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“A Girl Child Ain’t Safe in a Family of Men”:  
*The Color Purple* and Intimate Partner Violence

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#### Abstract:

This dissertation is concerned with the issue of intimate partner violence within African American community. In particular, it focuses on the changes brought about by the ascendancy of Ronald Reagan and the New Right during the eighties. To get a better sense of the impact of these changes, it focuses on Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1982). It argues that Walker's novel is a cultural text that provides a more precise understanding of gender violence. It will argue that this form of violence does not take place in isolation; quite the opposite, it has always been rooted within very specific social and cultural contexts. Although gender violence within the black community goes back to socialization processes developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, here, the focus is mainly on the changes in gender roles stirred by the cultural movements of the sixties and the seventies and, to a lesser degree, on the renegotiation of masculinity that took place during the Reagan presidency. My dissertation also considers the important role played by the feminist movement at the time. Finally, once the complex relationships between the social context and the novel are tackled, it moves on to analyze intimate partner violence in greater detail – what is actually considered domestic violence, the normalization of violence against women due to concrete socialization processes and concrete social settings – and also touches upon possible solutions as hinted at by Walker's novel, most notably the need for African American women to report intimate partner violence and the importance of the concept of sisterhood as a support network to deal with domestic violence.

#### Resumen:

Esta disertación se centra en un problema social la violencia de pareja en el ámbito doméstico dentro de la comunidad afroamericana, en particular en los cambios que conllevó el ascenso de Ronald Reagan y la *New Right* durante los años ochenta. Para ello, la novela *The Color Purple* (1982), escrita por la autora afroamericana Alice Walker, servirá como documento cultural para acercarnos al problema social de la violencia de género de una manera más precisa. Esta forma de violencia no ocurre de manera aislada, sino que se imbrica dentro de un contexto social y cultural. Por lo que se analizará los precedentes de los años sesenta y setenta en cuanto a la hipermasculinización de los movimientos de la comunidad afroamericana de esa época ya que influyeron directamente sobre la violencia en general y la violencia doméstica en particular en esta comunidad. Además, se tendrá en cuenta el importante papel de los movimientos feministas del momento en el que se publica la novela. Una vez situada esta, se abordará en profundidad el tema de la violencia domestica: qué entendemos por violencia doméstica, el papel importante que tiene la sociedad en cuanto al ejercicio de la violencia, y cómo la socialización y el ambiente puede favorecer la normalización de la violencia contra la mujer. Además, se abordarán las posibles soluciones que Walker transmite en su novela: la necesidad de denunciar dicha violencia y la importancia de la sororidad como red de apoyo para combatirla.

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“A Girl Child Ain’t Safe in a Family of Men”:  
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1. Introduction

In his autobiography, 19<sup>th</sup>-century US abolitionist Frederick Douglass describes how he once, to prevent being whipped by his white owner Edward Covey, grabbed him by the throat and kicked down those who came to assist him. Douglass had had enough and would not tolerate being treated like an animal any longer. For bell hooks (4), Douglass account of his reaction highlights how, even for African Americans, manhood has been affirmed by exerting violence since the days of slavery. Likewise, Douglass’ testimony leads hooks to observe that white men were a key force in instilling patriarchy and gender-based violence in the male African American community. For hooks, if black men are chauvinist and violent, someone must have taught them. In the stories told by male slaves, black masculinity, hooks notes, was characterized by a longing for patriarchal relationships based on the traditional idea that women are entitled to be dominated by men.

This resulted in a contradictory situation. The violence that served as the basis for the emasculation of African Americans also became the vehicle through which they affirmed their masculinity when exerted upon others. As Cole and Guy-Sheftall remark (82-83), racism emasculated black men by preventing their legitimate claims to manhood. The institution of slavery reduced the role of black men and women to being exclusively labor force. But, in the social organization of southern plantations black men also learned that the use of violence was a tool to establish and maintain power in the domestic realm. Slaveholders did not allow their slaves to establish a family. They thought nothing of selling slaves or having them shifted to a different plantation,

splitting families in the process and preventing African Americans from forging family ties. Although African-Americans managed to forge strong and durable family and kin ties within the institution of slavery, when slavery was abolished, they pursue their dream of starting the same kind of traditional nuclear family their white masters had. They tended to follow the Euro-American model, which at that time was based on the authoritative role of the father as the head of the household. Therefore, an excess of testosterone and obedience to the male head of the family also came to characterize the family life of African Americans (hooks 3; Sudarkasa 320).

In this dissertation I want to consider the ways in which the reproduction of patriarchal authority and, consequently, the use of violence against women have affected gender relations within the African American community to this day. In order to get a better understanding of this phenomenon, I will focus on how it has been addressed in black culture in general and in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1982) in particular. During the eighties, many artists focused on the problematic issues faced by African American women not only as blacks within a predominantly white society, but also as women who suffered violence within the domestic sphere. Artists like Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems, for example, investigated the construction of black feminine identity from different perspectives. However, in this dissertation I have chosen to focus on Alice Walker's most iconic work. Published in the heydays of Ronald Reagan's conservative backlash, *The Color Purple* was meant to illustrate, among other things, the importance of raising awareness about violence against women in general and against black women in particular.

