hooks considers the book an unrealistic fantasy that diminishes the Black Feminist struggle. She writes, “To make Celie happy [Walker] creates a fiction where struggle—the arduous and painful process by which the oppressed work for liberation [—] has no place. This fantasy of change without effort is a dangerous one for both oppressed and oppressor. It is a brand of false consciousness that keeps everyone in place and oppressive structures intact” (hooks “Reading and Resistance” 295). Perhaps the most virulent criticism is that of Trudier Harris, whose 1984 article accuses Walker (and the text) of inauthenticity, as well as supporting “a general pattern of violence and abuse for black women” (Harris 156). She asserts that Celie is a pathetic, unrealistic character who has no business in a critical comparison with Janie Crawford. Harris’s is the most often cited critique of the work, and is so scathing that it is frequently set apart from other critical voices.

of the movement in which they fall, virtually no critics have dealt with the role of the mulatto in Walker's fiction. Mary Agnes and her participation in the novel are often entirely glossed over within the critical landscape.

Those critics who do address Mary Agnes and her rape almost entirely see her as achieving selfhood and a voice through this violation. In addition to seeing Mary Agnes as finding "her own unimitative voice" (McDowell 49) following her rape, Deborah McDowell even examines Walker's perspective on the mulatto briefly (as represented in her essay in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*), but fails to address Mary Agnes as relevant to this discussion at all, instead examining Celie. No one finds the character of Mary Agnes problematic or spends more than a paragraph addressing her role.¹⁴ James C. Hall is so cavalier as to call Mary Agnes's rape a "limited success," which is noteworthy due to the "decision to combat patriarchal power with black female solidarity" (Hall 92), ignoring of course the implications of this "limited success" for Mary Agnes. Wendy Wall writes that Mary Agnes "is willing to be raped by the white deputy...because the family *expects* this sacrifice" (Wall 269, emphasis in original). Yet, Wall is unable to link this expectation to a systematic oppression of the mulatto character throughout the text, and sees the text as successfully achieving its Womanist aims. Through the close reading in the next section of my paper, I will demonstrate that these pervasive critical views are unsound to a fault. This perspective ignores the fact that Mary Agnes does not understand the risks of her assignment (she is not "willing to be raped," as Wall asserts), is never given an opportunity to heal from her violation, and is no longer a part of the black community by the text's end. Critics have, on the whole, failed to address the intraracial hierarchy Walker's text sets up, one in which the mulatto is excluded and alienated from the black community.

¹⁴ There are several other critics, such as Michael Awkward, Daniel Ross, and Molly Hite, who address this idea in passing, upholding the perspective that Mary Agnes is uplifted by her rape.

“Do you really love me, or just my color?”

In order to establish Walker’s inability to incorporate the mulatto into *The Color Purple*’s black community, I will use an existing framework through which to view the paradigmatic nature of race relations in the text. I do this to avoid ideas of societal essentialism and instead shape Walker’s text and characters within a critical framework that functions as written in this text but not necessarily in society at large. To look at the framework of race and gender surrounding constructions of blackness and whiteness in the text, I use the paradigm set up in Eldridge Cleaver’s article “The Primeval Mitosis,” which is contained in his collection of essays entitled *Soul on Ice*. Though Cleaver does not use explicitly racial terms, the article is contained in the collection’s final chapter, “White Woman, Black Man,” and I suggest that a reading of his paradigm as racialized is not only obvious, but necessary to accurately read Cleaver’s ideas as they manifest in Walker’s text. I thus read his “Omnipotent Administrator” as the white, upper-class male; his “Supermasculine Menial” as the black, lower-class male; his “Ultrafeminine” as the white, upper-class female; and his “Amazon” as the black, lower-class female. As a Black Panther, and a known misogynist, Eldridge Cleaver certainly represents many of the problematic gender dynamics of the Black Power movement. It is the fact that Walker’s characters fall into his paradigm so explicitly, thus reproducing these problematic gender dynamics that necessitates my use of Cleaver.¹⁵ The applicability of this framework to *The Color Purple* demonstrates that though the text is a very powerful and progressive one it adheres to many of the same

¹⁵ It is also important to note that Walker is critical of Cleaver’s elevation to the level of philosopher and intellectual within the black community. In a speech she gave at Sarah Lawrence’s (her alma mater) convocation in 1972, Walker states, “I am disturbed when Eldridge Cleaver is considered the successor to Ralph Ellison, on campuses like this one—this is like saying Kate Millet’s book *Sexual Politics* makes her the new Jane Austen” (*Gardens* 36). While Walker is not completely diminishing Cleaver’s importance, she is asserting that the community should not be hasty to embrace him as a philosopher or successor equal to Ellison, whose 1964 *Shadow and Act* was an important collection of social and political essays that resonated with many black scholars and citizens engaged in societal liberation struggles.

conceptions of social structures as did the movements that preceded it, which ultimately causes the marginalization of the mulatto character.

In applying Cleaver's view to *The Color Purple*, the minimal presence of white characters in the text is notable.¹⁶ While there is less overt evidence of the white male Omnipotent Administrator and white female Ultrafeminine, the attributes of these archetypes are exemplified by Mayor _____ and his wife, Miss Millie. Cleaver explains of the white male, "[The] basic impulse of Omnipotent Administrators is to despise their bodies and glorify their minds" (Cleaver 179). In assigning himself the Mind, the white Omnipotent Administrator simultaneously assigns the Body to the black Supermasculine Menial, removing from him the agency associated with intellect and sovereignty over himself. However, by elevating himself to this status, the Omnipotent Administrator is "perennially associated with physical weakness...effeminacy, sexual impotence, and frigidity" (180). The mayor demonstrates this demasculinized nature in his altercation with Sofia, who is a strong black woman:

Mayor look at Sofia, push his wife out the way. Stick out his chest. Girl, what you say to Miss Millie?

Sofia say, I say, Hell no.

He slap her...

Sofia knock the man down. (*The Color Purple* 87)

With all of his posturing, Mayor _____ is weak in comparison with Sofia, who exemplifies the defeminized strength of the black female Amazon, which will be explored later in this section.

¹⁶ As Brian Norman explains, "When Walker returns to the Jim Crow period, she consciously turns away from the color line so that the heart of her story and Celie's world does not depend on interactions with white people. In fact, for the first third of the novel, references to white culture or people are intrusive blips and bobbles that occasionally punctuate Celie's rather small but also black-directed world. Whiteness appears sporadically, almost like gnats buzzing around the narrative" (Norman 72). This allows the paradigm I highlight to function in such polarity. It is the very minimal presence of whites in the text that crafts their opposition to blacks.

The ability of anyone, let alone a subordinate black woman, to knock a white man of prominent position to the ground is emasculating.

In light of the Omnipotent Administrator's possession of the Mind coupled with an effete body, the Supermasculine Menial holds an uneducated Body, gifted with physical power and sexual virility. Throughout the text we see the black male as an economically and socially stagnant individual due to his intellectual oppression by society as a whole. Instead of mental power, male characters like Mr. _____ demonstrate physical strength. Cleaver writes, "In an uncannily effective manner, the society in which [the black man] lives has assumed in its very structure that he, minus a mind, is the embodiment of Brute Power" (Cleaver 186). Though all of the black men in the text represent the hypermasculinity of the Supermasculine Menial at some point in its pages, Mr. _____ carries this narrative throughout, most notably through his consistent and physically graphic beatings of Celie. She explains, "He beat me like he beat the children...It all I can do not to cry" (*The Color Purple* 23). The regular beating of Celie by her husband purely "cause she my wife" (23) indicates the regularity with which black men perpetrate violence as framed in Cleaver's social structure, whether on their children or wives, due to the grafting of the wholly physical nature of "Brute Power" onto their identity by the Supermasculine Menial. In fact, this beating is perpetrated by almost all black men in Walker's text on their female counterparts, again reproducing the paradigmatic framework laid out by Cleaver: In addition to Celie's beatings by Mr. _____, her stepfather beats her for winking at a boy in church and dressing "trampy" (5, 7), and Harpo attempts to beat Sofia (37). It appears that the violent physical expression attributed to the Supermasculine Menial is the only mode of interaction between black males and females in the early letters of the novel.

