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Gender, Race, and Violence: A Critical Examination of Trauma in *The Color Purple*

Jessica Lewis, English¹

Abstract. The purpose of this article is to analyze the roles gender and race play in relation to trauma in Alice Walker's novel, The Color Purple. Specifically, the article argues that gender and race are the underlying causes of the violence and trauma experienced by Walker's female characters, Celie, Sophia, and Squeak. While violence does not always lead to internal conflict, this critical examination looks chiefly at trauma that is derived from violence. As a catalyst for targeted violence, identity categories, in particular female and African American are explored and their roles in oppression are investigated. In doing so, the notion of identity-based marginalization and double discrimination is unpacked. The article denotes the implications of intersectional identities, for example, female and African American, and reveals a startling connection between one's gender and race and the susceptibility to trauma. The latter acts as a springboard for an analysis of the psychological effects of trauma. This study is rooted in a psychoanalytic framework that constructs the foundation for the argument. More specifically, in support of its argument, the literary criticism delves into the psychology of trauma to help navigate through the characters' identity experiences and traumatic experiences. Ultimately, in both exposing the connection of gender and race to oppression and trauma as well as unpacking the psychology of trauma, this article illuminates Walker's literary techniques, narrative structures, use of language, and calculated character dynamics—all of which support and demonstrate the ways in which the female characters' gender and race are the underlying causes of their traumatization.

Keywords: Gender; Race; Trauma; Violence; Discrimination

Throughout her novel *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker investigates the notion of double discrimination. She points out that a woman's gender largely contributes to her discrimination. Walker outlines race as an equally influential component of discrimination and, with that, highlights both gender and race as a driving force behind an individual's identity. Through her carefully constructed female characters, Walker successfully exposes how both gender and race act as a catalyst for oppression against African American women. The novel focuses on rigid gender and race-based stereotypes imposed by society on African American women in the early 20th century.

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Harsh categories constructed around differences act as a springboard for violence upon those perceived as inferior. African American women, who are viewed as subordinate because of both their gender and race, are more susceptible to experiencing trauma. While violence does not always lead to trauma, this critical examination of Walker's novel looks chiefly at trauma that *is* derived from violence. Walker shows how the oppression and discrimination of gender and race are exhibited against African American women in various forms of physically and sexually traumatic events.

Identity Categories and their Role in Oppression

The construction of gender and race in contemporary America pushes labels and statuses on individuals, which promotes oppression. Categories like "race, sex, class, and sexual orientation may be described as 'master statuses'" (Rosenblum and Travis 1). These "statuses" influence an individual's daily life and are the building blocks for one's identity. Double discrimination is catalyzed through the many different categories that have existed in society for centuries. As Rosenblum and Travis observe, individuals are not pigeonholed to only one socially constructed status, but can instead occupy multiple (1). An individual cannot separate the make-up of his or her societal status; when combined, the categories of gender and race create a recipe for a specific type of stereotype, discrimination, and oppression. Using the theory of intersectionality, Kimberle Crenshaw narrows the categorical lens, analyzing double discrimination in terms of "women of color." She explains that gender, race, and other identity categories are treated as "intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works to exclude or marginalize those who are different" (1242). In other words, identity categories *do* have a profound impact on the individuals occupying them: "the concept of political intersectionality highlights the fact that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas" (1251-1252).

In accordance with Crenshaw's claim, Rosenblum and Travis unpack the essentialist and constructionist perspectives. Both offer different viewpoints on "categories of difference." As they write, "an essentialist asks what causes people to be different; a constructionist asks about the origin and consequence of the categorization system itself" (5). While both perspectives talk about discrimination, the constructionist approach acknowledges the profound impact categories like gender and race have on an individual. Walker's novel does not necessarily focus on what makes people different, as much as she demonstrates the consequences of the categorization system. The name of a category like *woman* or *African American* forces a person to become a member of that category. Membership in a specific population wrongly stereotypes certain characteristics as being the group's "most important qualities," which disregards individual characteristics and potential (Rosenblum and Travis).

The attribution of certain qualities to a specific group is common in today's society. One of the most popular examples is that all women gravitate toward homemaking. Placing particular

qualities on to all members of a group and dubbing those characteristics most essential puts individuals at a disadvantage when breaking out of the mold society thinks they belong in. Preconceived expectations of a certain group promote discrimination and oppression for those members who challenge the constructed societal norms.