Before attempting to analyze the phenomenon of domestic violence within the African American community during the eighties, several other questions need to be explained. First, I will consider notions of manhood and womanhood from a general

perspective. Since violence in the novel is rooted in the context of the traditional patriarchal family with clearly defined gender roles, I have tried to describe how this gender ideology has been implemented by African American families in their daily life. I will then shift the focus of attention to the social pressure felt by black males during the eighties for (apparently) not being manly enough. This pressure grew during that period due, first, to the impact of alternative sexualities and family models as they derived from the women and gay liberation movements of the seventies, and, secondly, to the promotion of clear-cut, strongly masculine notions of gender as derived both from the campaigns of the Reagan administration and from the strategies against racial oppression developed by black organizations. Then, I will consider the paradoxical position of African American women in this social context. What is more, due to the overlapping of racism and sexism, my suggestion is that the reality of black women at the time is best explained from the perspective of intersectionality. Both the concept of intersectionality and the implications for the understanding of the double burden imposed on African American women will also be analyzed below. My dissertation then will deal with the problem of the aggressiveness of black males towards their intimate partners by focusing on various and more concrete aspects of violence against black women within a domestic setting, namely, what is considered domestic violence, how society can shape people's attitude towards the use of violence, the importance of setting and socialization in normalizing violence against women, the need to report intimate partner violence, and how sisterhood can be essential to women in order to tackle domestic violence.

## 2. The African American Community in Reagan's America

On the very first page of *The Color Purple*, readers witness how the female protagonist is raped by her stepfather. This event serves as a starting point to the portrayal of the physical and psychological victimization of black women (Songire and Gaikwad 141-142; Garfeld xii). Thus, Walker's impulse and motivation is clearly stated in the very beginning of her novel. Throughout the narration, violence against women is exposed as a manifestation of male dominance. Walker depicts this physical violence as a common occurrence. The crude exposure to domestic violence in the narration is a mechanism to reach contemporary readers. As Srinivas (23) notes, Alice Walker, like many other women writers, decides to enter the literary scene to motivate women to fight against male domination. By portraying the world view of black women, the novel depicts vividly their struggle for surviving in a community where sexism, racism, and poverty are rampant.

According to John Fiske (in Bobo 101), the cultural subject of a text is defined as "the political being who is affected by the ideological constructions of the text." Despite the fact that the narrated events take place in the thirties, the novel was published in 1982. Therefore, it is important to understand that Walker is addressing the readers living in the eighties and, from a cultural perspective, this is more important and more urgent than seeing the novel simply as a reflection of life in the thirties that bears little or no relation with the time of novel's publication. That is, despite being set in the past, the reader from the eighties can relate the novel's meanings to their present conditions, and these meanings can empower the female reader and her social group. Therefore, it is important to have a complex knowledge of the social, political, and economic context in which the novel was received and examine how the two – the novel and the context – inform each other and provide us with a deeper or different awareness

of the forces that affected black women at the time. Only in this way can we understand the importance of this novel as a tool for exposing a problem and offering a possible solution. Thus, in this dissertation I will focus on the early years of Ronald Reagan's presidency and on the conservative reaction to the tumultuous sixties and seventies.

Ronald Reagan's 1980 campaign for the presidency of the United States brought together the many different strands of US conservatism. The seventies was a decade of confusion and frustration due to economic stagnation after a long, uninterrupted period of economic growth. Inflation and unemployment rose to levels unseen since the thirties, which resulted in a contradiction: on the one hand, upward mobility and economic advancement were still perceived as a defining feature of US society and, on the other hand, despair, hopelessness, and chronic misery were increasingly palpable (Chafe 439; Zinn 557). The widespread sense of anxiety during the seventies opened up new political opportunities for conservatives. In addition to this anxiety, the political polarization of the country, with the Christian Right throwing its weight behind the conservative agenda of the Republican candidate and the Democrats suffering the consequences of having supported "special interests" groups that were now blamed for the recession, helped Reagan win a landslide victory in the 1980 presidential elections. The main strategy of Reagan's campaign was based on espousing a mythic image of America when life was simpler and traditional values prevailed. The aim was to bring hope and optimism to white middle-class voters that felt resentment towards the social changes brought by the sixties mobilizations. As a consequence, the bastions of this modern conservatism were the suburbs (Bunch 24, 28; Chafe 461; Boyer 941; Foner 1101, 1106). From an economic perspective, the Reagan Administration focused on the so-called "trickle-down economics" (or "Reaganomics"), a theory that rested on a blind

faith on an unregulated market and, as a consequence, reduced taxes and slashed social investment.