Cleaver's upper-class white female is constructed in response to the Omnipotent Administrator's effeminacy. She "is required to possess and project an image that is in sharp contrast to his, more sharply feminine than his, so that the effeminate image of her man can still, by virtue of the sharp contrast in degrees of femininity, be perceived as masculine" (Cleaver 181). Miss Millie fulfills this image, particularly her inability to operate a vehicle properly: "Mayor _____ bought Miz Millie a new car, cause she said if colored could have cars then one for her was past due. So he bought her a car, only he refuse to show her how to drive it. Every day he come home from town he look at her, look out the window at her car, say, How you enjoying'er Miz Millie" (*The Color Purple* 104). Though he has acquiesced to her desire for a car, the mayor is unwilling to relinquish the masculine power granted to him through the knowledge of its operation. Lacking mobility without her husband's driving, Miss Millie implores Sofia to teach her how to drive. Here, again, the Ultrafeminine perpetuates an image of female helplessness, the opposite of which is taken up by the Amazon.

In Walker's text, Sofia serves most clearly as the black female Amazon. In addition to the violence she enacts on the Mayor, descriptions of Sofia throughout the text emphasize her physical strength and lack of femininity: "Sofia dragging a ladder and then lean it up gainst the house. She wearing a old pair of Harpo pants. Got her hair tied up in a headrag. She clam up the ladder to the roof, begin to hammer in nails" (*The Color Purple* 62). In response to this strength, Miss Millie attempts to place Sofia in the domestic sphere, imploring, "All your children so clean...would you like to work for me, be my maid?" (87).¹⁷ In order to further maintain her

¹⁷ It is this very interaction that creates much of the secondary plot throughout the novel: it leads to the altercation between Sofia and the mayor, after which Sofia is imprisoned. In trying to free Sofia for the community, Mary Agnes is raped. Mary Agnes does, however, succeed in having Sofia removed from prison to instead serve as the mayor and Miss Millie's maid. In essence, the chain of events set into motion by this interaction does indeed lead to the domestication of Sofia that Miss Millie initially proposes.

extreme femininity, the white woman projects her domestic tasks and the masculinity associated with them onto her black counterpart.

Cleaver further complicates his portrait of racialized class interactions by asserting that males of each class long for the females of the other. The white male Omnipotent Administrator seeks out the black female Amazon as an effort to prove his masculinity: “Fearing impotence, impotence being implicit in his negation and abdication of his Body, his profoundest need is for evidence of his virility...Strength gauges its own potency through a confrontation with other strength. To test it, he must go where it is” (Cleaver 182). In contrast to the Omnipotent Administrator’s attraction to the Amazon, the black male Supermasculine Menial is repulsed by the defeminized nature of his partner, since she is desexualized within the social framework. In turn, when he encounters the white female Ultrafeminine, he lusts after her due to her extreme femininity. These desires “are compounded by the fact that on the whole they are foredoomed to remain unfulfilled. The society has arranged things so that the Supermasculine Menial and the Ultrafeminine are not likely to have access or propinquity to each other conducive to stimulating sexual involvement” (187). During the era of Jim Crow, in which Cleaver was writing and *The Color Purple* takes place, laws against miscegenation were prevalent. And in those places where laws did not govern racial mixing, social norms dictating the taboo nature of interracial fraternizing prevailed. Thus, in the social paradigm laid out by Cleaver, which is reproduced throughout Walker’s text, the attraction of white men to black women and that of black men to white women goes unfulfilled.

The archetypal roles and clear delineation between white men and black men, and white women and black women in Cleaver’s paradigm and *The Color Purple*, creates a liminal space between blackness and whiteness that is defined only by the races’ opposition to one another.

Neither black nor white, the mulatto is left out of the social paradigm and is thus without a racial community. Acknowledging the operation of this framework and the racialization of class and social position within the text allows us to explore the role of the mulatto as an outsider in two societies so inextricably linked by their opposition. It is the aforementioned taboo sexual attraction of Omnipotent Administrators to Amazons and Supermasculine Menials to Ultrafeminines that create the unique sexual position of the mulatto in the social framework set out by Cleaver. Though she is not white, Mary Agnes carries access to the white standard of beauty sought after by black men, as well as the black ethnic beauty desired by white men. This position raises the mulatto above other women with black roots within the social paradigm in the eyes of the black woman, who thus alienates her. Although it places the character of the mulatto in the context of black women, this intraracial hierarchy serves to divide her further from the existing black community rather than bring her closer through a shared oppression. In addition, it leads to frequent objectification and commodification¹⁸ by both black and white men. In the text, Mary Agnes is raped by the white warden and claimed by both unmarried black male characters (Harpo and Grady). She is consistently described corporeally from the scene in which we meet her through her rape, and continually in its aftermath. By nature of her skin color, the mulatto is simultaneously placed outside the existing framework in a position of superiority over other black women and commodified, but without the social standing of white women.

From her initial description in the text, we sense that Mary Agnes is a character existing outside the black community. When we first meet Mary Agnes, she is solidified as a passive, docile character. Celie explains, “Harpo little yellowish girlfriend sulk, hanging over the bar. She

¹⁸ Here and throughout this paper, I use the term objectification in its sexual definition. That is, the treatment of a person simply as an object of sexual attraction, pleasure, or gratification. Marxism defines commodification as the assignment of an economic value to something not previously assigned such a value. Here and throughout, it refers explicitly to female sexuality.

a nice girl, friendly and everything, but she like me. She do anything Harpo say. He give her a little nickname, too, call her Squeak” (*The Color Purple* 83). Mary Agnes’s ambiguous skin color (“yellowish”) is the most heavily emphasized aspect of her person. The rest of the descriptive words in the passage “nice girl, friendly” are vague and imprecise. Further, though she may be “nice” and “friendly,” these are not seen as positive aspects by the black female community, for she will “do anything Harpo say.” Mary Agnes lacks an identity outside of Harpo; he gives her a nickname with mouse-like connotations, reinforcing her passive nature. This passivity does not resonate with these Amazon women who are characterized as strong and dominant.

However, even with this depiction of her personality, Mary Agnes attempts to enter a preexisting communal framework. When Harpo begins to dance with Sofia in his jukejoint, Mary Agnes becomes vocal:

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

You know who she is, say Harpo.

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

Sofia say, Fine with me. She turn round to leave. (*The Color Purple* 84)

Here, Mary Agnes attempts to displace Sofia, literally questioning her identity by asking who she is. Harpo asserts that she already knows Sofia’s identity, a fact that Mary Agnes quickly confirms when she commands Sofia “leave him alone.” However, she speaks without confidence, in her “little teenouncy voice,” and it is ultimately Sofia who chooses to exercise her Amazonian courage and “turn round to leave.” The passage continues,

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

Squeak say, What you mean, Dis her house? She walk out on you.

Walk away from the house. It over now, she say to Sofia.