Estelle Disch explains that Western society has an “A and Not-A” system. “A” represents the “normal, dominant” gender, while “Not-A” represents the subordinate and different gender (99). Society deems men as “A” and women as “Not-A.” Division by gender furthers social stratification, where men also rank above women. In referencing the Marxist feminist theory, Disch exposes an “explanation” for gender inequality, where “demeaning women’s abilities and keeping them from learning valuable technological skills” allows men to maintain control over their abilities and success (99). Race, like gender, can be broken up into “A” and “Not-A” groups. In America, White is “A” and African American is “Not-A.” The dichotomization of racial categories goes as far as falling under the concept of “American/non-American” (Rosenblum and Travis 16). Rosenblum and Travis explain that these are “racial categories, because they effectively mean white/non-white” (16). Ruglass and Kendall-Tackett add to this critical conversation by claiming that “it has been generally recognized that groupings based on race, ethnicity, or culture have their limitations” (82). African American women face a severe disadvantage in society; not only are they part of the subordinate group for gender, they are the subordinate group in regards to race, too (Disch 99).

Crenshaw draws on the concept of intersectionality to demonstrate that African American women are not confined to traditional boundaries of gender and race-based discrimination or oppression. Instead, they lie within boundaries that intersect sexism and racism. She asserts, “women of color occupy positions both physically and culturally marginalized within dominant society” (1250). The overlapping generates a very specific type of marginalization and ultimately a very specific type of traumatization (1244). She explains that for both African American men and white women, there is no need to spilt their “political energies” between two often opposing categories because the two groups do not belong to multiple categories. On the other hand, this “dimension of intersectional disempowerment” forces women of color to confront (1252). Crenshaw calls for “a focus on the intersections of race and gender [to highlight] the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (1245). Through her carefully constructed female characters and literary techniques, Walker’s novel also calls for a focus on intersections of race and gender in an effort to advocate for both understanding and change.

When combined, identification with two subordinate categories generates different life experiences than those associated with membership in either one or no subordinate statuses. Category-derived experiences for those in inferior groups include oppression and discrimination in forms of violence and traumatic events. Furthermore, trauma is very closely related to gender and race. In regards to gender, while both men and women are exposed to traumatic events,

women are “more likely to be exposed to chronic high-impact traumas such as childhood sexual abuse and rape” (Ruglass and Kendall-Tackett 76). Ruglass and Kendall-Tackett expose the severity of sexual violence explaining that it is one of the most “high risk factors” contributed to the development of posttraumatic stress disorder (77). Pertinent to the trauma experienced by Walker’s female characters is the likelihood of women to be victims of rape: twenty percent of women have experienced rape in their lifetime, while only one percent of men have (Ruglass and Kendall-Tackett).

Additionally, traumatic experiences rooted in race are more common for racial and ethnic minorities. Low socioeconomic status plays a large role in the probability of exposure to severe stressors amongst racial minorities. Ruglass and Kendall-Tackett reference a review conducted by Alim, Charney, and Mellman which found that “African Americans were more likely to be exposed to violent traumas such as homicide, physical assaults, and rape than Whites” (84). Race-related trauma is linked to vulnerability based on differences. African American individuals, like women, are more likely to face traumatic events because of stigmas and prejudices that cloud the marginalized group.

Trauma in Relation to Violence

Although violence does not always lead to trauma, this critical examination investigates trauma that *is* derived from violence. Celie, Sofia, and Squeak are subject to oppression and violence that results from their gender and race, a traumatizing realization in itself. The identity-specific suffering speaks to the connection between violence and trauma throughout Walker’s novel. Given the emotional, physical, and sexual abuse Celie, Sofia, and Squeak collectively endure, it is not far-fetched that their violent experiences have led to their traumatization. Judith Herman notes that violence committed by someone the victim knows is particularly traumatizing; she states, “in most instances of rape, for example, the offender is known to the victim...the rapist often enjoys higher status than his victim within their shared community” (62). Not only do Celie, Sofia, and Squeak know their abusers, but they also exist at a lower status than them. Herman backs the plausible relationship between violence and trauma by unpacking one form of violence the women fall victim to: “The malignant effects of rape are not surprising given the particular nature of the trauma. The essential element of rape is physical, psychological, and moral violation of the person” (57).

It is extremely unlikely that the women are *not* traumatized from their experiences with violence, given the nature of the abuse is not only identity-based, but both physical and sexual as well. Celie, for example, actively demonstrates the link between violence and trauma in her experiences stating, “I look at women, tho, cause I’m not scared of them” (Walker 5). The violence Celie endures does not fit into her “‘inner schemata’ of self in relation to the world” (Herman 51). Celie, in a rightfully traumatized state, no longer trusts men. The identity-based

violence she experiences destroys her assumptions of safety in men and in the world, resulting in her traumatized state (Herman 51).

