Queering Black Patriarchy: The Salvific Wish and Masculine Possibility in Alice Walker's The Color Purple

Jenkins, Candice Marie, 1974-

MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 48, Number 4, Winter 2002, pp. 969-1000 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/mfs.2002.0075

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mfs/summary/v048/48.4jenkins.html
QUEERING BLACK PATRIARCHY: 
THE SALVIFIC WISH AND 
MASCULINE POSSIBILITY IN ALICE 
WALKER'S THE COLOR PURPLE

Candice M. Jenkins

Family has come to stand for community, for race, for nation. It is a short-cut to solidarity. The discourse of family and the discourse of nation are very closely connected.

—Paul Gilroy, Small Acts

In her 1989 essay "Reading Family Matters," Deborah McDowell examines a pattern of hostile critical responses directed toward a "very small sample" of contemporary black women writers by some black reviewers and critics, mostly male (75). McDowell describes the critical narrative employed by these figures as a black "family romance," the creation of a "totalizing fiction" of community wholeness—a fiction which, if realized, could rehabilitate a fragmented and painfully complex racial past (78). Gesturing toward the overwhelmingly masculinist ideology of black cultural nationalism, whose disciples she posits as the most powerful proponents of this family fiction, McDowell writes: "[T]his story of the Black Family cum Black Community headed by the Black Male who does
battle with an oppressive White world, continues to be told, though in ever more subtle variations" (78). Indeed, part of the increasing "subtlety" of such narratives is their extension into broader spheres of cultural influence than the putatively "political" arena, including the space of black literary production and analysis.

As McDowell goes on to note, Alice Walker has received more than her share of black (male) critical attack for disrupting this notion of family romance in her fiction; at least in part, that attack has been in response to the 1985 film adaptation of Walker's novel The Color Purple by Steven Spielberg, which brought a great deal of additional publicity to Walker and her work. Walker, accused by various critics of being unduly influenced by white feminists and of harboring animosity toward black men, seems to have written herself out of the so-called black family embrace, even out of the black community as a whole, by " expos[ing] black women's subordination within the nuclear family, rethink[ing] and configur[ing] its structures, and plac[ing] utterance outside the father's preserve and control" (McDowell 85). In other words, Walker's work (along with the work of such writers as Ntozake Shange and Gayl Jones, who have been similarly criticized) deconstructs a black family romance and represents unequivocally the ways in which "traditional"—and traditionally idealized—family structures can endanger black women both physically and psychically, largely because of the patriarchal power that such structures grant to black men.

Perhaps even more significantly, however, Walker's writing, and particularly her 1982 novel The Color Purple, also engages in a project of "queering" the black family, reshaping it in unconventional ways that divest its black male members of a good deal of power, thereby reconfiguring the very meaning of kinship for black sons, brothers, and especially fathers. Indeed I invoke McDowell's essay, and the generally masculine critical furor to which it refers, at the opening of this essay on Walker's The Color Purple because I believe there are crucial connections to be made between the ways in which Walker's text calls for a queering or refashioning of family dynamics and the manner in which Walker herself, as author, has been scripted by a black (male) critical establishment as a delinquent daughter who has strayed from the black family fold. Not only do Walker's characters repeatedly find ways to subvert the shape and order of the heteronormative, patriarchal family, but in many ways
Walker's authorly body functions as an apparent source of subversion or betrayal in its own right, imagined by her critics to be waging treacherous assault upon a mythologically unified black community.

"Imagined" is, of course, the operative word in the foregoing sentence; nothing in Walker's published reflections on the filming (and resulting criticism) of *The Color Purple* suggests that her intention in writing this novel was to betray the black family/community. Instead, what is at stake here is the behavior assigned to Walker by her critics, the motivations and loyalties she is assumed to hold, in short, the writerly persona grafted onto Walker's not-so-willing body by an act of critical storytelling. We might say, in fact, that Walker's writerly body is subject to interpretation in the same way that the narrative body of her fiction is. Indeed, the conclusion of "Reading Family Matters" cautions against the ways in which black women's "bodies" (in both senses of the term) might be reduced to the terrain upon which white and black men enact a struggle for power and control of the literary landscape.

While McDowell's point is well taken, my interest in drawing such a link between Walker's authorly body and the textual body of her novel is to call attention to a different set of issues entirely—namely, the gendered and sexualized complexities that underlie the black drive toward a patriarchal "family romance." The power of this drive, and the particular vehemence of critical responses to Walker, has to do with the manner in which patriarchy's hierarchalized kinship structure has generative consequences for black (hetero)sexual subjectivity—and particularly black masculinity. Disruptions of this kinship structure, such as those effected in Walker's novel, thus have the potential to unsettle black gender difference, even to render it incoherent. If, as Michael Awkward has suggested, "monolithic and/or normative maleness" is conventionally defined by the "powerful, domineering patriarch" (3), then a family in which men no longer dominate is a family in which masculinity itself is called into question.

This challenge to heteronormative masculinity is precisely why Alice Walker herself is imagined as a kind of racial turncoat for her portrayals of black men—not merely, as McDowell suggests, because these portrayals present black manhood in a supposedly negative light, or simply shift the focus of black fictional narrative away from the black male. In fact, it is the radical *reshaping* of the family effected in Walker's novel that...
leads to her rejection by the black (male) critical establishment; Walker's transformative revision of black domesticity in *The Color Purple* accomplishes no less than the emptying of "black masculinity" as a term, insofar as that term has been dependent upon an assumption of black men's authoritative role in the family sphere.

In other words, Walker's refashioning of the black family "queers" the very notion of the potent black patriarch. Her text goes beyond simply representing an absent father, one who has abdicated from the legitimate seat of patriarchal rule; nor does it portray merely a father inadequately fulfilling the requirements of his (again, assumed rightful) authority. Indeed, both of these possibilities evoke what Sharon Holland, following Hortense Spillers, identifies as "fatherlack": "the idea of a dream/nightmare deferred [...] an inevitable and unattainable fatherhood" (387). For Holland, the cultural trauma of this lack—or the difficulty of fulfilling what Spillers names the "provisions of patriarchy"—is a "founding and necessary condition/experience of what it means to be black" (387). In this schema, the very concept of black patriarchy becomes a conceptual impossibility, precisely because of a fatherly absence contained within the cultural signifier "black."