Sofia say, Fine with me. Try to pull away from Harpo grip. He hold her tight. (84)

Harpo attempts to reclaim power from both women in the situation, when he says to Sofia, “You don’t have to go no where.” In doing so, he also displaces Mary Agnes by asserting that the house belongs to Sofia. Mary Agnes demonstrates insider knowledge of the reality of the situation, claiming, “She walk out on you. Walk away from the house,” again attempting to displace Sofia from the physical position of strength that Harpo has now granted her. But it is still Sofia who tries to “pull away” and exit the situation. Harpo again attempts to reinstate masculine control by ignoring Mary Agnes’s orders and Sofia’s discomfort, as he grips her “tight.” Finally, the conflict comes to its head:

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

Squeak say, Not if he my man he can’t. You hear that, bitch, she say to Sofia. (84)

Mary Agnes now becomes enraged as Harpo has not only gifted Sofia with the physical strength of place, an ownership of the house, but also an emotional and social power over Mary Agnes, stating that Sofia is “his own wife.” This depiction of the relationship between Harpo and Sofia is in stark contrast to the ownership Mary Agnes attempts to uphold. Though she claims Harpo is “my man,” this holds less value and weight than the marital bond he holds with Sofia.

Mary Agnes turns the conflict away from Harpo and onto the relatively quiet Sofia, calling her “bitch” and slapping her in the face. Immediately, Celie expresses shock at this action, questioning, “What she do that for. Sofia don’t even deal in little ladyish things such as

slaps” (*The Color Purple* 84). Celie’s utterance, “what she do that for,” inserts a commonly held knowledge in the community: you don’t cross the Amazonian Sofia, and certainly not with anything as “ladyish” as a slap, which instead connotes the feminine weakness of the Ultrafeminine. Mary Agnes is an outsider, in both race and knowledge, and is not privy to this communal awareness. Sofia, in turn, “[B]all up her fist, draw back, and knock two of Squeak’s side teef out. Squeak hit the floor” (84). Sofia’s expression of strength is now physical, and she uses this defeminized action to knock out two of Mary Agnes’s teeth, striking a blow at her feminine beauty as well as her dignity. Sofia pushes against Mary Agnes’s weak attempt at an expression of agency, essentially asserting her Amazon strength as a necessary aspect of black female identity. In doing so, she forces Mary Agnes back into the docile, liminal space outside of the fledgling black community. Though as a woman of color Mary Agnes is not granted access to Ultrafeminine spaces, Sofia is making it clear that Amazon spaces are also inaccessible to her.

While Mary Agnes is not initially accepted into the group, many critics assert that in the moment of her sexual assault Mary Agnes finds agency and voice within the black community. Daniel Ross writes about this growth in his article “Celie in the Looking Glass,” explaining, “Mary Agnes...helps free Sofia from prison by submitting to rape by the warden, her illegitimate father...Ironically, Mary Agnes the victim emerges from this encounter with a new power over men in general” (Ross 13). In addition to incorrectly identifying her rapist (it is her uncle, not her father, who violates Mary Agnes), Ross gifts an incredible amount of agency to Mary Agnes in this moment. I contest two of his points: first, that Mary Agnes is herself choosing to submit to the warden’s rape, and second, that she leaves this encounter with a power over either men or herself.

Mary Agnes's trip to visit the warden stems from the community's decision that they need to get Sofia out of jail. Of the group, Mr. _____ states, "Us got to do something...and be right quick about it" (*The Color Purple* 92). This sense of urgency is not expressed by everyone in the community, and certainly not by Mary Agnes, who provides no suggestions and instead merely asks, "What can *us* do?" (92, emphasis added). Mary Agnes is very clearly emphasizing this endeavor as a communal one, with her use of the word "us," and in doing so is aligning herself with the community. However, it is ultimately Mary Agnes who has the greatest ability to go to the warden on behalf of Sofia because he is her kin.¹⁹ She approaches the topic with trepidation and is unable to claim the warden as her uncle without prodding. When she does acknowledge their familial relationship, the question—at first "What can *us* do?"—is now "What can *you* do?" The group turns their attention towards Mary Agnes and evaluates her in a different light, one of use value:²⁰

Mr. _____ rear back in his chair, give Squeak a good look from head to foot. Squeak push her greasy brown hair back from her face.

Yeah, say Mr. _____. I see the resemblance. He bring his chair down on the floor.

Well, look like you the one to go.

Go where, ast Squeak.

Go see the warden. He your uncle. (*The Color Purple* 94)

¹⁹ Mary Agnes is "yellow" as a result of her mother's miscegenistic relationship with Jimmy Hodges, who is the warden's brother, and thus Mary Agnes's uncle. It is unclear whether the relationship between her mother and Jimmy is consensual or not.

²⁰ Marxism defines use value as the association of an economic value with the consumption of a good or service. Linked closely with the concepts of sexual objectification and commodification, the application of use value to a human being implies an economic valuation of their utility. When adding the fact that it is a male evaluating the use value of a female, the term has additional sexual connotations.

Exemplifying application of the male gaze,²¹ Mr. _____ looks over Mary Agnes “from head to foot” in a sexual position, to the point that it makes her uncomfortable and she adjusts her appearance. He then asserts that she must go and plead to the warden. And though she has been sitting in the room for the entirety of the conversation, Mary Agnes seems unaware of the task the community is asking her to perform (“Go where”). Here we see that Daniel Ross is wrong. Like many other critics he has misread Mary Agnes. In truth, there is very little willingness or awareness on the part of Mary Agnes to sacrifice herself for Sofia.

Mary Agnes has no voice in the preparation for her meeting with the warden. Though it could be seen as a moment of strength, during which she is aiding the community she strives to join, her lack of involvement in her own experience demonstrates that she is not voluntarily submitting to her fate. Though they are relying heavily on her to win Sofia’s freedom, the group feeds Mary Agnes her entire story, demonstrating a lack of confidence in her ability to represent the community and herself: “Say you living with Sofia husband...Tell him how much that quarter he give you meant to you...Make him see the Hodges in you...Tell him you think justice ought to be done...Make sure you git in the part about being happy where she at” (*The Color Purple* 95-96). If their intention is to empower Mary Agnes as their representative, they do not give her the voice she needs. The community has created Mary Agnes as a puppet essentially, and is feeding words into her mouth. They are projecting the Ultrafeminine onto her already submissive self, highlighting the Amazon’s defeminized agency in the face of the liminal mulatto.

The anxiety the community expresses demonstrates knowledge of the danger in which they are placing her, a danger of which it seems Mary Agnes is unaware. Further evidence rests

²¹ Developed from Lacan’s theories of the gaze, the male gaze is a feminist concept that asserts an unwanted objectification of a woman through a man’s eyes. This demonstrates an inequality in power between the man (gazer) and the woman (gazed).

in the care with which they primp and dress her in preparation for her visit to the warden. Celie explains,

Us dress Squeak like she a white woman, only her clothes patch. She got on a starch and iron dress, high heel shoes with scuffs, and a old hat somebody give Shug. Us give her a old pocketbook look like a quilt and a little black bible. Us wash her hair and git all the grease out, then I put it up in two plaits that cross over her head. Us bathe her so clean she smell like a good clean floor. (*The Color Purple* 95)

In addition to her Ultrafeminine ironed dress and “high heel shoes,” the group gives Mary Agnes a hat that belongs to Shug, the most sexual and feminized woman in the black community. By enhancing the feminine attributes previously diminished in Mary Agnes through the loss of her teeth and the grease in her hair, the community is increasing her sexuality.²² Though they claim to be sending Mary Agnes in to talk to her family member, using the basis of her kinship with him as the point of access, there is a clear emphasis on the importance of her physical appearance. This is really an attempt to make Mary Agnes physically and sexually appealing to the warden. Furthermore, as a socially adept and sexualized female character herself, it is difficult to imagine that Shug does not know the possible implications of sexualizing Mary Agnes and sending her into a space dominated by a powerful white male figure. Thus, the community clearly has some understanding of the risk surrounding Mary Agnes’s mission. Yet, they use her “yellow” skin, and even accentuate it, in order to achieve their ultimate goal of