Twofold Nature of Gender and Racial Trauma

The psychological impact of an individual's gender or race being the source of suffering can be traumatizing in itself, but adversity resulting from one's gender and race can be doubly painful. Oftentimes the psychological effect of gender and race result from the responses members of the minority receives from majority groups about their abilities, skin color, or other physical features (Ruglass and Kendal-Tackett 83). The groups are marginalized for a genetic makeup over which they have no control; it is specifically that genetic makeup that supports the continuation of oppression, discrimination, and ultimately the infliction of trauma. African American women are subject to rejection for no other reason than their identity in itself. Oppression and discrimination that stems from one's identity acts as a form of self-betrayal. Ruglass and Kendall Tackett state, "certain discriminatory practices (*e.g.* hate crimes) may be traumatic events in and of themselves, which increases exposure to trauma among racial and ethnic minorities" (86-87). While recognizing that adversity develops because of one's identity is both disheartening and traumatizing, at the same time the suffering that derives from an individual's "master status" is also traumatic. The recursive cycle demonstrates the way in which gender and race create trauma; it speaks of the twofold nature of the situation.

The Psychology of Trauma

Walker's novel is a model of how gender- and race-related trauma is expressed in literature. Aside from showcasing trauma in a literal way, through various violent physical and sexual events, the novel is written to mimic the feelings associated with trauma. To understand how Walker captures the essence of trauma, one must understand general symptoms of trauma from a psychological standpoint. An event is considered traumatic if it "resulted in death or threatened death, actual or threatened physical injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence" (Ruglass and Kendall-Tackett 5). Physical and sexual violence elicit serious psychological symptoms that include feelings of intense fear, helplessness, and horror (Ruglass and Kendall-Tackett). There are three cardinal symptoms associated with traumatic events and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD): "hyperarousal," "intrusion," and "constriction" (Herman 35). Hyperarousal involves the expectation of danger, intrusion involves the lasting memory traumatic events leave on individuals, and constriction involves the paralyzing feelings connected to surrendering (Herman 35). Both during and following traumatic experiences, victims frequently report feelings of confusion and helplessness.

Processing a traumatic event is incredibly difficult; confusion surfaces as the human mind tries to understand what has happened in a logical way, but realistically there is no logical or rational explanation for why such awful violence and suffering occurs. Herman explains that

traumatic symptoms often become disconnected from the event itself. She describes the sense of fragmentation that arises with a traumatic experience. As Herman writes, “this kind of fragmentation, whereby trauma tears apart a complex system of self-protection that normally functions in an integrated fashion, is central to the historic observations of post-traumatic stress disorder” (34). A sense of disconnection from both the present and other individuals acts as a barrier for traumatized people. Trauma often severs a sense of connection and attachment between the victim and his or her community. Such events damage a victim’s perception of safety in the world around them as well as their concept of self-worth and meaning. If a victim is already part of multiple “Not-A” categories, when combined with trauma, the internalization of disconnection, low self-worth, and loss of meaning is much greater. It mixes with the already negative preconceived notions of self-worth and meaning associated with the marginalized group, while adding to the rejection and disconnection the minority faced prior to the trauma.

Trauma Narratives and the Role of an Epistolary Structure

Trauma is a theme that can be traced throughout literature because it speaks of the human condition, a condition in which no person is immune to. Recognizing common thoughts and feelings associated with traumatic events sets the foundation for understanding how Walker uses literary techniques to recreate those symptoms. The novel’s fragmented structure illustrates feelings of posttraumatic stress disorder; it is written as individual letters, which captures the essence of fragmentation and disarray the female characters experience as victims of physical and sexual violence. From a psychoanalytical standpoint, Charles Proudfit writes, “It is a style that mirrors Celie’s traumatized cognitive processes and depressed emotional state” (17). The letters themselves are short, prompting the reader to jump from idea to idea, as Celie, Sofia, and Squeak do while confronting the confusion based around the trauma, oppression, and discrimination they endure. Separating the novel in letters rather than chapters is fragmented in itself; the isolation of the writing is representative of the isolation African American women encounter. While the letters specifically represent the isolation Celie experiences, on a broader scale, the letters written to God and Celie’s sister, Nettie, reveal the women’s only outlet from the trauma to be a spiritual figure or other members of their master status. The letters speak of the silence and oppression African American women experience as a result of their gender and race.