I would differentiate the queered black father of Walker's novel from Holland's idea, however. Walker's subversive transformation of the black family, and of the black father, responds more to ahistorical fantasies of black patriarchy (erected, perhaps, as a defensive response to fatherlack), of which the black community harbors many. As Ashraf Rushdy notes, "African American intellectuals espousing black nationalism have long argued that the family represents the site for the development of the black nation" (109); for nationalists, "those families representing the race can form a nation only when [...] patriarchal power is evident" (110). Ultimately, it is in playing with, literally queering, such patriarchal fantasies that Walker's novel invites hostile critical scrutiny, for by the conclusion of the text, Walker's black family contains a possibility far more bewildering than the father's absence: a father who is present, but nonetheless no longer dominant or even interested in domination. It is no wonder, then, that Walker's narrative is viewed by many critics as an affront to black community wholeness, for it posits a community without a (male) leader, a masculinity without even the desire for what has traditionally been understood as masculinity's hallmark: power.
Contexts: The Salvific Wish and Patriarchal Tyranny

Crucial to my argument in the remainder of this essay is a term that I have coined to better explain and historicize the recurrent black drive toward a patriarchal family romance. I believe this drive can be understood as part of a pattern of black desire that I call the "salvific wish." The salvific wish is best understood as an aspiration, most often but not only middle-class and female, to save or rescue the black community from white racist accusations of sexual and domestic pathology, through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety. Historically, it has been located in social institutions such as the black women's club movement, which began in large part as a response to moral defamation of black women in the US public sphere. Fannie Barrier Williams said in 1895 that "the club movement among colored women […] is only one of the many means for the social uplift of a race" (qtd. in Davis 133); Williams's use of the word "uplift" is no coincidence since the salvific wish is closely related to the philosophy of middle-class racial responsibility which began near the turn of the twentieth century. W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of the "Talented Tenth" is a particularly illustrative example of this philosophy: a small group of economically and culturally privileged African Americans poised to lead the masses of blacks "away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races" (842). In other words, middle- and upper-class African Americans in the late 1800s and early 1900s sought to improve the reputation and status of the race as a whole through their "respectable" actions and influence. And as one scholar notes, the measure of respectability for these bourgeois blacks consisted chiefly of "conformity to patriarchal family ideals" (Gaines 12).

I contend that the salvific wish has most influenced female behavior because it has historically placed a high value on maintaining a protective illusion of black sexual and familial sobriety. This illusion is particularly dependent upon (and prohibitive for) black women because the black female body has so often been characterized as the sole source of black intimate or domestic irregularity. Indeed, as Paula Giddings notes, at the turn of the twentieth century, even black men's assumed sexual excesses were considered traceable to black women's inadequate performance as respectable mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives: "[B]lack men were thought capable of […] sexual crimes because of the lascivious character of the women of the race in a time when women were considered the
foundation of a group's morality" ("The Last Taboo" 415). As such, insistence that women in particular suppress their own desires (sexual or otherwise) and surrender passively to patriarchal control is a part of what might be called rules or tenets of the salvific wish, the actual behaviors required of black women under the wish's influence. Indeed it is this sense of black women's self-disciplining that distinguishes the salvific wish from uplift ideology more generally; we might read the wish as an internalized, particularly feminine manifestation of a larger pattern of belief and behavior among middle-class African Americans in the Victorian era.

Although the salvific wish originated in this moment at the end of the nineteenth century, and was first expressed among middle- and upper-class black women of the period, I argue that it remains relevant in the twentieth century and continues to shape the ways that black women of all classes publicly express sexual and familial issues. This is particularly true given the fact that the salvific wish is essentially a response to stigma, the stigma of deviance that has been attached to African-American sexual identity. Referring to queer sexuality, Michael Warner reminds us that stigma is carried indelibly in the body, possessing a kind of stubborn ineffaceability which to me suggests the potential for historical continuity: "Stigma [. . .] marked the person, not the deed, as tainted. This is what the modern metaphor of stigma singles out. It is a kind of 'spoiled identity' [. . . which] befalls one like fate. Like the related stigmas of racial identity or disabilities, it may have nothing to do with acts one has committed. It attaches not to doing, but to being; not to conduct, but to status" (27–28). Black sexuality has certainly been so stigmatized in the United States, from slavery onward. And as Michael Dyson reminds us, in the US "the psychic, political, economic, and social costs of slavery [. . .] continue to be paid" (183). Indeed, Warner's use of the more generalized term "racial identity" as an illustration in the former passage reveals the way in which skin color itself is perhaps the best example of stigma's indelible and embodied "fate," since it has functioned as the metonymic stand-in for a whole host of enduring cultural assumptions about black people. The very irreversibility of black skin, its visible permanence, as well as the persistent and irrational association of that skin with deviance in the US cultural imaginary, point to a possible justification for the persistent presence of the salvific wish in contemporary black culture—in that the figurative branding of black intimacy which calls forth the wish has also persisted.
At the very least, the logic of the salvific wish continues to be both interrogated and reinscribed in black women's fiction of the twentieth century. In these narratives, female characters who refuse to behave according to the tenets of the salvific wish (Toni Morrison's Sula Peace, Nella Larsen's Clare Kendry, and Walker's own Shug Avery come immediately to mind) can be interpreted as "cultural infidels," precisely because their sexual or domestic misbehavior threatens a narrative of black community sanctity, which, due to the historic influence of white racism on black intimate life, has larger political meaning for black people. I contend, however, that in Walker's case, more than her characters can be read as "cultural infidels." As I have already noted, Alice Walker herself has been represented as such by a host of hostile critics, and I believe the reason for this representation is the way that Walker appears to defy the salvific wish through the shape taken by her narrative. In other words, her textual body operates (or is believed to operate) as a proxy for her authorly body, and the symbolically queer, or queering behavior of this proxy enacts a kind of intolerable threat to black community sanctity as it is defined by the salvific wish.4

Perhaps not surprisingly, the definitions of and contexts for the salvific wish outlined above assume more complex contours in Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, for several reasons. The first of these is the relationship to whites effected by the rural southern setting of the text. Because the novel takes place in the South during the Jim Crow era, the presence of whites in or around the community has more immediate (and immediately painful) consequences than in many other black women's texts. This is significant in part because the efforts of the salvific wish to protect black people's public reputation from racist assumptions about black character seem, in an environment where blacks have little physical protection from white attack, to be far less urgent than the protection of black people from direct bodily harm at the hands of whites. Walker's text represents whites as a concrete and continual threat to black characters' lives, a shift that might alter the very meaning of "protection" for the black community.

The second complicating aspect of Walker's text is that the bulk of its characters cannot be understood as conventionally bourgeois or middle-class. I say "conventionally" because, in part, the apparent difference between Walker's characters and those of writers such as Toni Morrison
or Nella Larsen is one of rural versus urban expressions of bourgeois status. This is particularly true when one considers that Celie and Nettie's biological father is a wealthy man in the community, and that it is his wealth, which surpasses that of many whites, that leads to his lynching. Indeed, many of Walker's characters are land and homeowners, some even business owners—hallmarks of bourgeois status for black people, especially in the period during which the novel is set. Although it is possible to identify certain of Walker's characters as poor or working class, it would be a mistake to assume that the salvific wish, with its strategic embrace of bourgeois propriety, would thereby have less of a hold in the community Walker describes.

In fact, as Kevin Kelly Gaines's text *Uplifting the Race* reminds us, economic status has not historically been the sole determinant of blacks' participation in uplift ideology (of which, as already noted, the salvific wish is certainly a part). As Gaines suggests:

Through uplift ideology, elite and less-privileged African Americans were striving for bourgeois respectability in the absence of rights or freedom. [...] And although marital status, the possession of a home or education, or the wish to acquire these, are considered markers of middle-class status, the material conditions of many blacks with these aspirations was often indistinguishable from that of impoverished people of any color. [...] Thus, in light of their tragic plight within a racist social formation, it is more accurate to say that many blacks [...] were not middle class in any truly material or economic sense, but rather, represented themselves as such [...] (16–17)

In other words, the embrace of uplift ideology has served as a crucial marker, among poor and working-class blacks, of aspirations toward "respectability," in spite of actual economic status. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Walker's characters, although rural or working class, are concerned with uplift-based issues of propriety, since such concern would in fact help to mark them as respectable.