Due to the reduction of social benefits for the poor and the lowering of taxes, which benefited mostly the wealthy, the Reagan Revolution brought changes to American society reversing a seventy-year trend toward social progress. Reagan's measures remained within the boundaries that have always characterized US conservatism: the protection of corporate wealth and power (Kleinknecht 71; Zinn 565, 573). While, from a purely ideological perspective, the blame for the economic decline of the United States fell on the social changes brought about by the progressive movements of the previous decades, from a strictly economic perspective, the blame was put on the social welfare expenditures. Therefore, Congress decided to cut more than \$25 billion from welfare programs, which most poor black families needed to support their children. To get a good sense of the impact of the recession on black communities, these figures need to be coupled with the unemployment rate. In terms of wages and jobs, the most heavily affected group were black. As to the unemployment rate, it was 20 or 30 percent for young black people during Carter's presidency, but these figures raised to 40 percent in the course of the eighties (Chafe 441-442, 473-474; Foner 1112; Zinn 570, 582).

Reaganomics hit harder an African American population that was already suffering the ghettoization and its consequences as a result of the suburban flight mentioned above. Millions of blacks experienced, to a higher or lesser degree, upward mobility during the seventies; however one third of the African American population, who inhabited inner-city slums, became more entrenched in the cycle of poverty. It is estimated that 70 percent of black poor families lived in inner cities. For these citizens, the seventies was rather "a decade of expecting virtually nothing, being taught fear and

living amidst chaos” (Chafe 442). The achievements obtained since the Civil Rights movement nurtured the self-esteem of blacks but the maladies of the urban black ghetto continued unaddressed, which produced unfulfilled expectations and frustrated hopes among the black population (Boyer 884, 903; Chafe 430-431). In inner-city ghettos, female-headed households were a common phenomenon. This was the result of a vicious cycle. On the one hand, young men living in the ghetto were not able to find jobs. On the other hand, young women needed welfare in order to support their children in the ghetto but welfare rules discriminated households where the husband was present. Therefore, black women became the head of the family, which produced a further descend into poverty. Then, the entire cycle started all over again.

Due to the deepening economic insecurity along with environmental deterioration of the inner-city, a culture of violence and family disarray grew in US society. Half of the young people living in inner-city slums never finished high school. Because of this lack of education and the minimum-wage jobs on offer, inner city residents saw drugs or crime as the only options available. Black males praised the life outside the law that selling drugs offered. Because of the racially based exploitation on the workplace, black males saw the world of crime as a way to obtain money and independence, a way to make a living while breaking with the evocations of slavery that having a white boss entailed. Moreover, the eighties was a period of self-complacency and hedonism, and jobless young people were used to watching glittering lifestyles on the television that transmitted a get-rich-quick public ethic, so drug dealing was seen as a way of accessing easy money. For those young people without secure and stable families living in squalid surroundings, drugs – and the Drug Wars of the eighties – played havoc across the country. The deprived, the unemployed, the poor, the strivers, and the professional classes, all fell into the trap of addiction, ones as consumers and

others as dealers. This national catastrophe brought an epidemic of violence (Chafe 473, 488; Boyer 884; Evans 645; Foner 1112; hooks 25; Zinn 570, 582). Zinn describes accurately the cause-effect relation that was taking place during the eighties “[a]long with poverty came broken families, family violence, street crime, drugs” (582). In very general terms, this is the social, political, and economic context within which readers received and interpreted *The Color Purple* when it was first published. Despite the fact that the novel portrays a rural society in the thirties, the state of stagnation, ghettoization, and the culture of violence of the eighties is relevant for comprehending African American women’s worldview and the reception of Walker’s novel, which went to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1983. That is, the reception of the novel was determined by all these forces. In addition, the conservative backlash of the seventies and the eighties shaped notions of gender roles, manhood, and womanhood, which influenced gender relations among African Americans.

### 3. Patriarchy, Masculinity and Black Community

Patriarchy is an ideology that subscribes to the view that women are inferior to men, and thus justifies women’s oppression in all spheres of society. This view is based on the argument that women have a special need for dependence due to their innocence and physical, mental, and moral weakness (Banks 43, 87, 227) and that men are meant to fulfill the role of guardian and protector. In *The Second Sex* (1988, originally published in 1949), Simon de Beauvoir describes the subordinate status of women in these terms: “Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him, she is not regarded as an autonomous being. He is the subject, he is the absolute – she is the other” (in Songire 35). The society portrayed in *The Color Purple* does not differ from the one described by Banks or de Beauvoir, and is based on these same patriarchal

values. This society is inevitably populated by superior and inferior beings, by controlling males and subordinated females. Both the protagonist's stepfather and her husband are embodiments of male domination, whereas the protagonist – Celie – is defined exclusively by her proscribed role as wife and mother.