Celie’s status as an African American woman determines her willingness to come forward about her abuse. Early 20th century society has deemed her less than human because of her combined gender and race. Societal constructs create Celie’s low self-confidence and tendency to direct her blame inward, which is shown through her decision to confess her abuse only through letters to God. In her book, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, Laurie Vickroy refers to psychiatrist Alice Miller, who notes that trauma victims who are most damaged, “are those who are unable or prevented from voicing their anger or pain” (6). Celie, like many victims, is unable to voice her trauma because of her subordinate statuses. In a letter to Celie, Nettie

reveals, “I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn’t even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was” (Walker 130). Vickroy attests to the power of Celie’s letters, which act as her trauma narratives, explaining that these narratives, “enact the directing outward of an inward, silent process to other witnesses, both within and outside the texts” (3). In other words, these narratives allow for the traumatic memory to begin to lose its power as a fragment or symptom and instead be reconstructed and integrated as a memory. While Celie’s letters act as an outlet and may somewhat aid in her healing process, overall the letters elicit the feelings of confusion, isolation, and despair the characters encounter as African American women in a white patriarchal society.

Replicating trauma through the novel’s structure allows Walker to highlight the severity of the suffering while calling attention as to *why* the women are the victims of violence. Identifying the signs of trauma throughout the novel acts as a bridge to understanding the source behind the symptoms and provides a narrower lens for analyzing how gender and race relate suffering. While structuring the novel in epistolary form illustrates the trauma the women are subjected to, it also portrays the marginalization that African American women struggle with. It does so through its lack of traditional narration, which is instead conveyed through Celie’s personal letters. Her letters demonstrate her ignorance, and generally speaking, allude to African Americans’ lack of opportunity, which propels oppression specifically amongst women. Linda Selzer draws upon Elliot Butler-Evans’s viewpoint of the epistolary structure to heighten her argument. Butler-Evans points out that, while other criticisms argue that the letters and personal narration take away from the race issue because “it is constricted to the viewpoint of an uneducated country woman,” the letters actually allow for racial implications to be analyzed (Selzer 67). Selzer quotes Butler-Evans, who asserts that the letters serve as a “textual strategy by which the larger African-American history, focused on racial conflict and struggle, can be marginalized by its absence from the narration” (67). Lauren Berlant, on the other hand, considers the letters to take away from the novel’s ability to transcend from the personal to the public lives of African Americans. In accordance with Selzer and Butler-Evans, the letters actually appear to amplify the issues of gender and race on a larger scale. In that sense, Walker uses the narrative strategy to draw attention to families and kinships (Selzer 68). Selzer claims that this “enables Walker to foreground the personal histories firmly within a wider context of race and class” (Selzer 68). Essentially, the letters demonstrate the personal lives of the narrators, which speak on behalf of the wider issues of gender and race in the African American community. Celie and Nettie’s letters show the larger issue of oppression, and it is that oppression that evidently launches the trauma the women face.

The structuring of the novel in epistolary form emphasizes how race leads to trauma. As Selzer writes: “Indeed, the personal point of view of *The Color Purple* is central to its political message: it is precisely the African American woman’s *subjectivity* that gives the lie to cultural attempts to reduce her [Celie]—like Sofia—to the role of the contended worker in a privileged

White society” (75). The epistolary format reveals that gender and race are in fact the underlying cause of the trauma the women experience in the novel. Celie and Nettie’s personal accounts show how imposed societal stereotypes centered on gender and race influence oppression and, in turn, promote abuse and suffering.

Language and Educational Oppression

The novel’s epistolary format calls attention to the educational oppression the female characters are subject to in *The Color Purple*. Walker’s use of dialect, most obviously her incorporation of broken English, illustrates the inferior status of the female characters. Celie’s letters are not written in Standard English; the women’s broken dialect sounds choppy and is challenging to read, forming a sense of fragmentation. From a young age Celie faces horrific physical and sexual abuse; her stepfather began beating and raping her at fourteen years old, ultimately forcing her to carry his two children just to have them taken away from her at birth. When Celie recounts her difficult experiences, her language mimics the sense of fragmentation and isolation trauma victims often feel. Celie remembers the first time the abuse occurred: “When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. But I don’t ever git used to it. And now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook. My mama she fuss at me an look at me. She happy, cause he good to her now” (Walker 1). The spelling and grammar Celie uses plays against a smooth read, recreating the sense of confusion, turmoil, and fragmentation she experiences following the start of the abuse as well as while dealing with the aftermath of the trauma. The language also simultaneously recreates the feelings of isolation, confusion, and helplessness that many trauma victims experience. The sense of confusion positions the reader to ask *why* the characters are victims of such violent abuse. The language speaks of the educational oppression Celie, Sofia, and Squeak suffer because of their gender and race, which directly contributes to their trauma.