Ironically enough, however, given the presumably female emphasis of the salvific wish, in Walker's text many comments about black respectability are voiced by male characters. This connection between the ostensibly feminine salvific wish and the interference of men is one
means by which Walker's work critiques the wish and the patriarchal values that motivate it, a point to which I will return later. Many of the men who express concern with feminine behavior and reputation in The Color Purple behave (or attempt to behave) as oppressive tyrants toward women, pointing to an obvious link between repressive social strictures around female character and abusive actions designed to force women into specific patterns of behavior. What remains consistent in Walker's novel among these male characters' attention to black women's respectability is that such attention repeatedly concerns pregnancy, marriage, and appropriate (female) behavior in the domestic sphere. Indeed, these masculine assertions of the salvific wish are nearly always accompanied by direct expressions of patriarchal power over the domestic sphere: a father refusing to allow a son or daughter to marry, refusing to extend support to a mother or child, or insisting upon specific behaviors from a wife or daughter.

That this power to restore propriety and order is expressed in relation to marriage, children, and family is not surprising since the privatized space of the domestic is precisely where a traditional patriarch wields unchecked power. As Catherine MacKinnon has written, "In private, women are objects of male subjectivity and male power. The private is that place where men can do whatever they want because women reside there" (qtd. in Berlant 142). While MacKinnon speaks of the "private" in a legal sense, her words are certainly relevant to the space of the household or the domestic, since this space is traditionally assumed to lie within the realm of the private. The home, the family—all are a part of the world to which men are expected to retreat for comfort after their forays into the "public" sphere of commerce and paid work.

Of course, as Patricia Hill Collins notes, "Black women's experiences [...] have never fit this [public/private spheres] model." Indeed, Collins goes on to suggest that "Because the construct of family/household [...] is rooted in assumptions about discrete public and private spheres, nuclear families characterized by sex-segregated gender roles are less likely to be found in African-American communities" (47). Since black women have always labored in what could be considered the "private" sphere—either through domestic work for whites both during and after slavery, or in order to maintain their own black household spaces—the distinction between a public sphere reserved for work and a private sphere reserved
for leisure and intimacy has often been of little consequence in real black women’s lives. In Walker’s text, however, perhaps because of the novel’s focus on a male-driven notion of patriarchy, this concept of separate and opposing spheres is not entirely ineffectual, particularly for male characters. For these characters, enforcing a public/private distinction is one way of ensuring masculine power over women.

The rural setting of Walker’s narrative further complicates this notion of a public versus a private sphere, however, since the work of maintaining the farm and homestead means that no domestic space is solely for “relaxation.” Still, the work that takes place on Mr. ___’s land is rarely done by the patriarch himself, which means that the space of the “private” in The Color Purple maintains some coherence as a space in which men are empowered to behave as they please. Indeed, MacKinnon’s sense that the space of the “private” or the domestic is a space in which men wield power over women might in the case of The Color Purple also be understood to imply two other potential objects of privatized masculine control: children and less powerful males.

In fact, in Walker’s text, men who are dominated by their own fathers seem determined to dominate their sons (as well as any women in their lives) in equal measure within their own “private” realms. This phenomenon is made clear by Mr. ___’s subordinate relationship to his own father and his (consequently) dominant relationship to Harpo; Harpo’s resultant efforts to dominate his own family can thus be read as gestures toward the same sort of defensive patriarchal control. Harpo’s inability to challenge his father—Celie remarks that “Harpo no better at fighting his daddy back than me” (29)—points out the way in which a dominant male, in this case Mr. ____, exercises power over not only the women in his control but also the male and female children. Celie’s description of Harpo working for his father in fact provides a subtle comparison between a subordinated male and a woman (already subordinated simply because of her gender): “Harpo nearly as big as his daddy. He strong in body but weak in will. He scared. Me and him out in the field all day. Us sweat, chopping and plowing. I’m roasted coffee bean color now. He black as the inside of a chimney. His eyes be sad and thoughtful. His face begin to look like a woman face” (29). That Harpo is “nearly as big” as Mr. ____ reminds the reader that his father’s ability to dominate him does not stem from sheer physical prowess. Instead,
Harpo is "weak in will," controlled by fear of his father’s power. It is this fear that turns Harpo’s eyes "sad and thoughtful" and that leads Celie to describe his face as feminine—the comparison points out the ways that all those subordinate to a family patriarch are feminized, because they are all subject to the same hierarchical relationship. In addition, however, the narrative’s juxtaposition of Harpo’s "sad," "thoughtful" eyes with the claim that he has begun to resemble a woman reminds readers of the rigidity of conventional gender norms. Clearly, neither melancholy nor reflection are behaviors expected of men, so much so that when a man exhibits them, he is immediately feminized. Here Walker’s text begins its commentary on the limitations patriarchy imposes upon both women and men—anticipating the more radical project of "queering" patriarchy that will take place later in the novel through the character of Mr. _____. Harpo’s case, however, falls short of this radical revision precisely because while he is feminized by his father’s control, he maintains a conventionally masculine determination to control the subjects of his own patriarchal domain.

In fact, Harpo provides one of the novel’s major conflicts (and major sources of comic relief) in his own efforts to dominate his wife, Sofia. Described as "a big strong girl. […] Solid. Like if she sit down on something, it be mash” (36), Sofia never acquiesces to her husband’s patriarchal authority, though he continually attempts to dominate her. In stark contrast to Celie’s silent obedience in Mr. _____’s home, Sofia demands to be treated as an equal by Harpo, to his surprise: "Harpo want to know what to do to make Sofia mind. He sit out on the porch with Mr. _____. He say, I tell her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. Always backtalk” (37). And, Celie adds, "To tell the truth, he sound a little proud of this to me" (37). It is crucial to acknowledge Harpo’s pride, for it marks one of several instances in Walker’s text when characters take a particular joy in behaving (or in interacting with others who behave) counter to gendered expectation. This joy is often short-lived in early portions of the novel, however, because the hegemony of the patriarchal family structure, what Kaja Silverman has called the "dominant fiction" (15), repeatedly reimposes itself, reminding those characters of the "appropriate" manner of behavior.

In Harpo’s case, the reimposition of patriarchal order comes, not surprisingly, from his own father, who strikes immediately upon the "problem" with Harpo and Sofia’s relationship:
You ever hit her? Mr. _____ ast.
Harpo look down at his hands. Naw suh, he say low, embar-
rass.
Well how you spect to make her mind? 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. (37–38)

That Harpo is embarrassed to admit to Mr. _____ that he doesn’t hit
Sofia indicates not simply discomfort with his lack of power over his
wife, but shame at being exposed, in front of his own father, as an
inadequate patriarch. Rather than being able to interact with his father
as an equal, now that he has his own household to dominate, he proves
himself incapable of the requisite authority. His low-voiced, eyes-averted
response to Mr. _____, replete with the previously absent "suh," thus
signals Harpo’s return to a subordinate position relative to his father—
a position ensured by the fact that he has admitted he is unable to make
his own wife "mind." Indeed, Mr. _____’s assertion that "wives is like
children" functions as a veiled reminder of the feminized subjugation
that Harpo has endured as Mr. _____’s child, the blanket patriarchal
control that disciplines wives, children, and anything in between.