Patricia H. Collins (*From Black Power to Hip Hop* 178-179) remarks that black gender ideology mirrors mainstream gender ideology due to the process of patriarchal socialization. As argued by hooks in her book *Ain't I a Woman*, black females and males strived to adapt themselves to womanhood and manhood standards set by the dominant white society (in Sinatria 1). According to the predominant gender ideology, the acceptability of men's and women's roles is based on biological difference, a difference that is in turn translated into relations of power and extrapolated to all areas of life. In addition, since the Victorian era, gender roles are shaped by a binary framework known as the doctrine of separate spheres: the private home and the public world. This general ideology has produced a society organized – or divided – in terms of gender. The private sphere is women's realm and their role is to carry out domestic and maternal tasks within the home. The public sphere, on the other hand, is men's place, where they engage in moneymaking and governing, skills that are, in turn, regarded more complicated and more important than those performed by women and, therefore, are valued higher. This ideology has constructed women and men as opposites beings belonging to separate and incompatible spheres, the domestic sphere in the case of women and the public sphere in the case of men (Banks 43, 85-86; Boyer 281, 585, 853-856; Klein 3, 56, 86). These spheres were based on bourgeois life, since middle-class and working-class women were forced to work outside their homes and were not confined to the private sphere of homemaking. Despite the fact that there was no such distinction among working women and men, Angela Davis (147) notes that the

ideal of womanhood and the cult of domesticity also became ideals to reach by the lower classes. Therefore, regardless of other deep social differences, the European-American construction of masculinity and femininity also influenced African Americans and determined the lines along which their emancipation was carried out. In Walker's *The Color Purple*, these values are portrayed from a critical perspective. The female protagonists are eventually driven to struggle for their own rights due to the prevalence of patriarchal values that turn them into passive subjects who carry out non-remunerated work, depend economically on their husbands, are not allowed to take independent decisions, and are not able to carry out certain tasks – Celie, for example, has to accept that her husband expels her sister from the house and is even forbidden to collect the mail. In fact, Makna Sinatria (2, 8, 12) notes how Walker criticizes the Black Madonna Movement, a set of values promoted by black scholars to reverse negative portrayals of black women like the mammy, the promiscuous sexual object or Jezebel, and the tragic mulatta among others. In order to uplift the image and position of black women in society, this movement encouraged them to follow the traditional codes of true womanhood. However, Celie is an embodiment of the ideal, patriarchal women whose image and social position are far from being uplifting.

During slavery, black males and females were considered property and lived in communities that did not necessarily mirror the familial behavior of their masters. Only when a black culture started to emerge in the southern plantations did blacks get together as the customary nuclear family. After the abolition of slavery, gender roles in black communities posed an added problem. Black intelligenzia claimed that gender equality was important to strengthen the social standing of the race. However, there were different perspectives among the advocates of these ideas. The common trend was the recognition of black women's role in the struggle for ending racism. But, at the

same time, the standards for community and family life promoted a subordinated position for black women following sexist norms. The traditional gender roles start with the marriage contract. It is assumed that men and women choose to be married and to remain with their partner until death, which conforms to the idealized image of traditional family life. The beginning of a women's adult life is marked by marriage since it is the first step towards motherhood. The problem of this ideal – and patriarchal – family life was that it entailed the willingness of black women to be dominated by their black counterparts. After being freed, many black women also wanted to free themselves from traditional gender roles precisely at a time when the idea of men as protector and women as dependent was taking deeper roots in society (hooks 7; Klein 69, 106). Therefore, within the black community, a tension emerged between the advocates of encouraging and supporting black manhood by all means, including the subordination of black women, and the advocates of the promotion of black manhood without undermining the rights and aspirations of black women.

The biological explanations for women's roles were challenged by those who supported that roles are socially determined. This required a rejection of biological explanations in order to accept the inherent equality between men and women. This step towards a more egalitarian vision of gender was backlashed during the seventies and the eighties rise of conservatism. The emphasis on family togetherness renewed the ideal of domesticity and, as a consequence, redefined the role of women along the lines of an idealized version of the fifties when family was seen as a bastion of stability after the emotional insecurity suffered during World War II (as opposed to the advances in women's rights achieved in during the sixties and seventies). This return to traditional, patriarchal notions of the family also influenced the African American community (hooks 85-86; Mansley 6; Miller 121; Gardfield 57). According to the basics of

hegemonic masculinity, men need to fulfill the specific role of provider for their family's material well-being. Therefore, masculinity is defined by "the ability to earn a living and thus support a family" (Mansley 14). But there were structural restrictions to the accomplishment of these patriarchal objectives in the disadvantaged urban communities where most of the African American population lived during the eighties. Many black males were prevented from being responsible in the patriarchal sense of the term due to poverty and lack of job opportunities. Thus, black males were encouraged to construct their conventional masculine identity through the use of violence in the space where they did have privileges as males, that is, their own household.