²² It is notable that the community does seem to be driving Mary Agnes toward whiteness (by getting “all the grease out,” etc.), which would, according to Cleaver’s theory of white male attraction to black females, make her less attractive to the warden. However, the community is merely appropriating commonly held notions of feminine beauty of the times, which were constructed around white standards, as mentioned earlier in this paper. Thus, rather than trying to make Mary Agnes more white or less black, they are merely attempting to make her beautiful, having internalized contemporary standards of beauty.

freeing Sofia. Again, we are made aware of the black community's power over Mary Agnes as a singular outsider, which further disproves the idea that she *willingly* "submit[s] to rape" (Ross 13). Wendy Wall reads this scene more accurately, but still falls short of removing agency from Mary Agnes. She writes, "It is quite striking that Squeak, Harpo's lover, is willing to be raped by the white deputy so that Harpo's wife can be released from prison, a gesture even more unusual because the family *expects* this sacrifice" (Wall 269, emphasis in original). Wall agrees with my close reading here, that the family is aware that Mary Agnes is in danger, and they "expect" her to "sacrifice" herself for their benefit. However, she too falls into Ross's misreading that Mary Agnes "is willing to be raped." The whole of the black community, as insiders, has access to the full knowledge of the risk of the situation, as they did in the initial scene in which Mary Agnes is punched by Sofia. Rather than attempt to provide precautions to ameliorate this risk, however, they accentuate and highlight the features that sexualize her, and thus contribute to an already potentially dangerous situation. Mary Agnes, on the other hand, does not know the tragedy that is about to befall her. Once again, she will be violated physically for her lack of communal knowledge.

Mary Agnes has a different, but comparable, value to the warden. In addition to his obvious use of her body for forced intercourse, the warden also uses the rape of Mary Agnes to reassure and reinforce his skewed moral perspective. He asserts that she cannot be related to him, for "[t]hat be a sin. But this just little fornication. Everybody guilty of that" (*The Color Purple* 98). The falsehoods of this statement are many: calling rape fornication is inaccurate because while it does occur between two unmarried people, fornication is by definition voluntary ("fornication, n.1"), and the warden is certainly committing incest with his niece. In this way, he uses forced sex with Mary Agnes to prove his brother's innocence in his miscegenistic

relationship with her mother. Though both we and Mary Agnes know that the warden is indeed her uncle and thus, that the act is incest, this justification in the warden's head is a clear demonstration of his use of Mary Agnes beyond just the physical. This moment is especially important, because it is her only interaction with a white male in the text, and it highlights the use value both blacks and whites place on the mulatto, as well as the sexualization that takes place from both sides. From her rape, the warden gets both physical pleasure and a sense of morality, while the black community gains the freedom of one of its own members. Once again, Mary Agnes gets nothing from this, other than violation. Her liminality allows Mary Agnes to be useful to both the black and white communities, but only through her "yellowness," which places her outside both groups in the first place.

Following her rape, Mary Agnes is defeminized by the portrayal of the violence enacted on her body: she "come home with a limp. Her dress rip. Her hat missing and one of the heels come off her shoe" (*The Color Purple* 97). The group's effort to sexualize Mary Agnes, though effective in its aims, is now destroyed, and she is devoid of those material aspects they gave her to enhance her femininity. This defeminization pushes her closer to the Amazonian side of the paradigm, allowing her to embody the power grafted upon this group. Unlike "us," which was the primary actor in the scene preceding her rape, Mary Agnes is the focus of this passage ("her dress rip," "her hat missing"). She is embraced by Celie, Shug, Sofia, Albert, Harpo, and Grady. They demonstrate interest in her story and are seemingly horrified by the tale. Though Harpo still attempts to express agency over all of the women involved in the situation, stating "My wife beat up, my woman rape" (97), he is asserting a claim to Mary Agnes he has not made before. In fact, Harpo is seemingly equating his "wife" and his "woman," an assertion of Mary Agnes's agency not made in the scene at the jukejoint. The use of the possessive "my woman" is especially

important, as it echoes her previously rejected assertion of Harpo as “my man” (84). The group largely ignores Harpo’s claim, which again serves as a stark contrast to the interaction in which we first meet Mary Agnes. She is thus given the confidence to take personal agency in the telling of her tragic story, stating, “Shut up, Harpo...I’m telling it” (97). This too poses a contrast to the conflict in the jukejoint, during which Mary Agnes does not attempt to silence Harpo at all, in fact she is described as “do[ing] anything Harpo say” (83). Further exemplifying attributes of the Amazon, she also begins to ask questions of Harpo, a demand we have not seen since her violent confrontation with Sofia. Examining the previously mentioned intraracial hierarchy that privileges lightness, as represented by Mrs. Turner’s view in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the emphasis on white standards of beauty, Mary Agnes asks,

Harpo, she say, do you really love me, or just my color?

Harpo say, I love you, Squeak. He kneel down and try to put his arms around her waist.

She stand up. My name Mary Agnes, she say. (*The Color Purple* 99)

An insecurity about her skin color emerges from Mary Agnes’s rape, and she asks Harpo to reaffirm that the basis of their relationship is not the color of her skin. While it would seem that until this point in the text she has suffered due to her lightness, Mary Agnes realizes that her “color” grafts upon her attraction from white and black men. In response to her query, Harpo kneels, separating himself from the community and moving into her sphere, and asserts it is *her* that he likes and not just her color. Still he continues to call her Squeak, thus implying the same docile, Ultrafeminine connotations it held prior to her rape. Though he is claiming that race is not a factor in his affection, the name he uses implies Ultrafeminine lightness, and thus her mulatto coloring as the source of his love for her. With a firmness not before present in her character,

Mary Agnes states, “My name Mary Agnes.” Taking claim over her own name and identity is indeed a mark of progress for the passive Mary Agnes. If the text ended here, with this moment of agency, I would agree with the critics that Mary Agnes’s story is one of success and acceptance within the black community, but this progress is temporary, lasting approximately two pages. In the rest of the text, even through its narrative voice, Mary Agnes is marginalized.

This scene draws attention to the fact that unlike Celie, Mary Agnes is granted a listening audience immediately following her rape, which allows her to begin the process of coping with this traumatic experience. However, Celie heals throughout the entirety of the text, while Mary Agnes’s rape is never spoken of again. Critics focused on Celie may see Mary Agnes as achieving this same epiphany Celie experiences throughout the text. However, their readings of Celie’s rape and healing as “revisionary” inform my analysis of the portrayal of Mary Agnes’s healing process as still oppressive within the text. As Robin E. Field writes in her article “Alice Walker’s Revisionary Politics of Rape,” *The Color Purple’s* placement of the rape of Celie within the first-person, allows the victim an element of control and agency. Through her eyes we gain access to the personally traumatic attributes of rape. She explains, “This focus upon the individual emphasizes not only the self-worth of the rape victim, but also the importance of understanding and affirming her point of view” (Field 160). However, we are not given this same access to Mary Agnes, which diminishes, in Field’s own words, “the self-worth of the rape victim.” With Celie there is a very explicit and graphic depiction of her violation,²³ but in Mary Agnes’s retelling of her own story (which only happens through the narration of Celie), she is unable to vocalize her experience: “He took my hat off, say Squeak. Told me to undo my dress. She drop her head, put her face in her hands” (*The Color Purple* 98). Though it appears she

²³ The book begins with a graphic depiction of Celie’s rape at the hands of her stepfather: “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” (*The Color Purple* 1).

exercises agency in her previous interaction with Harpo and the following development of her music, the narrative position of Mary Agnes within the text keeps her in the same passive position she has always inhabited before and after her rape. Field's view is echoed by many critics of the text, most notably Barbara Christian who asserts that "[w]e feel Celie's transformation intensely, since she tells her story in her own rural idiomatic language, a discrete black speech" (94). But again, this highlights the marginalization of Mary Agnes: we do not gain access to Mary Agnes's language except through Celie and thus her story is made a part of Celie's "transformation" instead of her own.