This widespread, violence-enforced tyranny, in which women are
no more autonomous than children and children, even adult children,
are feminized by their subordinance, recalls the resented black father
figure that David Marriott points to in Richard Wright’s writing: "Deeply
suspicious of his father’s inheritance—in which all white men were ‘Mis-
ters’, and all black men ‘boys’—Wright gives voice to his ambivalence
toward a father, and toward father-figures, who, trapped in a time-warp,
want to be called ‘Mister’. These are fathers who identify with the racist
violence of (white) culture in the South by miming that violence in their
relations with their black sons” (103). This description is stunningly remi-
niscent of father-son interaction in The Color Purple—black fathers who,
in a social sphere shaped by white racism, gain access to manhood through
the recreation of a violent (white) patriarchy in their own homes. While
Marriott’s reading of Wright’s autobiographical universe posits a
straightforwardly mimetic relationship between black and white
masculinity, such a relationship is less directly visible in Walker’s narrative.
Instead, Marriott’s analysis is useful because it highlights the way that
whiteness can be understood as a backdrop for these intraracial, masculine
assertions of power. After all, except for the lynching of Celie and Nettie’s biological father, Walker’s text masks the actual interactions that black men have with white, focusing instead on the various assaults (literal and figurative) that black women such as Sofia and Mary Agnes (“Squeak”) experience at white hands. Even the aforementioned lynching is, arguably, hidden from view throughout much of the novel, a communal secret that is only revealed well into Celie’s adulthood.

Still, the violent relationship that exists between black and white men in The Color Purple’s southern rural setting is never far from the surface in the text. It is evident, for instance, in Celie’s stepfather (Alphonso)’s statement that “[Y]ou got to give [whites] something. Either your money, your land, your woman, or your ass” (188)—and this particular collocational set presents disturbing, though hardly surprising, correlations between black (female) bodies and property that are consistent with the patriarchal tyranny otherwise expressed by Alphonso throughout the novel. The appellation “Mister” is perhaps a more subtle reminder of white controls over black life, however. For if, as Marriott suggests, every southern white man is “Mister” and every black man “boy,” then the black men in Walker’s text are scripted into a pattern of titular naming that even without direct reference to whiteness is informed by racial hierarchies. This scripting takes place through Celie’s narration; Celie describes almost all the men in the text as Mr. _____, even making it difficult to distinguish between male characters at times. Indeed, when Shug Avery first refers to Celie’s husband, previously called only Mr. _____, as “Albert,” Celie notes, “Who Albert, I wonder. Then I remember Albert Mr. _____ first name” (49). Shug, who is uninterested in maintaining artificial language tags meant to signify respect—”[D]on’t you yes ma’am me, I ain’t that old” (51)—is here as elsewhere starkly contrasted with Celie, who, as arguably the most subordinated character in early portions of the novel, is required to think of the men who surround her only as “Misters.”

To return, then, to the salvific wish: I have suggested that men are frequently the characters in Walker’s text who give voice to tenets of the salvific wish and that these articulations are often linked to masculine expressions of control over the feminized spaces of domesticity with which the salvific wish is ultimately concerned. I want now briefly to reexamine the ways in which masculine and feminine articulations of
concern over respectability in Walker’s text might be differentiated and what significance this has for the "treacherous" project of queering the patriarch in *The Color Purple*. For while it may be true that both men and women in the novel hope to control the appearance and actuality of the domestic sphere for the sake of propriety, only female characters link this control to the idea of recuperation or rescue for the community (or even for themselves). Celie’s attempt to push her sister Nettie into marriage is only one example: "Sometime he still be looking at Nettie, but I always get in his light. Now I tell her to marry Mr. ______. I don’t tell her why" (6). The "he" in this passage refers to Celie and Nettie’s stepfather, Alphonso, who at this point in the narrative has already raped and impregnated Celie twice. By "getting in his light" Celie hopes to intercept and forestall any similar attempts by Alphonso against her sister. In stark contrast to the behavior of most male characters in Walker’s text, who orchestrate domestic behavior by forbidding marriage rather than encouraging it, Celie hopes to protect Nettie from a fate similar to her own by encouraging her sister to marry and leave Alphonso’s house. What might be perceived as an effort at controlling the events of the household is quite literally in the service of protecting one of its members from psychic as well as physical harm.

Male characters, on the contrary, seem to desire control for its own sake—to make a statement about their own capacity to rule in the private sphere. Of course, one reason that this distinction exists is that men’s gestures toward respectability through "proper" behavior are always externalized—since the behavior that needs reform always seems to belong to women. This is true, for example, when Mr. _____ protests Celie’s inclusion in an outing to Harpo’s juke joint: "Mr. _____ didn’t want me to come. Wives don’t go to places like that, he say" (76), or when Harpo himself reacts with horror at seeing Sofia in the same place: "It just a scandless, a woman with five children hanging out in a jukejoint at night" (86). In neither of these instances do Mr. _____ or Harpo consider their own behavior to be potentially improper—Mr. _____ does not question a husband’s right to go to a "place like that," and Harpo, the father of Sofia’s five children, finds nothing unusual about his own presence in (and ownership of) a juke joint. The irony of this double standard is pointed out by Sofia herself, in an exchange with Mr. _____:
Mr. _____ whisper to Sofia. Where your children at?
She whisper back, My children at home, where yours?
He don't say nothing.
Both the girls bigged and gone. Bub in and out of jail. If his
grandaddy wasn't the colored uncle of the sheriff who look
just like Bub, Bub be lynch by now. (85)

Sofia’s response to Mr. _____ silences his question about her behavior
by calling attention to his own neglected responsibilities and to the irony
that while he finds it within his rights as a man to question the
whereabouts of Sofia’s children, his own family is significantly troubled
(something Sofia may or may not have been aware of when she made
her retort). The silence that Sofia’s question elicits from Mr. _____ is
filled by Celie’s narration, however, which informs the reader, at least,
that Mr. _____’s daughters had both gotten pregnant and left home and
that his younger son was hardly well-behaved.5

Thus it seems that male articulations of the salvific wish in Walker’s
novel ultimately eschew the project of communal recuperation in favor
of self-aggrandizement—a self-aggrandizement that more often than not
is undeserved. Still, these masculine articulations of externalized control
over domestic life and feminine gestures toward domestic self-discipline
in the service of group safety are aligned in the novel for good reason—
it is only through this alignment that Walker is able to point out the
pitfalls of the ostensibly feminine salvific wish, that drive to protect the
community through self-control and sacrifice.6 When voiced through
the bodies of male characters, these ostensibly noble behaviors become
something disturbingly close to tyranny, creating not community safety
but a hyper-powerful masculinity that lays down the law of propriety
solely in pursuit of the authority to enforce that law.7 And it is this
patriarchal authority, so spotlighted in early portions of Walker’s narrative,
which subsequently becomes the object of not only critique but creative
and queer revision in the latter part of the text.