During the Civil Rights Movement, aggressive, black masculinity was used as a response to white racism in United States. This idea was mainly defended by black organizations that emphasized Black Power and claimed that black males need to cease subjugating themselves to whiteness in order to be respected in the society. The emphasis on physicality and manhood has been regarded as a consequence of the lack of masculinity and social power during most of US history due to slavery first and segregation later. The new idea of black masculinity constructed by black activism endorsed aggressive machismo, that is, a strong, virile, heterosexual man. The rest of African Americans, who did not fit into that concept, were classified as passive, feminized subjects. This transformed the problem of race into one of gender and sexuality. Ironically, this masculinity did not use violence on white men but displaced it to black women and others who had less power. Therefore, this new model of black manhood depended on the subjugation of those who were already oppressed. In general, it defined itself through the objectification of women and queer men. Cole and Guy Sheftall (203) argue that black women are the target of black men violence since they are considered accessible and vulnerable. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that,

despite the sexist views of many black activists, powerful militant women like Kathleen Cleaver, Ericka Huggins, and Elaine Brown were essential for the development of black organizations. Even the female membership in organizations like the Black Panther Party reached sixty percent by the early seventies (Seither 1-2; Spencer 94-100). Despite the role of these women against sexism, it is the black misogyny of the time that Walker makes use of as the basis for her novel. During the eighties, an idealization of the fifties traditional family life was being promoted by mass media and Walker's depiction of ideal womanhood and the cult of domesticity in *The Color Purple* can be read as a critique of this way of life because these concepts are based on patriarchal values that undermine black women's aspirations and rights in modern society. In fact, female characters, like Shug Avery, who do not conform to patriarchal gender roles are the ones who empower and encourage Celie to stand up against the unfair treatment she receives. The introduction of this powerful female character and the strong female bond that develops between Shug and Celie runs parallel to the movements of the eighties because African American women were starting to organize themselves in order to address common issues such as the high rate of domestic violence in their communities.

#### 4. Domestic Violence and *The Color Purple*

Throughout the history of black America, race and gender have overlapped. In the debate over the Fifteenth Amendment, Frances E. W. Harper supported Frederick Douglass' view that racial issues should take priority over gender ones, whereas Sojourner Truth supported white suffragists and their demands for greater gender equality. In this equation, black women have always found themselves caught between the gender question and the race problem. In order to understand how gender relations among the characters of *The Color Purple* were interpreted by African American

women readers, the tension between being black and being a woman needs to be considered. According to Collins and Bilge (3-4), the complex reality of African American women can be best understood from the perspective of intersectionality, because they have to confront sexism and racism – as well as heterosexism and class exploitation – and these cannot be properly understood when seen isolated. These intersecting systems of oppression are not fully acknowledged by Western feminism or Black Nationalism. The perspectives of these ideologies are always partial because they are based on gender- and race-specific paradigms, respectively. Therefore, modern Black Feminism was founded due to the limitations that acknowledging racism and sexism under the same ideology entailed.

On the one hand, Western feminism's principal aim is to challenge the public-private binary that relegates women to the private sphere. Taigi Smith notes that many African American women shared the feeling that the women's movement focused on liberating “themselves from housework and childcare, while women of color got stuck cleaning their kitchens and raising their babies” (in Collins *From Black Power to Hip Hop* 177). Even though African American women do support issues that are essential for the global feminist agenda – good-job accessibility and equal pay; policies against sexual and domestic violence; reproductive rights; equal schooling opportunities; adequate family policies; and social benefits for poor women – many of them usually reject the term “feminism” (Collins *From Black Power to Hip Hop* 138). In the US context, women's political activism is affected by race, class, and nation and, as a result, the focus of attention is different, for example, for African American and White American women, affluent Americans and working-class or poor Americans, American women and non-American women.

On the other hand, mainstream black political thought was characterized by its blindness to gender concerns. The United States tend to be described as populated by “un-raced White *individuals*” and “raced Black *groups*” (Collins *From Black Power to Hip Hop* 179). This racial classification originated during the era of slavery when Black people were considered property rather than human beings. Being considered part of a group resulted in negative perceptions for African American women's struggle. As part of the African American community, these women are encouraged to subordinate their needs as individuals to the perceived needs of the group they belong to. A black woman was expected to choose “between the well-being of her race and her own needs as a woman” (Cole and Guy-Sheftall 73). Moreover, during the Civil Rights movement, the black agenda failed to distance itself from the traditional gender roles advocated by the dominant white culture. The Black Power movement was mainly centered on the achievement of black male empowerment. A good illustration of the position of African American women within the Black liberation struggle is the fact that black women were not allowed to speak at the March on Washington in 1963. During the event, women activists like Rosa Parks were presented but they were not allowed to speak or march in the vanguard. Many cultural nationalists embraced gender notions based on a biological natural order that emphasizes male supremacy. In addition, some black activists regarded the Women’s Liberation movement as an exclusively white women’s movement, which distanced black women from eradicating racial oppression (Cole and Guy-Sheftall 74, 79-80, 84-85; Collins 180-181).

As a consequence, modern Black feminism is characterized by being a fusion between Black solidarity – centered on race and class – and American feminism – centered on gender and sexuality –. In the first issue of *The Black Scholar*, Linda La Rue stressed the irrelevance of the white women’s liberation movement to black women

as well as the unsatisfactory approach to male-female relationships by the Black liberation movement. In mid-sixties, a Black feminist discourse and separate Black feminist organizations emerged. This split of Black feminism from Black nationalism was seen as a disloyalty to the race and hostility between black men and women increased (Cole and Guy-Sheftall 84, 90-96; Collins 24). African American women readers of *The Color Purple* were living with the consequences of this clash of interests between Black solidarity and US feminism that triggered the emergence of Black feminist organizations. Thus, Walker, both an African American *and* a woman, uses her literary work as an ideological tool to draw attention to the social issues that affected black women.