The alleged agency asserted immediately following her rape is seemingly compounded by critics who use evidence from the letters that follow, where Squeak begins to literally find her voice. Celie writes, "6 months after Mary Agnes went to git Sofia out of prison, she begin to sing" (*The Color Purple* 100). The only song we actually have access to within the text is an expression of Mary Agnes's racial anxiety and ambiguity. She sings,

They calls me yellow

like yellow be my name

But if yellow is a name

Why ain't black the same

Well, if I say Hey black girl

Lord, she try to ruin my game (101, emphasis in original)

Here, she sings about her "yellow" skin coloring explicitly. She remarks that this is an identifying characteristic, "like yellow be my name." And yet, as Mary Agnes evaluates, this is an unfair means of classification. Instead of being fully accepted into the community following her rape, as critics like Ross and Wall assert, Mary Agnes is vocalizing the experience of her

isolation. While she may have taken on the attributes of the Amazon immediately following her assault, they are gone now as she regains her femininity and timidity. Furthermore, even with the supposed agency of singing, Mary Agnes does not see herself as worthy of expressing herself in relation to Shug: “She think cause she don’t sing big and broad like Shug nobody want to hear her” (117). A more docile and passive individual, Mary Agnes is not able to stand up to the “big and broad” Amazonian strength of Shug. The liminal space she has always inhabited continues to be the only one she can truly claim.

Her objectification by individuals both inside and outside the established black community does not end with her rape. Even the seemingly empowering act of performing her music becomes a vehicle for Mary Agnes’s oppression. When initially encouraging Harpo to allow Mary Agnes to sing at the jukejoint, Shug states, “you dress Mary Agnes up the right way and you’ll make piss pots of money. Yellow like she is, stringy hair and cloudy eyes, the men’ll be crazy bout her” (*The Color Purple* 118). Here we see the intraracial hierarchy imposed not by a man, but by a fellow woman. Shug is attempting to use Harpo’s material gain through the larger communal objectification of his girlfriend to incite him to action. Even though she has seemingly found her voice, it is not her voice that grants her the ability to perform according to Shug. Rather, it is still Mary Agnes’s physical appearance that makes her attractive to an audience, and Shug’s description is wholly focused on Mary Agnes’s features (“stringy hair and cloudy eyes”) and skin color (“yellow like she is”). While she is asserting Mary Agnes’s attractiveness, there is a distinct negative connotation of these light features: her hair is “stringy” and her eyes are “cloudy.” Shug highlights Mary Agnes’s feminine attributes, driving her towards the Ultrafeminine end of the paradigm and thus away from the Amazon and the black community. The ultimate outcome is again a sacrifice of Mary Agnes’s physical being to men.

Another point of Field's analysis of Walker's "revisionary politics of rape" is that Celie "recover[s] her personal agency in the discovery in Nettie's letters that Fonso was not her biological father, but her stepfather; thus her children are not the product of incest. Such knowledge is freeing to Celie" (Field 166). Mary Agnes is given no such alleviation of incestuous guilt. While she does not bear a child by the warden, he is assuredly her uncle, and there can be no resolution of this moral conflict for her character as there is for Celie. Furthermore, we are not given the opportunity to see her heal as we are with Celie: "[Celie's] newfound capacity for sexual and emotional intimacy demonstrates the progress that Celie has made in her recovery from sexual trauma" (166). In the wake of her assault, we see Mary Agnes move away from the community in order to pursue her singing career. Since her rape is not mentioned again in the text, we are not given access to her healing process, but we watch her marijuana abuse spiral out of control:

Mary Agnes not the same, say Harpo.

What you mean? I ast.

I don't know, he say. Her mind wander. She talk like she drunk. And every time she turn round look like she want to see Grady.

They both smoke a lot of reefer, I say. (*The Color Purple* 222)

While there is no explicit connection drawn between her excessive marijuana use and her rape, we are only given a view of this addiction through Celie, who does not have insight into Mary Agnes's internal point of view. Furthermore, even Celie, who has experience with the drug herself, asserts that Mary Agnes smokes it too much, and that "if you smoke it too much it make you feeble-minded. Confuse. Always need to clutch hold of somebody" (222). This chemical method of numbing herself seems to be a likely response to the trauma she has incurred,

especially since she is given no communal outlet to heal. Rather than heal through supportive interactions as Celie does, Mary Agnes becomes increasingly alienated from the group through her personal healing process by way of marijuana. Having sought to enter the black community through the entirety of the narrative, Mary Agnes now turns to a drug that makes her “always need to clutch hold of somebody.”

The conclusion of the book is frequently seen as the most obvious expression of a whole black community. The characters all return to Georgia, enlightened and connected to Celie’s large home, where she inhabits her own room in which everything is purple, the color of Womanism (“Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender” [*Gardens* xii]). There is also a surprising turnaround by the previously violent and abusive Mr. _____; as Gina Michelle Collins states, he is reborn “as a new man, Albert, who is ready and able to participate in Celie’s utopian community” (87). His transformation exemplifies the necessity of male involvement in the Womanist progress of the black race and female gender. Like the other characters, Mary Agnes does indeed return in the book’s final letter for their family reunion, but this is merely a visit to pick up her daughter, Suzie Q. She is off drugs and thus far healthier emotionally than the last time we saw her character: “After awhile, being with Grady, I couldn’t think, she say. Plus, he not a good influence for no child. Course, I wasn’t either, she say. Smoking so much reefer” (*The Color Purple* 293). Her rejection of Grady and return to reclaim her child is an indicator of growth in Mary Agnes’s character. The eschewing of marijuana and acceptance of her parental responsibilities seem to indicate healing from the trauma of her rape, though we have no access to her inner monologue to chart this personal growth. Ultimately, these experiences of healing are not privileged within Celie’s narrative and *The Color Purple*; the scenes we don’t get (the physical act of her rape, the reason for her addiction, and her ultimate healing from it) are those

most important to Mary Agnes's psyche and personal trajectory as a character. What is clear is that any healing or agency Mary Agnes has discovered is outside the black community established throughout Walker's text. In Panama, where she and Grady moved following their splintering off of the main group, there were "A lot of colored folks look like Mary Agnes" (254). Finding a community in which there are more individuals with her "yellow" skin tone helps Mary Agnes create a sense of self outside of the black community she has long sought to infiltrate. At last her liminal space is not an entirely lonely one. We learn that after she left Grady, she "move back to Memphis and live with her sister and her ma. They gon look after Suzie Q while she work" (293). The reconnection to her family allows Mary Agnes to create a similar community in the United States, comprised of her sister and her daughter (who are also individuals of mixed race), and her mother (who is inextricably linked to her daughters' racial identity and potentially the victim of miscegenistic rape). Rather than attempt to participate or emulate the black community of Harpo, Celie, Shug, and Sofia, Mary Agnes has recreated her own family in Memphis.