**Tailoring Mr. _____’s Masculinity: Rewriting the Black Patriarch**

The term ”patriarchy,” as defined by feminist scholars, is ”the rule
of the father, including the rule of older men over younger men and of
fathers over daughters, as well as husbands over wives" (Ehrenreich 284). This concept, so defined, seems to be precisely the prevailing system of male-female interaction in the beginning of The Color Purple. Certainly, Mr. ____ functions as a traditional patriarch in early portions of the novel, dominating both Celie and his grown children. He undergoes a transformation by the conclusion of the novel, however, from head of household wielding near-absolute power to a more subdued and philosophical friend and companion to Shug and Celie. In other words, Mr. ____ is displaced as patriarch, divested of his former dominance. Ironically enough, this transformation takes place in part because of Celie, who puts a curse on Mr. ____ as she leaves his house with Shug. While Mr. ____'s initial response is quintessentially patriarchal—"Who you think you is? [. . .] You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam . . . you nothing at all" (213)—he soon discovers, in the first of many reversals in his life, that the person he had assumed to be most powerless is in fact the one most capable of transforming his existence.

Indeed, by the time Celie returns, Mr. ____ is a different person; after the hardship he suffers under Celie's curse and because of her absence, his behavior begins to move toward the traditionally "feminine," in part because there is no one else in his household to dominate and coerce into working for him. As Sofia and Harpo inform Celie:

I know you won't believe this, Miss Celie, say Sofia, but Mr. ____ act like he trying to get religion [. . .].

He don't go to church or nothing, but he not so quick to judge. He work real hard too.

What? I say. Mr. _____ work!

He sure do. He out there in the field from sunup to sundown. And clean that house just like a woman.

Even cook, say Harpo. And what more, wash the dishes when he finish. (229)

Celia's disbelief is to be expected, since no one, least of all she, has ever seen Mr. ____ work to maintain his own household. Perhaps more importantly, however, the claim that he is "not so quick to judge" suggests that Mr. ____'s transformation is more than simply an external one, wrought by necessity. Instead, the shift extends to his sense of morality.
Rather than taking it as his prerogative to pass judgment on the world around him (as he did when he was more clearly functioning as patriarch) Mr. ____ assumes a more open-minded position. This is only the first of several changes in Mr. ____ that serve to "soften" him—he begins to collect shells, for example, displaying a tenderness for them which hardly resembles his former self: "He don't say that much about them while you looking, but he hold each one like it just arrive" (260). Later, he begins to sew alongside Celie, helping her to assemble her pants; sewing becomes an activity that the two share as friends: "Now us sit sewing and talking and smoking our pipes" (279).

It is no coincidence that the title of this section is a reference to both Mr. ____'s sewing and his gender; I read his participation in this traditionally "female" activity as an indication, perhaps the most striking, that his character has divested from the patriarchal behaviors which marked him as a tyrant in earlier portions of the novel. In other words, his acceptance of traditionally female gender roles goes along with his humanization in the text. This transformation is related to the distinction Karla Holloway identifies between destruction (gendered masculine) and creation (gendered feminine) in black narrative: Mr. ____'s feminization in Walker's text indicates his newfound ability to access the "spiritual creativity" that has traditionally been assumed the province of black women (24).

The change in Mr. ____ also, however, comes along with a shift in actual family dynamics—Mr. ____ becomes more feminized as he is displaced from the role of father and husband, as his family is "queered" by Celie and Shug's romantic involvement. As Celie says to a disheartened Mr. ____, still disappointed that Shug is no longer his lover, "She still feel for you, I say. Yeah, he say. She feel like I'm her brother. What so bad about that, I ast. Don't her brothers love her?" (278). Celie's comment is important because it points out the way in which Mr. ____'s connection to Shug (and to Celie herself) has become a connection based in egalitarian affection, rather than hierarchy. The difference between "brother" and "lover/husband" points to this transformation. In addition, Celie's question, "Don't her brothers love her?" again shifts the focus from Mr. ____ to the women in his life—by asking about Shug's brothers' love for her, rather than her love for her brothers, Celie reminds Mr. ____ of the potential for intimate connection based not on a
woman's devotion to a man, but on a man's devotion to a woman, no matter what her feelings for him.

Indeed, this shift of focus from Mr. ______ to the people, largely women, who surround him, is a part of a larger pattern of family reconfiguration in the novel, which decentralizes the patriarch and calls for a more democratic distribution of kinship ties. For example, Harpo and Sofia's family eventually includes the child of Harpo's former mistress, Mary Agnes ("Squeak"), who leaves Harpo with Shug and Celie to go sing and eventually moves away from Memphis with Shug's (ex-)husband, Grady. Throughout the text, the concept of family moves further and further toward a kind of unruly and unregulated jumble of intimacies, many of which begin as sexual dyads but end up more as platonic kinship relations. Shug's young lover Germaine, for example, eventually takes on a more consanguine role in Shug's life: "He feel just like family now. Like a son. Maybe a grandson" (291). In this move toward extended rather than strictly nuclear family, Walker's text ironically gestures toward familial patterns that, as Hortense Spillers notes, were common among enslaved blacks:

[T]he laws and practices of enslavement did not recognize, as a rule, the vertical arrangements of [. . .] family [for blacks]. From this angle, fathers, daughters, mothers, sons, sisters, brothers spread across the social terrain in horizontal display, which exactly occurred in the dispersal of the historic African-American domestic unit. In this movement outward from a nuclear centrality, "family" becomes an extension and inclusion—anyone who preserves life and its callings becomes a member of the family, whose patterns of kinship and resemblance fall into disguise. (148)

This relationship to kinship ties among captive blacks is important because it may indicate, at least in part, why Walker's extensive "queering" of the family has received such hostile black critical responses. A major project of the salvific wish, the aforementioned desire to recuperate black people from accusations of racist pathology around family and sexuality, is the repudiation of unconventional family relations such as the ones Spillers outlines and the embrace of more traditional bourgeois patterns of "proper" domestic and sexual behavior.
While the salvific wish is perhaps most deeply interrogated and critiqued within black women's fiction, it would not be inaccurate to suggest that the wish, as part of an African-American cultural imaginary, also affects external critical responses to black women's literature. This is particularly plausible in light of what Evelyn Hammonds notes about black women who undertake feminist work; in a conflation of feminist and female, she writes: "Black feminist theorists are themselves engaged in a process of fighting to reclaim the body—the maimed, immoral, black female body—which can be and is still being used by others to discredit them as producers of knowledge and as speaking subjects" (177–78). I would argue that the same is true, in different ways, of all black theorists, not simply black women, even if women's bodies are sometimes forced to assume a disproportionate share of pathologizing scrutiny. Thus black critics of any gender might fall sway to the discourse of the salvific wish, enacting patterns of repression and silence in the hopes of protecting themselves or the communities they represent.