Educational oppression is a way in which men can maintain control over women’s abilities and remove opportunities for success, forcing complete dependence. Lauren Berlant points out, “*The Color Purple* opens with Celie falling through the cracks of a language she can barely use” (837). Based on Walker’s use of language, the audience might assume that the narrator has not been given optimal educational opportunities, which once again segues into the question of *why*? The broken dialect speaks of a larger issue at hand—the complacency and inferiority African American women internalize because they are in a perpetual state of control by members of superior categories. Selzer argues that the women’s broken English, specifically Celie’s limited knowledge of the larger world, points to the “domestic site she [Celie] occupies as the novel’s main character” (67). The language reveals how the women’s ignorance allows them to fall victim to abuse, oppression, and discrimination. In trying to learn where her sister Nettie is, she explains, “One time I ast him could I look at the stamps but he said he’d take it out later. But he never did” (Walker 118). Mr. _____ intentionally oppresses Celie because of her position in

society as an African American woman; a lack of education allows for the men in her life to maintain control and continue using her as an object that will not question authority. While discovering Nettie's hidden letters, Celie exposes her limited scope of knowledge: "I don't know where England at. Don't know where Africa at either" (Walker 119). Celie has been purposely kept in the dark regarding education. Celie remarks on the stamps on Nettie's letters and exclaims, "Little fat queen of England stamps on it, plus stamps that got peanuts, coconuts, rubber trees and say Africa" (Walker 119).

The novel's political innuendos call attention to the issues of race. Selzer explains that the latter demonstrates the notion of imperialism. The stamps act as juxtaposition—England representing royalty, while Africa represents the opposite. The stamps show how the novel is riddled with the implications of racial inequality, with Celie representing the intentional oppression of African American women into positions of subordination. Celie's language, which points to her lack of education, illustrates how her race is a catalyst for abuse. The female characters in the novel are at a clear intellectual disadvantage because as African American women, earning an education does not fit in to their master status, supporting the fact that gender and race are the causes of trauma. The women's lack of opportunity transcends into a lifetime of discrimination, oppression, and abuse.

Gender and Race-Based Trauma

For Walker, trauma is cumulative. She examines the impact gender and race have on African American women through a wide range of interpersonal violence. The violence results from the greater systemic issue at hand, which includes contributing factors such as African American women's rigid societal roles in contrast to men's superiority complex. Categorical roles determine what African American women can and cannot do. Celie, Sofia, and Squeak are part of two "Not-A" categories, which produces group-specific adversity. Juliet Mitchell argues that patriarchy is a "universal feature of human societies," through which "women are oppressed in their very psychologies of femininity" (Jackson 9, 11). This idea becomes evident through Celie's relationship with her father, who has robbed her of the opportunity to receive an education once he got her pregnant. As Celie tells it: "The first time I got big Pa took me out of school. He never care that I love it...You too dumb to keep going to school, Pa say" (Walker 9). Celie's life is constructed around patriarchal ideals, supporting how women's inferior status influences the trauma they experience.

Pa, as the patriarch, is a catalyst for gender- and race-based trauma. His view on African American women's rights propels Celie's oppression. When referring to Celie's schoolteacher, Pa asserts, "She run off that mouth so much no man would have her" (Walker 10). Celie's father spells out men's expectations of women, believing that they should be obedient, complacent, and uneducated so they are easier to control. Celie's father blatantly calls attention to how gender and race influence the trauma the women in the novel experience. He also plays into the

recursive cycle of trauma. Pa yells at Celie because she never dresses nicely but beats and rapes her when she dresses up because she “looks like a tramp.” As Celie explains, “He beat me for looking trappy but he do it to me anyways” (7). Her identity causes the abuse, which is doubly traumatic. Pa continues to represent society’s view on African American women by treating Celie as an object, offering her up to any man that comes asking for a wife. He describes Celie to “Mr. _____” as “ugly” (8). When Mr. _____ returns to talk to Pa about taking one of his daughters he says, “Mr. _____ want another look at you” (10). Celie is nothing more than an object who will belong to a man for all of her life. She adds: “Mr. _____ marry me to take care of his children. I marry him cause my daddy made me. I don’t love Mr. _____ and he don’t love me” (63). Celie has no say over her body or her life; she is given to one abusive man from another because society deems that, “A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something” (155). Ultimately, a woman’s looks and ability to care for a house and children determines her worth, demonstrating how social constructs are at the core of oppression and suffering.