Although Mary Agnes is physically present for the Independence Day celebration, she is not considered part of the group. When relaying the current situation of the community, Celie explains, "I feel a little peculiar round the children. For one thing, they grown. And I see they think me and Nettie and Shug and Albert and Samuel and Harpo and Sofia and Jack and Odessa real old and don't know much what going on. But I don't think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt" (*The Color Purple* 294). Speaking in the communal "us" as she has done so many times throughout the text, Celie now explains who "us" is, and is explicitly leaves Mary Agnes out of this association. Mary Agnes is, in fact, the only significant female character that is not listed by Celie. This constant assertion of "us" by

characters in the text and the trajectory of its use throughout highlights Mary Agnes's marginalization, from her initial attempt to enter the community ("What can us do?" [92]), to the communal manipulation of her physical appearance, of which she is only a passive recipient ("Us dress Squeak like she a white woman" [95]), through the final "us" at the book's end, of which she is not a part. This use of "us" as a means to accentuate who is a true part of the black community hearkens back to Walker's article on "the black black woman," in which she writes, "the blacker she is the more *us* she is" (*Gardens* 291, emphasis added). This conscious emphasis in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* on who is a real black woman echoes throughout *The Color Purple's* pages, and by reading these scenes separately we find a trajectory of Mary Agnes's continual failed attempts to enter the black community and her ultimate ostracism.

"Despising those caught in the middle"

In assessing the marginalized role of Mary Agnes as *The Color Purple's* sole mulatto character, it is important to note that she is not the only such character in Walker's oeuvre. This section will explore two of Walker's other characters, Lance in *The Temple of My Familiar* and Star in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, to show a pattern of mulatto characterization as subjugated by the surrounding black community with which these characters seek a connection.

The Temple of My Familiar (1989) contains many of the same characters from *The Color Purple*. The text is complex, with multiple narratives from several of these characters, as well as new ones from future generations. Most closely related to Celie and the extensive Womanist community we find at *The Color Purple's* close is Fanny, Celie's granddaughter born out of wedlock to Olivia (Celie's daughter) and Dahvid, an African man.²⁴ Like *The Color Purple*, this

²⁴ While he is Fanny's biological father, Dahvid remains in Africa while a pregnant Olivia returns with Nettie to Celie's home in the final pages of *The Color Purple*. We do not know she is pregnant in *The Color Purple*, but this

text has decidedly Womanist overtones: Fanny's previously philandering ex-husband, Suwelo, rejoins her in a seemingly platonic union. Suwelo has learned the error of his previous ways and believes that black men must be supportive of the black women within their community, as they have not been in the past. The text ends with the two happily occupying separate wings of a house shaped like a bird. Like in *The Color Purple*, the wronged woman is rejoined by a man, who has come to a greater understanding of the need to respect women and propel the race forward through communal understanding. While Olivia is not a main character in *The Temple of My Familiar*, it is through her brief appearance that we gain access to her mulatto husband, Lance.

Lance is initially described as merely "the man [Olivia] was not quite sure she would marry" (*Temple* 143). He is defined merely in his relationship to Olivia, and her ambivalence toward his character (though they are a couple, she is "not quite sure" about him) comes to the forefront of our introduction to Lance. Immediately following, we are given a racialized physical description as the point of access to both Olivia and Lance's identities: "To passerby they presented an unusual couple: she, short and very dark, he, tall and very light, with the sandy, wavy hair that would, under certain circumstances in their rigidly segregated city, have classified him as white" (143). The narrative highlights the racial disparity between the two, and emphasizes the privilege afforded to Lance: he is granted access to those places inaccessible to the "very dark" Olivia and the rest of the black community.

In contemplating if she can marry Lance, Olivia interrogates the notions of privilege associated with mulatto skin:

narrative links the former text with *The Temple of My Familiar*, which fills in Olivia's story. Dahvid and Olivia never meet again, and his relationship with Fanny is limited to the descriptions her mother gives her of him.

It was a sad, almost listless quality that people of obvious mixed race used to have. Not for nothing was there once a stereotype of the ‘tragic mulatto’! I think now that a lot of their energy was consumed by their effort to live honorably as who they were (and who *were* they?), with both sides—black and white—constantly warring against each other and despising those caught in the middle.
(*Temple* 172)

Lance is far from happy with the possibility of being “classified as white” (*Temple* 143), instead fulfilling the stereotypes of his racial identity as “tragic,” “sad,” and “listless.” Olivia vocalizes something here that other Walker characters are unable to, that is that blacks and whites are “constantly warring,” and that the mulatto is caught in the middle of this oppositional paradigm. However, she falls short of condemning her community for this or embracing Lance for the love he shows to her. Olivia denies the implication that there is still a “stereotype of the ‘tragic mulatto’,” asserting that it is a thing of the past, not realizing that she is vocalizing the very oppression that created and continues to create Lance’s marginalization within the text. She continues, “I didn’t feel I could support the heaviness; nor could I be his front in the black community or his thumbed nose to the white. Aunt Nettie used to say, ‘Don’t take on anybody’s burdens that look heavier than yours.’ And Lance’s looked heavy indeed” (*Temple* 172). Olivia’s analysis that she does not want to take on Lance’s “blues” exemplifies the tension between the mulatto and the black community. Unwilling to “be his front in the black community,” Olivia implies this is not a place where Lance belongs, though he is trying to assert himself as such. This view provides a stark contrast to the perspectives of the white community and the idea of passing narratives (as explored in the introduction of this paper), which pose the mulatto as a member of the black community with the mere ability to pass themselves off as members of the

white community. By categorizing Lance as passing in the black community, Olivia attempts to alleviate herself of the role of ostracizing him, implying that he is an outsider in the community to which she belongs. This action has the effect of enforcing the very tragic, Othered qualities she attributes to Lance at the beginning of the passage.

This portion of the text is narrated as a story told by Olivia entirely in quotation to Fanny. Much like Mary Agnes, Lance is not given a voice throughout the text, further emphasizing his outsider status in relation to the strong community depicted in the novel. While Celie and Olivia are given the agency to narrate their own stories, the mulatto characters' stories are only asserted as they relate to these larger, seemingly more important characters and are ultimately told by them. Lance's silencing goes beyond just a lack of narrative position: we do not even read a word spoken from him to Olivia or Fanny in the entirety of the pages that contain his story, as we do with Mary Agnes throughout *The Color Purple*. Lance is not given a point of view at all.

Walker's first novel depicts, under far different circumstances, the only mulatto infant we see in her body of work. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) tells the story of the title character, Grange, and his life in the harsh conditions of postbellum Georgia. Grange develops throughout the text by way of his relationships with three generations (his own, his children, and his grandchildren), each of which is a "life" in accordance with the book's title. It is only in his third life that Grange is depicted as a loving and responsible character, righting his past wrongs with his love for his granddaughter, Ruth. In his first life, however, Grange is essentially enslaved in his work as a sharecropper. To get his family out of debt, it is implied that Grange forces his wife to sell herself to men, including their landowner. His wife, Margaret, gives birth to the landowner's illegitimate child, a mulatto baby boy named Star, whom she later murders shortly before she commits suicide.

Brownfield, Margaret's older son with Grange, assesses his mulatto half-brother: "The baby was almost two years old but refused to learn to walk. Instead it allowed itself to be dragged about, propped up and ignored, until something caused it to scream" (*Grange Copeland* 19). Though two-years-old, the child is unable to walk and is "dragged about" as the other black family members see fit. Brownfield even goes so far as to say the child is largely "ignored" unless it draws major attention to itself, to the point of screaming. Further, the baby is referred to in neuter terms as "the baby" and "it," rather than by its gender, "he." Star's ostracism seems to go beyond that of Walker's other mulatto characters. Because he represents the evidence of his mother's indiscretions and her need to sacrifice her physical body for the family's wellbeing, he is conspicuously ignored and marginalized, unlike the systemic tragedy that befalls Lance and Mary Agnes. Though "[t]he baby's name was Star...it was never called anything. It was treated indifferently most of the time and seemed resigned to not belonging" (19). Star isn't even given the privilege of reference by his own name. Rather than be referred to by name or even by gender, the baby is "never called anything," reinforcing his marginalization within the Copeland family structure. No one pays any attention to Star, regardless of his childhood innocence. This baby, like all of Walker's mulatto characters does "not belong" within the black community.