This was particularly true in 1982 when The Color Purple was published. In the wake of Ronald Reagan's election to the presidency, "Civil rights gains [were] being rolled back, [and] Black communities and families [were] in disarray" (Giddings, When and Where I Enter 349). Perhaps ironically, in this same period black women's writing, particularly fiction, was undergoing a renaissance of sorts, with authors such as Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor receiving a great deal of popular and critical attention. If the Sixties and early Seventies were what historian Paula Giddings called "The Masculine Decade" (When and Where 314), the late Seventies and early Eighties were characterized by the rise of Women's Liberation—a movement which, at least initially, focused on white, middle-class women—and the increasing presence of these women's concerns in public debate. This increased public interest in women's issues, coupled with the growing presence of women in publishing (Toni Morrison was herself an editor at Random House), may have contributed to the flowering of black women's fiction, though to many, that flowering came at the expense of black men.

Indeed, following the rise of "American feminism," suggested one critic in 1987, "[b]lack women writers seemed to find their voices and audiences, and black men seemed to lose theirs" (Pinckney 18). This perception is part of what fueled critical conflicts around black women's
writing; coupled with it was the sense among some critics that black women writers such as Ntozake Shange and Michele Wallace were gaining notoriety by "[choosing] black men as [. . .] target[s]" (Watkins 5). This perceived "targeting" of black men had to do with what the same critic called "the proliferation of scenes of violent interaction between black males and females, and of increased portrayals of black males as oppressors and brutalizers of black women" (4). Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* was accused by more than one reviewer of being the nadir of negative portrayals of black men; in just one example, Darryl Pinckney suggests that while other black women's writings contain "scenes of [. . .] offhand domestic violence. [. . .] in *The Color Purple* this violence is on virtually every page" (17). As I have argued throughout this essay, however, in the case of Walker's text more may be at stake than simply "negative portrayals" of black men—and might explain why her novel is viewed as so much worse than others released during the period.

In rereading critics of Walker's novel twenty years later, it seems clear that the furor surrounding *The Color Purple* was driven at least in part by the propriety-seeking salvific wish. Discussing Walker's activist work with female clitorodectomy in Africa, Gina Dent has written that "Walker locks the proverbial feminist personal-is-political into battle with that notorious black manifesto—*we will not have our business put in the streets*—and cuts close to the communal nerve" (3). This description might just as easily apply to Walker's *The Color Purple*, given the defensive and moralistic tenor of (male) critical responses to the book. While all of the most unsympathetic reviewers and critics seemed to agree that Walker held "a high level of enmity toward black men" (Bradley 30), many also intimated that Walker, along with some other black women writers, had ignored conventions of black decorum by publishing her work. One critic, asserting that "[b]lack women's concerns had earlier belonged to what was considered the private, rather than the public[,]" seemed disturbed to find that "the concerns of the kitchen" were now finding a wider audience (Pinckney 18). Philip Royster, writing an extensive analysis of Walker's "persona" in *Black American Literature Forum*, insinuated on the one hand that Walker's "accepting attitude" toward lesbianism served to "aggravate the already troubled waters with a large number of black folk who possess more conservative [. . .] values" (360) and in nearly the same breath dismissed Walker's own acknowledgment of such
potential community sanction as a figment of her imagination: "Walker rejects the concepts of appropriateness and correctness [. . .] in her fiction [. . .] because she believes they have been used to keep black women down" (359, emphasis added).

In another ironic twist, Mel Watkins suggests that Walker and other black feminists have sidestepped "unspoken but almost universally accepted" rules of black literary production, by forgetting that "one of the major forces shaping black literature has been the commitment to rectify the antiblack stereotypes and propagandistic images created by nonblack writers" (5). Watkins goes on to argue that "fiction [. . .] produced by the Talented Tenth school of writers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries [. . .] were [sic] characterized by their emphasis on establishing humane, positive images of blacks" (5). In this, at least, I would agree with Watkins. Part of what necessitated a focus on "positive images" at the turn of the century was the repeated circulation, in mainstream American culture, of pathologizing invective about blacks. It is no coincidence that Watkins cites Du Bois’s Talented Tenth as the source of propriety-driven resistance to this invective; I have already noted that middle-class blacks such as the ones Du Bois describes in his famous essay were the originators of the salvific wish and its attempts to rescue the black community from accusations of pathology through the embrace of conventional moralisms. The irony of Watkins’s comments about Walker lie in his assertion that by portraying black men in a negative light, she and other black women writers "have, in effect, shifted their priorities from the subtle evocation of art to the blunt demonstration of politics and propaganda" (6). A blind determination to "present positive images of blacks" is certainly as political and as propagandistic as any other artistic choice, however—a point that seems to elude Watkins. Indeed, I might argue that Walker’s novel has been read as particularly political because it disturbs certain "unspoken but almost universally accepted" markers of black respectability.

Trudier Harris’s 1984 essay "On The Color Purple, Stereotypes, and Silence" is also important to consider here, precisely because the objections to the novel that Harris outlines bear striking resemblance to the calls for black propriety fundamental to the salvific wish. In fact, I read her piece quite closely, below, in part because the assumptions that seem to underlie it are so germane to my argument about criticism of
Walker’s text and in part because other scholars (such as Deborah McDowell) who have commented upon the controversy surrounding Walker’s work have given surprisingly little attention to Harris’s essay. This lack of attention may be because Harris’s piece precedes and even anticipates the black male critical furor of the late 1980s, and has thus been somewhat eclipsed by its successors. As such, my intention in reading Harris’s article more closely here than I do reviews by male writers such as Watkins or Pinckney is partially to acknowledge its significance, and Harris’s presence, in the larger debate.

In the essay, Harris recounts her unease with the way that the novel has been “canonized,” suggesting that Walker’s text participates in racist mischaracterizations of black intimate life:

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

Harris’s reading of the novel begins with the assumption that Walker’s depictions of such fluid and amorphous intimate relationships must be interpreted as categorically negative and as unwittingly (rather than consciously) participating in a cultural narrative of pathology. What I read, for example, as a deliberate attempt to challenge the hegemony of the “traditional” family, by showing how that family has conventionally been based in hierarchical and oppressive relations between men and women, Harris reads as a confirmation of stereotype. The language of “benefit” used, sans irony, in relation to “marriage,” as well as the indirect parallel of marriage with “morality” (that is, Harris’s claim that black people in Walker’s text have “no morality when it comes to sexuality” might easily be related to her distaste for the “promiscuous relationships” Walker’s characters form extramaritally) seems to reveal underlying investments in domestic and sexual orthodoxy highly similar to those supported by the salvific wish.
This apparent adherence to the tenets of the salvific wish, which insists that black people, particularly black women, should behave according to traditional definitions of sexual/domestic "propriety" in order to protect themselves, and other blacks, from "the white racist's notions of pathology," is not the only conservative turn in the essay, however, since Harris also critiques Walker's portrayal of black men. In fact, she describes in detail the hostile response of a black male student of hers to Walker's novel. Though it is unlikely that Harris herself agrees fully with her student's sometimes overstated opinions, they are worth examining precisely because, in spite of their excesses, Harris gives them a good deal of prominence within her essay. The student's complaint about Walker is that the author "had very deliberately deprived all the black male characters in the novel of any positive identity. From giving Albert a blank instead of a name, to having the only supportive males be young and potheads or middle-aged and henpecked (as is the husband of Sophie's [sic] sister, for whom Celie makes a pair of pants and whose only goal in life seems to be to please his wife (because she can beat him up?) [. . .] this student thought black men had been stripped of their identities and thus their abilities to assume the roles of men" (Harris 158). While I have already suggested that the use of "Mr. _____" to describe not just Albert, but most of the men in Celie's life, is far more complex than simply leaving male identity "blank," and indeed has a great deal to do with Celie's own sense of herself as subordinate to all men, what is most striking to me about these assertions is the manner in which they describe Jack, Odessa's husband.