In her novel, Alice Walker exposes the violence against women in US society. The novel portrays African American women's struggle and tells a story of women's victory over male domination. By depicting the oppression of black women, the author manages to reach out to women in general, because the female characters represent the microcosm of oppression in the vast macrocosm of women's patriarchal subjugation and repression (Namhata 2; Srinivas 23-24). In 1982, Walker was concerned about women and felt the need to tell the world about the violent events occurred within intimate environments through a novel that focuses on sexual violence. The interest in domestic violence increased as a result of the seventies feminist activism. This issue shifted from being virtually neglected to becoming a significant social concern. The foundations for the discourse on violence against women within their own domestic sphere were established by the movement against sexual violence and rape of the seventies. This movement brought to the fore the issue of male power, control, and domination. There were different ideological and political stances among anti-violence advocates, but they saw men's strategies for imposing their will on women as the main

concept to understand the causes and the nature of violence against women. During mid-seventies, a nationwide campaign was launched to expose domestic violence against women. As a result, coalitions against sexual assaults and domestic violence, battered women's shelters, and counseling programs started to emerge (Garfield 1; NCDSV 1-2; NLM). The appearance of Walker's novel in the eighties coincided with an increase in domestic violence awareness. Therefore, *The Color Purple* can be regarded as an important cultural object to arise consciousness about this issue.

Violence against women is a general concept that includes domestic violence, spousal abuse, family violence, battering, and sexual assault. Intimates and close relatives are more likely to commit acts of violence against women than strangers. According to the American Medical Association (in Campbell et al.), "one in every three women in [the United States] can expect to be beaten by a male partner at some time during their adult life." In fact, each year in the United States nearly 5.3 million incidents of intimate partner violence occur, and between 1.8 and 3.6 million women are severely assaulted by their intimate partners (Mansley 2). The term intimate partner violence is used to refer to emotional abuse, intimidations, sexual abuse and economic coercion between current or former spouses or partners. For feminist scholars, this sexual violence or sexual abuse is conceptualized on a range of forms from normative heterosexual acts to rape. In *The Color Purple*, readers are witnesses to two types of sexual violence: sexual coercion – when an intercourse is obtained through verbal or emotional pressure – and sexual assault – when an intercourse is achieved by force or threat – (Garfield xii; Mansley 1; Miller 120-123). The beginning of the novel starts with the description of the sexual assault of Celie, the protagonist of the novel, by an adult black male, his stepfather (Walker 1):

First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he pushes his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it.

Since Celie does not consent to the sexual intercourse described here, this is considered an act of sexual violence. Here, the adult uses a verbal threat while making use of his greater strength as an adult to achieve his objective, obtaining sexual pleasure. This early sexual victimization suffered by Celie has consequences in her later sexual life (77): “Most times I pretend I ain’t there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep.” Her early experiences with her body have triggered a sense of dispossession with her body. Through this description of the sexual intercourses between Celie and her husband, the reader can appreciate that the sexual act is not produced by a mutual will but by sexual coercion. Due to the emotional pressure of traditional gender roles and the early victimization, Celie believes that she has the obligation of providing pleasure for her husband. Thus, her body becomes a place for repeated sexual and physical assaults.

Leaving aside the bias that marks the figures regarding the use of violence by African Americans males, it seems they tend to have higher rates of both overall violence and severe violence against their partners than any other race. This results in higher rates of African American females that experience intimate partner violence, a rate 35% higher than that of white females (Bureau of Justice 2001 in WOCN; Mansley 2). Robert J. Sampsons affirms that any concept suffers a cultural adaptation as a response to the structural condition in which persons find themselves (Miller 46). In the case of black men, violence in general and violence towards black women in particular, their social atmosphere needs to be considered in regard to the persistent use of aggressiveness in their daily life. hooks (57) describes the situation as a result of the tension between being socialized to assert manhood through domination and control and

the obstacles to acquire “socially acceptable positions of power and dominance” motivated by the political system. As sociologist Karen Franklin hypothesizes (in Miller 135), men can experience powerlessness because of age, economic class, and/or race, but they always maintain relative superiority because of their gender in societies based on patriarchal values. Men’s use of violence against an intimate partner is an expression of power. Therefore, the choice to use violence against women is an attempt to demonstrate their power by assuming a male prerogative in the home, which can be exacerbated by men’s differing access to power based on race and class (Mansley 75; Garfield 60). In the eighties, when Walker’s novel was published, miseducation and unemployment produced a “chronic frustration syndrome” among black males, who adopted roles of manhood through which the use of violence is condoned to resolve conflicts. Many young black men felt resentment, hostility, and disdain towards the police and the system because of the social situation in inner-cities and used socially unacceptable channels – domestic violence among them – to assert their patriarchal manhood. Therefore, intimate partner violence was a current social issue when *The Color Purple* was released. This highlights the ideological aim behind Walker’s novel: to bring to the fore to what extent violence against women had become a social malady in need of adequate attention by the citizenship.