In intertextually evaluating each of these three texts, it is important to note the shared conditions Walker creates in setting and time that contribute to the marginalization of the three mulatto characters. Each text depicts a black community that is distant from, but necessarily in opposition to, its white counterpart. Brian Norman assesses *The Color Purple* as a neo-segregation novel, that is, a historiographic text written in the Civil Rights or post-segregation era that depicts society governed by racism and Jim Crow. This classification, particularly as Norman defines it, applies to both *The Temple of My Familiar* and *The Third Life of Grange*

Copeland as well. He writes that these “narratives do not primarily concern interactions across the color line, but rather those on one side of it, though segregation still looms large on their horizon. These narratives focus on issues internal to black communities...while framing them with the shadow of Jim Crow and a shared knowledge of racial injustice and the impact of white supremacy on black lives” (Norman 52). In both *The Color Purple* and *The Temple of My Familiar*, the text depicts a community within racist society that functions largely on its own, but where the presence of racism and the opposition to the white community is abundantly clear. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* depicts a similarly opposed community in the postbellum sharecropping environment of Georgia. Though sharecropping itself was not legally defined as slavery, it created an almost identical relationship to that of the master and slave in the form of white landowners and black laborers. In this way, Walker creates a space in which this “war” between blacks and whites takes place, leaving the mulatto “despised” and “caught in the middle,” as Olivia asserts (*Temple* 172). It is through this repetition of Jim Crow-era polarized social structures in Walker’s texts that Cleaver’s racialized framework becomes applicable, and the reproduction of Black Power’s intraracial hierarchies and systems becomes obvious. By continually using these settings and temporal locations, Walker reenacts this marginalization and oppression of her mulatto characters.

This marginalization does not rest solely on the mulattos, but also on those who bring them into the community, particularly through motherhood. Throughout *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Star’s mixed race reflects negatively on Margaret Copeland: “From its odd coloration its father might have been every one of its mother’s many lovers” (*Grange Copeland* 19). This passage reflects negatively on Margaret’s sexuality, and implies that Star’s racial identity (“odd coloration”) is the product of her philandering, as if a mulatto child is a

punishment for its black mother. The passage ignores the fact that Margaret was driven to have sex with the landowner in order to get her family out of debt. Evidence of the dire nature of their poverty, the baby serves as a reminder of the ends to which the Copeland family needed to go in an attempt to repay what they owe. Rather than take on this burden as a family, the blame is put on Star, and on Margaret for bringing him into the world. This Othering of black mothers who conceive and give birth to mulatto children serves to further alienate the mulatto from the black community. Through its exclusion of those who associate with the mulatto, the black community controls the incorporation of these characters by discouraging association with them. In the final scene in which we see Star, he is dead, alongside his mother: “the following week [Margaret] and her poisoned baby went out into the dark of the clearing and in the morning Brownfield found them there. She was curled up in a lonely sort of way, away from her child, as if she had spent the last moments on her knees” (21). While the child is literally “poisoned,” which leads to his death, it is notable that Star is called “her poisoned baby,” tragically linked to his mother and doomed from birth as an unwanted mulatto child. Even in her final moments, Margaret has tried to distance herself from the child. She is “curled up in a lonely sort of way, away from her child,” yet is unable, even in death, to distance herself from the fact that Star is “*her* poisoned baby” and “*her* child.”

“Tainted with the blood of the oppressor”

While the heart of my argument remains focused on Mary Agnes and the oppression of the mulatto in Walker’s oeuvre, the texts lead me into Walker’s own life and biography. The anxiety of a black woman giving birth to a mulatto child presented in her literature was not so distant to Walker herself. In fact, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* was completed just three days before the birth of her own biracial daughter, Rebecca (White 182). In this section, I am

accounting for a phenomenon that I have proven is visible in Walker's work and providing some context for why it may be there, or at least how it becomes more pronounced in the context of her life.

In the summer of 1966, two activists left their homes behind and headed down to what many considered to be the heartland of racist America: Mississippi. Alice Walker, not yet a famous author, met Melvyn (Mel) Leventhal through their shared work at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (White 134-136). He was white and Jewish, about to enter law school, and she was a black writer who "was one of those who complained bitterly about white people having the nerve to be in 'our' movement" (*The Way Forward* 18). But the two soon fell in love, which Walker describes as "a separate space that contained just the two of us, even when we were apart" (21). Overcoming their visible differences and the bigotry that surrounded them, the two were married in March 1967. Walker details the story of their love, marriage, and ultimate divorce in her autobiographical short story "To My Young Husband." Their only child, Rebecca Grant Leventhal, was born two years later, on November 17, 1969.

Mel and Walker became increasingly distant, much of which he attributes to her growing fame in the black community and a desire to separate herself from his whiteness, as Walker biographer Evelyn C. White cites: "We had mustered up the courage to fall in love, but something was happening in the 1970s that made it impossible... We drifted apart, and I think a lot of it had to do with race. As Alice became better known, I think the negativity about our marriage did make her feel like a traitor" (qtd. in White 279). Walker portrays these pressures placed on their interracial marriage, both at the hands of white racism, as well as black nationalists, writing, "No matter how gentle you appeared, you struck an ancient terror in their hearts. To them, all white people had a vampire quality, they were seen as people who devour,

who suck dry” (*The Way Forward* 33). The two filed for divorce in 1976 (White 279-280), and agreed that Rebecca would alternate time with each parent, beginning that year: two years with her mother, then two with her father, and so on (296).²⁵ Walker’s collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983) is dedicated to Rebecca, who was twelve at the time of its publication just one year after *The Color Purple* was published and rose to sharp acclaim and popularity.

Rebecca is now an intellectual in her own right, and is closely aligned with the modern feminist movement, having published her memoir *Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* in 2001. As is evident from its title, the book deals explicitly with the formation of Rebecca’s mixed identity. It details her struggles in creating a sense of self as a biracial child with two separate households: one white and Jewish, and one black. She writes about the cause of her parents’ divorce and echoes her father’s sentiments that race was an underlying factor: “With the rise of Black Power, my parents’ interracial defiance...is suddenly suspect. Black-on-black love is the new recipe for revolution, mulatto half-breeds are tainted with the blood of the oppressor” (60). This statement ties almost directly to Mel’s assertion that the marriage made Walker “feel like a traitor.” Rebecca, too, is now “tainted,” evidence of her parents’ now “suspect” miscegeny. She explains, “The only problem, of course, is me. My little copper-

²⁵ It is notable that Rebecca was present during the writing of *The Color Purple*: “My daughter arrived...My characters adored her. They saw she spoke her mind in no uncertain terms and would fight back when attacked” (359). Walker goes on,

I had planned to give myself five years to write *The Color Purple*...But on the very day my daughter left for camp, less than a year after I started writing, I wrote the last page. And what did I do that for? It was like losing everybody I loved at once. First Rebecca (to whom everyone surged forth on the last page to say goodbye), then Celie, Shug, Nettie, and Albert. Mary Agnes, Harpo, and Sofia. Eleanor Jane. Adam and Tashi Omatangu. Olivia. (360)

In her assertion that the characters all returned (“surged forth”) “to say goodbye” to Rebecca, we might perhaps find some clarity surrounding the complexity of Mary Agnes’s temporary return to the community in the text’s final scene. Though the characterizations of Rebecca and Mary Agnes are certainly different (Rebecca is described as “[speaking] her mind” and “fighting back when attacked” [359]), the connections between these two biracial women are notable. Walker’s main mulatto character, who only emerges upon the appearance of Rebecca in Walker’s home and who moves fluidly in and out of *The Color Purple*, reemerges after a long absence in the text to say goodbye to Walker’s mulatto daughter, who too moves fluidly in and out of her own life.

colored body that held so much promise and broke so many rules. I no longer make sense. I am a remnant, a throwaway, a painful reminder of a happier and more optimistic but ultimately unsustainable time” (60). Rebecca has internalized what she perceives to be her parents’ motives for the divorce: what was once a *vogue* love affair is now suspicious in the era of Black Power and “black-on-black love.” Only Rebecca remains as evidence, “a painful reminder,” of this time in which the mixing of races (the breaking of “so many rules”) was deemed revolutionary. No longer is her “copper-colored body” one of “promise,” it is now one of shame. Like Star in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, it seems Rebecca is a manifestation of her parents’ indiscretions, a reminder to both them and the community of an “unsustainable time” that “no longer make[s] sense.”