The student's parenthetical insertion of descriptors "middle-aged" and "henpecked" to describe Jack is alarmingly misogynist, since the only basis given for dismissing Jack as unable to "assume the rol[e]" of a man is his profound devotion to his wife. Her student's views are certainly ironic, given Harris's prior celebration of the "benefit" of marriage, but the unanswered addition "because she can beat him up?" reveals precisely the "flaw" in Jack's performance as Odessa's husband: he stays loyal to his wife not from a stoic sense of duty, nor as a result of iron-willed discipline or a vaguely defined "morality," but out of simple devotion to Odessa and a single-minded willingness to please her. For Harris's student, such devotion must signify cowardice or weakness, indicating the extent to which traditional "manliness" or masculinity has in this view been
divorced from emotional vulnerability. That Jack is interested in pleasing his wife because he values her as a human being seems an impossibility in such a rigidly gendered universe.

Such an interpretation of Jack is all the more troubling when one compares it to Walker’s actual description of the character. Celie’s two-paragraph discussion of Odessa’s husband, including her sense of what his pants should be like, makes him sound much more like a man who is self-assured but unwilling to dominate with his body or his voice, a man very far from the fearful, “henpecked” object of ridicule outlined in the essay:

I sit looking out across the yard trying to see in my mind what a pair of pants for Jack would look like. Jack is tall and kind and don’t hardly say anything. Love children. Respect his wife, Odessa, and all Odessa amazon sisters. Anything she want to take on, he right there. Never talking much, tho. That’s the main thing. And then I remember one time he touch me. And it felt like his fingers had eyes. Felt like he knew me all over, but he just touch my arm up near the shoulder.

I start to make pants for Jack. They have to be camel. And soft and strong. And they have to have big pockets so he can keep a lot of children’s things. [. . .] And they have to be washable and they have to fit closer round the leg than Shug’s so he can run if he need to snatch a child out of the way of something. And they have to be something he can lay back in when he hold Odessa in front of the fire. (220)

Jack is here associated with kindness and gentleness toward adults that he encounters, as well as with a generous paternal affection for children and a genuine respect and love for his wife. That this particular character in The Color Purple, almost idealized in his positivity, can be dismissed as “middle-aged and henpecked” suggests that there is more at stake than “negative portrayals of black men” in critiques such as the one outlined in Harris’s essay. In fact, what seems to underlie this misleading emphasis on “negative portrayals” is a rigid adherence to gender norms—norms which Walker’s narrative challenges, norms without which the very boundaries of feminine and masculine subjectivity become dangerously indeterminate.

This reliance upon strict gender regulations, as well as upon the heteronormativity that gender binaries make possible, is clear in the
student's subsequent dismissal, as described by Harris, of Mr. ____'s transformation from patriarchal tyrant to thoughtful and generous companion for Celie and Shug; rather than read this shift as a "positive" redemption, Harris notes, the student continues to insist that "[n]o man in the novel is respectable [...] not even Albert (because he can only change in terms of doing things that are traditionally considered sissified, such as sewing and gossiping)" (159). In another parenthetical interjection, Mr. ____'s reformation is here trivialized through its association with feminine, or effeminate, behaviors. It is hardly surprising that Harris (through her student) uses the language of respectability to describe Mr. ____'s alleged failures, since that language is consistent with the terms of the salvific wish, dependent as it is upon the black community's sexual and domestic repression in the service of appearing "respectable." Neither is the use of the term "sissified"—often understood to be a synonym for male homosexuality—a coincidence here, since gender-bending and queerness are so closely associated in Walker's text. That the student uses the term so uncritically, however, again points to a disturbing undercurrent of misogyny and homophobia, because it openly assumes that gay men, or straight men who behave in non-traditional ("feminine") ways, are somehow emasculated, "stripped" of their (assumed static and naturalized) abilities to be "real men."

As I note above, this rigidly heteronormative critique has been echoed in articles by male writers such as Mel Watkins, Philip Royster, Darryl Pinckney, and David Bradley. In uncanny agreement with Harris's student, for example, Bradley writes, "Black men in Alice Walker's fiction and poetry seem capable of goodness only when they become old [...] or paralyzed and feminized" (30). In either case, such men are, in Bradley's view, "symbolically impotent" (30), and thus poor candidates for the title of so-called positive black man. But as one more contemporary scholar of Walker's work asks, "Why do critics denigrate brutal characters who become nurturing?" (Kelly 178). I would answer her question with a few of my own—why are patriarchal dominance and masculinity so closely aligned? Can a man remain "really" a man if he no longer possesses—or claims—the power to command? Who might a father become once he is no longer a patriarch? And if, as Martha Fineman suggests, "control, dominance, and independence are quintessentially masculine" (205), then how might we—as writers, as literary scholars, as
cultural critics, as a community of African Americans—reconceive manhood in a way that is not so dependent upon parallel binaries of male/female, strong/weak, potent/impotent, straight/sissified?

Walker’s reply to such questions can be found in her novel, in characters like Shug and Sofia, who challenge a traditional and submissive femininity, as well as Mr. _____, who learns to relinquish his power to dominate in order to engage in more human and egalitarian relationships with everyone around him. Indeed, Walker’s depiction of a family whose boundaries are indistinct and constantly shifting relies upon the decentralization of patriarchal figures like Mr. _____, for as long as the traditional father, empowered to dominate all younger men and all women, remains at the center of the family, rigid hierarchies will remain in place. As Barbara Ehrenreich notes in another context, patriarchy’s dissolution "creates an opportunity for men and women to begin to meet as equals without the pretenses involved in gender roles, and to get together against our common sources of oppression. [...] Potentially, we can be brothers and sisters, comrades and lovers" (290). The radical symmetry between genders that this vision implies is certainly inspiring, though if Walker’s critics are to be believed, it is also deeply frightening, verging on impossible to contemplate. For Walker demands an entirely new way of defining and understanding gender and male-female interaction, one which begins with men who are men in spite of patriarchal power, not because of it. In fact, Walker’s text remains a bit enigmatic about the role that men can or should play in the "new" black family—rather than clearly delineating a man’s place, she leaves several possibilities open, as evidenced, for example, by the difference between Jack’s quiet confidence, Harpo’s grudging acquiescence, and Mr. _____’s philosophical companionship.