In the essay “The Negro Woman in the Quest for Equality,” published in 1964, Pauli Murray wrote for the first time publicly about black male aggressiveness towards black women. In the black community, the essence of patriarchal masculinity is gangsta culture. Gangsta culture is defined in terms of Social Darwinism where only the predator has any chance to survive. The survival is based on strength rather than “thinking,” which is portrayed as non-valuable labor. This form of socialization is rooted in the idea that “real men are all body and no mind” (hooks 40). This promotion

of corporeality is coupled by a masculine street code that regards sexual conquest as a way to demonstrate respect, interpersonal violence, and heterosexual prowess. These concepts work as a basis for young men's constructions of masculine identity, which increases young women's risk for victimization (Cole and Guy-Sheftall 88; hooks 27; Miller 184, 188). The black male aggressiveness the novel brings out relied as much on patriarchal masculinity as on gangsta culture during the eighties. In their quest for gender equality, black female readers might see themselves reflected in the character of Celie because it is more than probable that many shared the same struggles as a consequence of sexual victimization.

In many African American inner-city neighborhoods, violence is strongly tied to black masculinity due to the presence of gang violence. A young African American interviewed by Miller summarizes the situation faced in the neighborhood with this statement: "females get raped, males get killed" (48). The impact of witnessing systematic violence at a young age is related to increased aggressive behavior. Adolescence is a vital transition from childhood to adulthood, the period when teenagers cement their gender identities. Thus, black boys are socialized in a climate where it becomes very difficult to grow into men who refuse to use violence against others (Collins *Black Sexual Politics* 151, 241; Oeur 9; Mansley 54-6; Miller 47, 149). By being exposed to multiple forms of violence, there is a tendency to give the same significance to all forms of violence. Due to the systematic exposure to violence in the neighborhoods and at home, black adolescents are at risk of normalizing the use of violence within the contexts of intimate relationships. In *The Color Purple*, domestic violence is described as a common occurrence. This normalization of the social malady can be read as a critique of how a society where violence is used in multiple forms and

situations leads to the acceptance of intimate partner violence as something unavoidable.

In this respect, the patriarchal socialization that takes place in familial life can strengthen or raise questions in young blacks' minds. In contexts where violence is endemic, the role models that adolescents find at home can be very decisive in their future relations with other persons. Despite the constant use of violence by the head of the family to exert his power and control over his children and wife in *The Color Purple*, readers can perceive a generational clash in the acceptance of intimate partner violence between Harpo – Celie's stepson – and his father. This raises the possibility of a change in future generations. Harpo's wife, Sofia, is portrayed as an antagonist of Celie (35): "I tell her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. Always backtalk." Because Sofia is not a submissive woman, Harpo thinks that she is not fulfilling the role of mother and wife adequately. Therefore, he asks his father for advice to dominate her. At first, Harpo is not willing to use violence in his marriage. Nevertheless, Harpo resorts to violence because his father teaches him that violence is the only means to teach a wife proper respect for her husband (35): "Well how you spect to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let'em know who got the upperhand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating." According to the paternal figure of the story, beating a wife is a respectable thing for a husband to do (Pillai 133). American culture has tended to present the father as a disciplinary figure whose main task is to exert a steady influence and a source of strict control. Therefore, the fact that Harpo's father is the supporter of the use of violence highlights the influence that parent's behavior can have on their children (Mansley 62). In inner-city neighborhoods where most of the households are characterized by an absent father, this influence is carried out by interactions among peers. In gangsta culture, it is normal to find an

informal peer support for abusive behavior, which includes a promotion of violence against women (Mansley 34). Moreover, the female figure in Harpo's family, Celie, confirms for Harpo that violence is the only way to handle the situation (36): "Beat her. I say." Celie's reaction is linked with her passivity in accepting the violence and abuse faced during her life as something unavoidable. She suffered her father's objectification as a filial obligation and her husband's objectification as a wifely obligation (Papadopoulou 4-5).

The direct approach to sexual violence and intimate partner violence by Walker in *The Color Purple* is related to the need to express one's own suffering. Culturally, woman battering was regarded as a "private matter." There was reluctance on the part of the police and medical practitioners to intervene into "matters between a husband and his wife" (NLM). Moreover, the cult of true womanhood supports self-denying and suffering in silence in regard to any kind of grief, intimate partner violence included, since the family's well-being is seen as more important than women's own individual safety (Mansley 33). Therefore, Celie's muting is a signal of her decision to submit to the beatings (42): "he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say Heaven last all ways." Silence is a common response towards violence in African American communities. When it comes to intimate partner violence, African Americans are less likely than their white counterparts to report these instances of domestic violence to criminal justice agencies (Mansley 2). This decision is usually influenced by racial solidarity. This racial ideology claims that the report of some kind of victimization to the authorities is an act of betrayal to the race. There is a need for reserving the good image of African American families. Therefore, African American women have to face a unique pressure to continue to endure the abuse in order to be loyal to the race (Mansley 15, 28). This makes the situation even more intricate, because