Though Walker reflects a similar sentiment to Rebecca’s, writing, “[f]or years Our Child has been the only visible, public evidence of our years together” (*The Way Forward* 25), she was initially hurt by her daughter’s memoir. In response to *Black, White, and Jewish*, Walker asserts, “At first, I was hurt by Rebecca’s book, but now, I’m completely over it. I told her, ‘I will always be your mother and always love you.’ Mel and I were a lot for Rebecca, but maybe one day, she’ll understand the gifts she received” (qtd. in White 409). However seemingly mended it was, the relationship between Walker and her daughter became even more strained during the composition of Rebecca’s second memoir, *Baby Love: Choosing Motherhood after a Lifetime of Ambivalence*. Over the course of her own pregnancy, Rebecca becomes entirely estranged from her mother, as the two continue to fight about *Black, White, and Jewish*.²⁶ Relaying one such

²⁶ The two women have cut all ties by the end of *Baby Love*. Rebecca explains, “When I write that if she can’t apologize, I don’t want contact because I feel she is too emotionally dangerous to me and my unborn son, she writes that she won’t miss what we don’t have and that to her our relationship has been inconsequential for years. She writes that she has been my mother for thirty years and is no longer interested in the job. Instead of signing ‘your mother’ at the end of the letter, she signs her first name. (167-168)”

argument, Rebecca writes, “Never have I been so frightened by my own mother...She told me that because I wasn’t from the South and didn’t have the full memory of slavery (read: I am half white), that I don’t know what it feels like to be sold down the river, but that’s how she felt after reading my book” (80). Here the conflict between Rebecca and her mother becomes racialized in Rebecca’s eyes. It appears that Walker is not only offended by the content of *Black, White, and Jewish*, but that she thinks Rebecca has had an easier life as the result of being “half white,” and that she does not hold the pain associated with the “memory of slavery.” Walker herself overtly asserts this idea in the very book dedicated to her daughter, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*: “Because she is lighter-skinned, straighter-haired than I, her life—in this racist, colorist society—is infinitely easier” (*Gardens* 291).

If the present looks like the past, what does the future look like?

Walker’s idea that her mulatto daughter has had an easier life is represented in her essay “If the Present Looks like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?” This is also the essay in which she so heavily privileges the “black black woman” introduced at the beginning of this paper. In the essay she continues the aforementioned quotation, “Because she is lighter-skinned, straighter-haired than I, her life...is infinitely easier. And so I understand the subtle programming I, my mother, and my grandmother before me fell victim to...Escape the pain, the ridicule...help your children to escape. Don’t let them suffer as you have done” (*Gardens* 291). Walker believes that she, by giving birth to a biracial child whose life is “infinitely easier,” has helped her daughter “escape” from the cycles of oppression enacted on black women for centuries. However, through close reading of the role of the mulatto, we find that her description

By the memoir’s end, Rebecca has been removed from her mother’s will and evicted from her mother’s small home that had previously been given to her (218-219).

of the mulatto's life here is inconsistent. In asserting that the mulatto has an "infinitely easier" life, as Walker does in the essay and her interactions with her daughter, Walker paints over years of tragedy associated with generations of children impacted by the racial mixing of their parents, whether through force or intimate love. Much as she tries to recast Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as "the black black woman" with hands "brown from the labor she shares with other blacks" (303), Walker tries to recast the mulatto as a wholly privileged being without the "full memory of slavery" (*Baby Love* 80).

Yet in reading Walker's own texts we find a different characterization of the mulatto. Perhaps because of Walker's opinion of the mulatto's privilege or perhaps because this is just the reality of being biracial in a racially polarized world, the mulattos in Walker's fiction are given tragic, liminal spaces. Star does not even get to have a life, let alone one that is "infinitely easier," due to his skin color, which serves as a physical reminder to the black community of his mother's indiscretions. While Lance gets married to a black woman whom he loves, he is given no privilege within the text itself to tell his story; his mulatto burdens are "heavy indeed" (*Temple* 172), and even Olivia doesn't want to take them on. Like the others, Mary Agnes is raped as a physical sacrifice for the greater community she longs to join, but is only temporarily accepted by its members in the pages following, soon to be cast out on her own. Her own texts seemingly undercut the assertion she makes in "If the Present Looks like the Past." These three characters aren't given a voice by Walker, making their lives infinitely difficult, rather than easier.

It is impossible to know whether this marginalization of Mary Agnes and her other characters is Walker's intention. Walker is indeed cognizant of intraracial issues, as she explicitly vocalizes them in her essay, but she is simultaneously inculcated by the movements of

the 1960s-1980s. In developing a theory that attempts to combat a fundamental flaw of historically gendered movements for black progress, Walker reproduces another flaw, which leads to the subjugation of the mulatto within her texts. But it is there, in the very community that casts out Mary Agnes, that critics like Deborah McDowell and Tuzyline Jita Allan, among so many other Womanists, find success in *The Color Purple*. That many Womanist writers have picked up Walker's theories is not troubling in and of itself, but instead my critique lies in the fact that they have latched on to *this text*, one that is by no means representative of the progressive and all-encompassing black community for which Womanism calls, due to its treatment of the Mary Agnes.

Ultimately, the mulatto is conspicuously marginalized in Walker's texts, and critics have almost entirely overlooked this fact. Walker does reproduce oppressive racial structures in *The Color Purple* and her other texts. The polarization that categorical marginalization established in the mid-nineteenth century crafted these structures long before Alice Walker was born. The idea that "one drop" of black blood made a person inferior and the societal norm of white supremacy pervaded the whole of the American legal and social system. With the advent of more normalized integrative marginalization, the black community became conflicted from within, as those mulattos who were previously just as "inferior" under categorical marginalization were now privileged above the rest of the black community. Yet, this "more privileged subordination" (Cohen 59) was still oppression. Mulattos were left stuck in the middle of a polarized world, neither black nor white, yet "tainted with the blood of the oppressor" (*Black, White, and Jewish* 60). As Black Power began to reject the systemic privileging of lightness and set itself in opposition to white society, it left the mulatto in this liminal space. As in *The Color Purple*, the mulatto was ostracized by the black community. In her dismantling of the gender binary of Black

Power, Alice Walker adheres to its racial one, ultimately maintaining the mulatto's marginalization in her text.

The Color Purple is a text of paramount importance for understanding the black community both during the Jim Crow-era in which it was set and the post-Black Power 1980s in which it was written. Critics who have ignored this intraracial dynamic in the past have done Walker's complex text a disservice. As Walker did with her theory of Womanism, an analysis of the marginalization of the mulatto within Walker's oeuvre allows us to see the necessity of changing the way we view race and gender in absolute, polar terms. To acknowledge this flaw is not to throw out *The Color Purple*, but rather to embrace its reflection of the hardships of a racially polarized society.

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