Indeed, The Color Purple presents precisely the kind of "open future" articulated by Judith Butler in her essay, "The End to Sexual Difference?" Writing about why such an unresolved eventuality is so difficult for some to accept, Butler suggests:

The desire not to have an open future can be a strong one, threatening one with loss, loss of certainty about how things are. [...] This is one reason that asking certain questions is considered dangerous. Imagine the situation of reading a book and thinking, I cannot ask the questions that are posed here because to ask them is to introduce doubt into my political
convictions, and to introduce doubt into my political convictions could lead to the dissolution of those convictions. At such a moment, the fear of thinking, indeed, the fear of the question, becomes the moralized defense of politics. And politics becomes that which requires a certain anti-intellectualism. To remain unwilling to rethink one's politics on the basis of questions posed is to opt for a dogmatic stand at the cost of both life and thought. (421)

If we replace the words "political convictions" with the words "sexual (or gender) subjectivity," and the word "politics" with "oppositional gender roles (or heteronormativity)" it is clear that Butler's indictment of such fear has much relevance in the case of Walker's text. For Walker's is a novel that poses "dangerous" questions about the black family and, by extension, the black community—since as Gilroy notes in this essay's epigraph, family has come to serve as the central metaphor for community and nation in black political discourse (even as that discourse has dismissed actual families and family dynamics as outside the realm of the political precisely because struggles that take place within families primarily concern women). By challenging conventional definitions of the black family, indeed, by challenging the very figure of the black patriarch, Walker challenges the very structure of the black community, inasmuch as that community is considered a kind of black patriarchal family-writ-large.

In the same essay from which the epigraph is drawn, Gilroy rails, and rightly so, against the way in which a discourse of race-as-family has repeatedly been used "to interpret the crisis of black politics and social life as a crisis of black masculinity alone" (204); he goes on to argue that "disastrous consequences [will] follow when the family supplies the only symbols of political agency we can find in the culture and the only object upon which that agency can be seen to operate" (207). While I agree with the potential dangers of this discourse, I am just as convinced that the hegemony of such discourse allows for sustained critique of both traditional family structures and the nation or community of which they are assumed to be microcosms. Rather than simply taking the family (and the gender binaries that underlie it) as a static, naturalized entity that cannot help but limit our conception of politics, it might be useful to consider how, within a culture that already takes family as the model for nation, the family itself can be redefined and in the process can unsettle
political "givens" that might otherwise remain equally fixed. In other words, by reexamining the ways that Walker's queering of the black patriarch, and disruption of oppositional gender roles within the black family, cast her as a kind of authorial "cultural infidel," scholars of her work might better understand how the rigid sexual and familial hierarchies upon which the salvific wish is based foreclose a whole host of alternative familial and national possibilities.

Notes

1. Significantly, McDowell herself notes that these hostile critics are not all men. One notable exception, for instance, is Trudier Harris, whose forceful indictment of Walker's novel I quote at length later in this essay. With this in mind, my subsequent references to a black critical furor over The Color Purple will place the qualifier "male" in parentheses.

2. Here I use the term "queering" as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines it in the introduction to her essay collection Tendencies. She asks, "What if [. . .] there were a practice of valuing the ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other?" (6) and goes on to say, of the "various elements" ascribed to the idea of "the family," that "it's been a ruling intuition for me that the most productive strategy [. . .] might be, whenever possible, to disarticulate them from one another, to disengage them—the bonds of blood, of law, of habitation, of privacy, of companionship and succor—from the lockstep of their unanimity in the system called 'family'" (6). Alice Walker, I argue, undertakes precisely this queer disarticulation and disengagement when she separates fatherhood and masculinity from patriarchy in her text.

3. See Walker, The Same River Twice, in which she chronicles the making of the film The Color Purple, and expresses some surprise at the harsh responses she received from black (male) critics.

4. It may also be true that Walker's own bisexuality and rumors that circulated about her sexual identity at the time of the book's publication (and later, the film's release) contributed to the virulence of responses to her work from some critics; for the purposes of this essay, however, I am less interested in how Walker's actual intimate attachments (or perceived desire for such attachments) fueled the controversy surrounding The Color Purple than I am in how the operation of the novel itself proved challenging to certain assumptions made by Walker's critics.
5. I understand "bigged" to mean "impregnated" here because throughout the text, "big" is used as a synonym for pregnant. For example, Harpo uses "big" to mean pregnant when he tells Celie that by impregnating Sofia he will finally get permission to marry her from her father: "She can't get out the house no other way, he say. Mr. ____ won't let us marry. Say I'm not good enough to come in his parlor. But if she big I got a right to be with her, good enough or no" (31).

6. Not coincidentally, the most conventionally feminine articulation of the salvific wish in *The Color Purple*—the Spelman-educated Corrine's misguided efforts to discipline Nettie during their sojourn in Africa—also fails to recuperate black community. Instead, Corrine's obsessive concern with respectability and with maintaining the appearance of domestic propriety (especially when she believes that propriety has in actuality been breached by a liaison between her husband and Nettie) effects a kind of intrafamilial and intraracial estrangement in the narrative. Rendered distraught by her suspicions, Corrine isolates herself more and more from her children and from Nettie, her former friend and pupil. Indeed, the narrative implies that this estrangement is the real reason for Corrine's untimely death—Nettie writes to Celie that "[Corrine] gets weaker and weaker, and unless she can believe us and start to feel something for her children, I fear we will lose her" (191). Though in her final hour Corrine does realize that her suspicions have been misguided, it is not enough to save her life: "But, Celie, in the middle of the night she woke up, turned to Samuel and said: I believe. And died anyway" (194).

7. Paradoxically, Walker has herself been accused of assuming a kind of tyrannical authority over other women's lives as a result of her activism around the issue of female clitoridectomy (the subject of her 1992 novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, as well as the book and film she produced with journalist Pratibha Parmar in 1993, *Warrior Marks*). According to some critics, Walker's zeal in condemning the practice (called "female circumcision" in sympathetic quarters, "female genital mutilation" by its most vehement opposition, including Walker) smacks a bit too much of Western condescension and even cultural imperialism. As one scholar writes of the controversy, "Walker seems 'possessed' of the pernicious notion that she can and must rescue those unfortunate women from themselves, from their ignorance, and from their patriarchal traditions" (James 1033). Although it is certainly possible (even probable) that the criticism Walker has received around this issue is a defensive response from individuals who do not wish to see the oppressive "dirty laundry" of African culture exposed to scrutiny, it also seems likely, ironically enough, that Walker's activism has more in common with the recuperative impulse of uplift ideology than even she realizes.
The Salvific Wish and Masculine Possibility in *The Color Purple*


9. In her essay, Harris notes that she collects reviews of *The Color Purple* and maintains that she has been largely unable to locate any reviews, from men or women, which criticize the novel: “Though I found and received many reviews, and some hints at criticism, there were no large-scale objections to the novel” (160). Considering the volume of text devoted to the critique and reproval of the novel only a short while later, it is clear that Harris’s essay was published at least a few months before the most virulent of Walker-related reviews began to appear. Since Harris’s essay also makes no mention of Stephen Spielberg’s film adaptation of the book, it is likely that her piece was written before that motion picture was released (not coincidentally, the time when a great number of negative reviews of both book and film appeared in print).

**Works Cited**