The body is fundamental to a person and abuse on the body removes personhood in the same way categorization systems do. The trauma the women experience is directly linked to the type of oppression and violence they suffer. Celie’s suffering does not end once she is given to Mr. _____. Celie, like Sofia and Squeak, is victim to brutal physical and sexual abuse throughout her life because of the categories she belongs to. Mitchell offers an explanation to the women’s cyclically oppressed existence stating, “gendered subjectivity can be seen as constituted ideologically, ensuring the continual reproduction of dominant masculinity and dominated femininity” (Jackson 9). The women in Walker’s novel have found themselves in a lifetime of abuse. “A girl child ain’t safe in a family of men,” Sofia reflects (Walker 40). Sofia, who acts as one of the novel’s stronger characters, offers an explanation as to why she learned how to fight; using her personal childhood experiences, she expresses the dangers that come for women living in a world run by oppressive men. Walker’s glimpse into Sofia’s childhood highlights the cycle of abuse women face, while providing explicit evidence to support how a woman’s inferior status promotes trauma.

Celie’s continued abuse and discrimination throughout her childhood and adult life also illuminate the universality and commonality of gender and race associated oppression. Her abusive father gives Celie away to an abusive husband, “Mr. _____,” which extends the trauma from her childhood to adulthood. Celie explains, “Most times mens look pretty much alike to me” (Walker 15). She is in an endless cycle of abuse at the hands of men, a result of her subordinate identity. Celie calls her husband, Albert, “Mr. _____.” Neglecting to write Albert’s name points to the reality that this could be any abusive man; the gender and racial abuse is not confined to Celie’s specific situation, but is instead a constructed categorical issue at large (Brogan). By omitting Albert’s name, Celie also indicates her fear of men. Her fear of men is warranted given the abuse she was exposed to as a child. As a child, she was conditioned not to speak out against her abuse, behavior that transitioned into adulthood. Celie recounts Mr. _____ raping her and

discloses: “But I don’t cry. I lay there thinking bout Nettie while he lay on top of me, wondering if she safe” (Walker 12). She continues to explain: “I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive” (17). For years the abuse is so severe that Celie cannot fight back without risking her life; her identity has forced her into life or death situations and Walker uses graphic abuse scenes to better depict the implications of her gender and race.

Walker’s abuse scenes emphasize both men’s control over women and White’s control over African Americans. Overtime, Celie is repeatedly raped by Mr. _____, confessing, “Once he git on top of me I think bout how that’s where he always want to be” (Walker 65). Walker focuses on detail, while describing the abuse to call attention to the reason behind the trauma; she calls attention to a man’s desire to “be on top” in regards to their relationships and dynamic with women—a classic power struggle. As African American women, Celie, Sofia, and Squeak will never be “on top”; society places individuals occupying multiple “Not-A” categories on the bottom of the totem pole. Crenshaw remarks, “many women of color for example, are burdened by poverty, childcare responsibilities, and the lack of job skills”—factors that maintain their subordination (1245). Burdens of poverty, childcare responsibility, and lack of job skills are characteristic of Walker’s female characters, which speaks to their confinement in roles that are inferior to their male and/or White counterparts. Crenshaw’s assertion points to Celie, Sofia, and Squeak’s vulnerability to identity-based oppression, violence, and trauma. Walker’s abuse scenes depict how a woman’s gender and race put her at a greater risk of suffering traumatic events.

Walker’s male characters, who pride themselves on keeping women “below them,” blatantly promote oppression and discrimination, highlighting how gender and race cause the infliction of abuse and trauma. Harpo is symbolic of how gender and racial stereotypes are maintained over multiple generations. He demonstrates how patriarchal society passes down gender and race derived expectations to their sons, sustaining the cycle of discrimination, oppression, and abuse. Harpo very clearly defines how gender and race are the underlying causes of the trauma the women experience in *The Color Purple*. Harpo often references his father, Mr. _____, and his “women handling skills” when commenting on the “proper” way to treat women. Harpo asserts: “Women work. I’m a man” (Walker 21). Harpo’s statement demonstrates the larger issue at hand: he is a representation of society’s view on women’s worth and potential. He illustrates the way in which oppression is distilled in the generations of men to come. Harpo learns a woman’s worth and potential from the standards society and his father set for young boys to uphold. Harpo argues: “I want her to do what I say, like you do for Pa...When Pa tell you to do something, you do it, he say. When he say not to, you don’t. You don’t do what he say, he beat you” (62-63). Harpo continues, “The wife spose to mind” (63). He claims: “Wives is like children. You have to let ‘em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating” (35). Harpo explicitly says that men feel they have the upper hand over women, proving differences in gender to be a clear incentive for physical and sexual abuse. In Harpo’s eyes, men “have” a wife so they “mind” and blindly listen to instruction; they are placed