sufferers do not explicitly inform of their sorrow and outsiders are not willing to help. Although many incidents involving violence take place in the public eye, few interventions are followed due to the distrust of the system, slow or poor police response, and neighborhood norms or “street code” that require neighbors to have a mind-your-own-business attitude (Miller 58). Therefore, Walker’s exposure of Celie’s suffering can be regarded as an attempt to empower other battered women to express their suffering without having in mind either the loyalty to the race endorsed by racial solidarity’s ideas or the “street code” of inner-city neighborhoods.

Since slavery, the social conditions of African Americans have fostered networks of solidarity. However, from the perspective of gender relations and gender violence, this racial solidarity has not always had positive consequences. As an intersectional approach reveals, black women feel trapped and voiceless in order to be loyal to the plight of the black community as a whole. The novel draws attention to this situation. In fact, *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel that starts when Celie needs to communicate her suffering because she is threatened by her stepfather to remain silent (1): “You better not never tell nobody but God.” The breaking of this silence is a turning point in the novel. Celie manages to articulate her suffering by describing her victimization to a friend, Shug Avery. In this way, Walker also stresses the importance of female bonding because the novel rests, from a thematic perspective, on sisterhood: the relationship between the two women brings about Celie’s personal growth as an individual. In the relationship between Celie and Shug, the latter is a vehicle of female consciousness and empowerment. Thanks to this strong female bonding, Celie gains psychological strength to express and denounce the violence she is suffering (Songire 129). The female characters in *The Color Purple* become independent and liberated women after undergoing a series of changes in their attitude towards male domination.

In doing so, co-operation among these women is highlighted for becoming independent psychologically, spiritually, and economically (Srinivas 28). In her essay “Race, Class and Gender,” Bonnie Thornton Dill says: “The concept of sisterhood has been an important unifying force in the contemporary women’s movement [...] this concept has been a binding force in the struggle against male chauvinism and patriarchy.” (in Thomas 247-248). Thus, the stress put on sisterhood by Alice Walker as a source of security, hope, and relief for battered women goes hand in hand with the feminist agendas of the time. Therefore, Walker’s novel can be regarded as an ideological strategy within the eighties context. By bringing female bonding to the fore, the author stressed the need to communicate each other’s sorrow in order to deal with intimate partner violence. During the eighties, the social, economic, and political context of African Americans in the inner-city neighborhoods favored the rise of violence, including domestic violence against women. Despite the dim prospects for African Americans, the high rate of women’s victimization was not justified for Walker, who decided to use domestic violence as a central theme in her most popular novel.

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, violence against women is a current problem in our society. Since literature allows writers to expose everyday concerns, Alice Walker uses her literature as an ideological weapon to deal with women’s issues such as domestic violence in *The Color Purple*. The focus of attention is on the incidence of intimate partner violence, the feelings of sorrow it produces on the victims, the urgent need to express that sorrow, and how communication might be a tool to empower the victims. Being in a relationship is a complex situation where several factors determine the nature of that interaction. In the case of relationships conformed by an African American man and an African

American woman in the United States, racism and sexism come to the fore. These forces create intersecting systems of oppression that African American women need to confront. In this dissertation, I have chosen to approach these complex issues from the perspective of intersectionality because it helps us to understand why certain social issues, such as domestic violence, can affect African American women in a different way. As I have shown, within the African American community, masculinity in general and the persistent aggressiveness within the family in particular are rooted in the specific history of blacks from slavery to freedom to equality. The hypermasculinity promoted by black organizations during the sixties and seventies, added to the crisis that ravaged most of African American communities during the Reagan years, lead to an endemic use of violence in the inner-city ghettos populated by black citizens. Nevertheless, the constant violent activities also fostered the emergence of anti-violence movement, whose principal aim was to solve violence against women. Thanks to these organizations, women in general launched campaigns to expose domestic violence against women and increased the awareness of this issue. In addition, I have analyzed Walker's novel from a cultural perspective, linking fiction and reality, with the objective of gaining a more complex understanding of these problems. I have demonstrated that, by reading the novel and engaging with Celie's problems, readers got a powerful knowledge about domestic violence that resonated with their experiences during the Reagan presidency. The meaning of fiction lies not only on the text but on the context of the reader and the cultural forces within which the story acquires significance. By taking into account the context within which *The Color Purple* was published, the story draws attention to the complex nature of domestic violence within the African American community and how necessary it is to get involved in the movement against intimate partner violence. As feminist black scholars like Angela

Davis and bell hooks have highlighted, fiction was an essential vehicle for the feminist agenda. Authors like Alice Walker had great success in the United States, and with success came a great impact among the general public. Thus, Walker's decision to address domestic violence may have had great influence on readers and may have raised awareness about the complexity of intimate partner violence for African American women.

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