in a position of subordination on purpose. Women are not viewed as human, but instead as an object willing to jump at a man's beck and call. Harpo continues to offer "justification" for the oppression and abuse of women when his wife, Sofia, tries to hold her mother's casket at her funeral, declaring: "But peoples use to men doing this sort of thing. Women weaker, he say. People think they weaker, say they weaker, anyhow. Women spose to take it easy. Cry if you want. Not try to take over" (217). Walker uses Harpo's clouded view of women to prove gender, along with race, as one of the contributing factors of the trauma the women experience in the novel.

In illustrating how a woman's race plays a hand in her oppression and suffering, Walker introduces the mayor and his wife, Miss Millie, who through their interactions with Sofia, spell out the crux of the trauma. Sofia at first acts as a foil to Celie. Never allowing Harpo to beat her, Sofia does not "mind" until she is arrested for talking back to Miss Millie and pushing the mayor down. Miss Millie saw Sofia in town and exclaimed, "All your children so clean, she say, would you like to work for me, be my maid" (Walker 85). She responds "hell no" and follows by pushing the mayor down for slapping her (85). The mayor and his wife symbolize racial limitations for African American women in early 20th century America. Despite Sofia's "clean" appearance, fine looking children, and nice wristwatch, her identity as an African American woman dictates her potential; she is seen as capable of only being a White family's maid. Miss Eleanor Jane, who is the White child Sofia raises as a maid, further proves the rigid gender and racial roles African American women are expected to uphold: "All the other colored women I know love children. The way you feel is something unnatural" (265). Society deems African American women "unnatural" if they do not conform to their gender and race specific roles. Sofia's master status does not provide her with equal opportunities to White women, African American men, or White men. Her gender and race trap her in a small bubble that contains minimal opportunity yet a great deal of oppression and abuse.

Despite her tough attitude, Sofia is knocked down each time she tries to function outside of her master status, showing how society's categories of difference promote oppression and trauma. Sofia is thrown in jail and Harpo finds a new girl, Squeak, who fits the "obedient woman" stereotype he praises. Squeak's real name is Mary Agnes; she received her nickname because of her passivity. She is described as a "little yellowish girlfriend" who will "do anything Harpo say" (Walker 82). Sofia adopts a similar complacency while in jail. Sofia explains, "Every time they ask me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like you" (Walker 88). Like Celie, Sofia's spirit has been broken; she does as she is told, and as a result, internalizes how society views her. Sofia's life in prison is symbolic of African American women's lives; they are prisoners in their own body and a prisoner to society's gender and race constraints.

Sofia faces extreme adversity while in jail and in an effort to break her out of prison, Celie and her family dress Squeak up "like she a white woman" because she is "the warden's black kinfolks" (Walker 92-93). Squeak's efforts to convince the White male warden to release Sofia

fails as she reveals, “He took my hat off...Told me to undo my dress” (Walker 96). The White warden rapes Squeak because of her inferior status. The warden defends his behavior by claiming that Squeak could not have been kin to him. She admits: “He say if he was my uncle he wouldn’t do it to me. That be a sin. But this was just a little fornication. Everybody guilty of that” (Walker 96). The warden sees Squeak as an African American woman who, despite her mixed race, is placed in both “Not-A” categories, catalyzing the sexual assault. As a woman of mixed-race, Squeak might demonstrate the severity gender alone has on one’s susceptibility to trauma. Jacqueline Brogan argues the “race-less” aspect of oppression, stating the commonality of “the continued abuse of white women, black women, all women, no matter what ethnicity or race” (196). Brogan indicates that Squeak’s trauma is not as much a race issue as it is a gender issue. On the contrary, Squeak’s traumatic event in fact speaks of marginalization deeply rooted in both gender and race. As a “yellowish girlfriend,” Squeak could identify with her White background over her African American background, but society’s strong emphasis on oppression and discrimination based on appearances will not allow her to do so. Walker’s novel as a whole, but specifically her female characters’ experiences, illustrates how race, alongside gender, is a huge factor in extending the abuse and traumatization of women. While the broad terms of gender and race can be unpacked to reveal discrimination fixed in each category alone, Walker’s novel illuminates the specific trauma that emerges when the two minority categories are combined.

While working for the mayor’s wife, Sofia portrays the group specific adversity African American women endure opposed to members occupying other categories. Sofia is barred from seeing all but one of her children, going five years without even a single visit. While cleaning their house Sofia exclaims, “I’m slaving away cleaning that big post they got down at the bottom of the stair” (Walker 102). Sofia’s son says, “Don’t say slaving, Mama” (103). Sofia angrily exposes the harsh oppression, discrimination, and trauma forced upon her because of her position in society, a source of her gender *and* race. She declares:

Why not? They got me in a little storeroom up under the house, hardly bigger than Odessa’s porch, and just about as warm in the winter time. I’m at the beck and call all night and all day. They won’t let me see my children. They won’t let me see no mens. Well, after five years they let me see you once a year. I’m a slave, she say. What would you call it? A captive, he say. (103)

Sofia’s experiences epitomize trauma stemming from gender and race. As an African American woman, she is confined to “slaving” for a White family in a female specific role. Walker uses Sofia’s encounter with the mayor and Miss Millie to shake the reader into understanding the driving force behind her suffering. Like Celie and Squeak, Sofia’s gender and race corner her into a life of oppression and discrimination, which ultimately induces her trauma.

Resilience and Transformation

Despite the trauma the women have endured, they are able to undergo important transformations in their healing processes. Herman affirms the difficulty of such a task. She explains that traumatic events strain social relationships and challenge our sense of selves. They also challenge belief systems and threaten severe personal crises (51). Celie, Sofia, and Squeak all experience the sense of disconnect and shattered beliefs that Herman claims is typical of trauma survivors; yet the women still demonstrate a transformation. Although gender- and race-based oppression, violence, and trauma can shatter the victim's world, healing and growth is not impossible. Herman explains that a supportive response from others can mitigate the impact of the event (61). Although the victim's sense of self has been damaged, "that sense can be rebuilt only as it was built initially, in connection with others" (61). Celie, in particular, validates the power of support; her transformation is contingent upon her strong, healing connections. She finds her voice in her relationships with women experiencing intersectionality and suffering as she does. Crenshaw, in her exploration of violence rooted in intersectional identities, raises a noteworthy point regarding the transformative nature of particular types of violence and trauma. As she writes, "battering and rape, once seen as private (family matters) and aberrational (errant sexual aggression), are now largely recognized as a broad-scale domination that affects women as a class" (1241). Wide-scale recognition of an issue affecting a group at large offers validation for its victims; it is representative of the transformative potential of the women's specific experience with trauma. While the women are indeed traumatized in the novel, they are not permanently arrested by the violence. Unfortunately, their trauma is indicative of a largely "social and systemic" issue at hand (1241). In understanding the commonality of their trauma, Celie, Sofia, and Squeak turn towards their shared experiences as a "source of strength, community, and intellectual development" (1242). Such recognition, discussion, and support leaves room for healing, growth, and transformation in the traumatized individual's life.

Conclusion

The Color Purple speaks of issues that are not only confined to Celie, Sofia, and Squeak, but in fact transcend from the specific individuals, setting, and time period of the novel to present day. Walker calls attention to the marginalization of groups at large through her depiction of gender and racial issues. Celie, Sofia, and Squeak's life experiences demonstrate how gender and race have a hand in the infliction of trauma. Though violence does not always lead to trauma, Celie, Sofia, and Squeak's specific experiences with violence are linked to their traumatization; the women are susceptible to such trauma because of the *type* of violence inflicted upon them—intersectional identity-based oppression, physical assault, and sexual assault, all of which results in a certain "group-specific trauma." The women not only find their voice as individuals, separate from their master statuses, but also find solidarity in each other, a community of African American women.

It is only members of both groups, female and African American, that can understand the group specific oppression, abuse, and trauma driven by gender and race. The novel's epistolary format directly engages the reader, calling on the audience to recognize the African American woman's plea for change. Celie's letters represent the marginalized group as a whole, who are asking for a solution to the trauma they experience. The abuse and suffering Celie, Sofia, and Squeak endure is a result of their identities and while the women cannot change their master statuses, the novel acts as a platform to change the stigmas that cloud them. The issues raised in Walker's, *The Color Purple* are timeless. Given recent categorical divisions in a so-called "progressive" America, gender and race appear to remain steady as central issues demanding a great deal of focus from our nation.

The lack of tolerance that surrounds gender and racial categories in today's society raises the following question: God may have been listening to Celie, but have we?

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