

## THE FEMALE SIGNS IN CELIE'S DISCOURSES OF DESIRE: A PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the subjective modes of representation of the protagonist in *The Color Purple*. It revises the ways how Celie constructs, through diverse personal and communal experiences, her own identity. This construction is possible in virtue of her desire that examines her body and the capacity to transform her own world. This article also shows the ways in which love, oppression, and lack fuse one another in order to build up an authentic female desire in a universe of men. Hence, Celie becomes a text for she engraves in herself several paradigms in relation to her body and her capacity to "see" beyond the restrictive world that surrounds her. This cathartic process demonstrates how the protagonist moves from the paralysis of being an object to the plenitude of being a subject.

**Key Words:** Desire, Lack, Repression, Subjectivity, Body, Scopic Drive.

### RESUMEN

Este artículo explora los modos subjetivos de representación de la protagonista de *El color púrpura*. Revisa las maneras en las que Celie construye, a través de diversas experiencias personales y comunitarias, su propia identidad. Esta construcción es posible en virtud de su deseo que examina su propio cuerpo y la capacidad de transformar su propio mundo. Este artículo muestra las maneras en las cuales el amor, la opresión y la falta se fusionan unos con otros para construir un deseo femenino auténtico en un universo solo de hombres. De esta manera, Celie deviene en un texto porque ella inscribe en sí misma una serie de máximas en relación con su cuerpo y su capacidad de "ver" más allá del mundo restringido que la acorrala. Este proceso catártico demuestra cómo la protagonista se traslada de la parálisis de ser un objeto a la plenitud de ser un sujeto.

**Palabras clave:** Deseo, falta, represión, subjetividad, cuerpo, pulsión escópica.

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker narrates Celie's story within the framework of a paternal injunction of silence that defines the whole storytelling: "*You better not never tell nobody but God*" (CP 1)<sup>1</sup>. That is why, the story of Celie is a text about recovering desire and breaking silences even though there is a sense of hearing unmediated "voices." Confined to a turmoil of racist and (hetero)sexist oppressions, Celie struggles to gain linguistic self-definition in a world of disrupted signs and to recover

her positionality within the enterprise of desire which had been repressed for so long. As that marginalized heroine, Celie is "imprisoned, alienated, sexually abused, and driven into semiotic collapse" (Castle 182). Walker's novel thus subverts conventional plot structures and the traditional concept of author by rewriting Celie's story in terms of seduction, desire, and demand within a female framework. These are the discourses of desire present in the novel which can be foreseen not only in Celie's writing

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Recepción: 23/4/07 - Aceptación: 30/4/07

itself, but also in the characters' development, especially in terms of Celie's subjectivity and identity formation.

### 1. Celie's Subjectivity: Body as Desire

The Color Purple deals with the cathartic process of subjectivization Celie goes through while she enters in the discourse of her own desire. Language and desire overlap in the novel to (re)construct the protagonist's subjectivity. Nevertheless, language appears before desire: Celie--the subject, her spirit, the darkness in which this spirit reveals itself, alienation, silence, and finally, the flesh and touch that abrogates--all of them are presented as being prior to language in Celie's story. The Color Purple depicts the solipsism of the protagonist's subjectivity, identity, and (un)-consciousness, the importance of language, the search for linguistic self-definition, and the insatiability of and the entrance to desire. For psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, desire lies in the gap between demands made in speech and the needs of the body; since those needs are unarticulated because they depend upon the restrictions of the Other, they can be said to precede language. Walker's novel can thus be read as an analytical examination of female subjectivity and unconsciousness in terms of repressed yet insatiable female desire.

Lacan's contribution to the particular issue of identity and subject<sup>2</sup> formation is initially given by the emphasis to the function and representation of the "lack of the object." His concept of the lack is engendered by the subject alienation in the Other. Lacan mentions that a lack also results from the fact that the subject depends on the "signifier," and that that signifier is, above all, in the context of the Other: for instance, the child cannot speak, but his/her parents can. In the case of The Color Purple, Celie, like a child, is silenced and confined to paralysis under the admonition of "never" talking. Others speak but Celie is constrained to the closure of her letters and the solitude of her experiences. In a poignant parallelism, for Lacan, the signifier dominates

the subject whereas the subject is constituted as secondary in relation to the signifier. The others, especially men, presume the signifying material on Celie so that she "functions" in this world by means of the impositions exerted by the others. Celie writes, "Harpo ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ say, Cause she my wife. All women good for--he don't finish. He just tuck his chin over the paper like he do. Remind me of Pa" (CP 25). At the beginning, she cannot create her own signifiers yet she is confined to assume the others'. The "laws" of the signifier hence impose themselves on the subject.

In the first letters of The Color Purple, Celie is clearly experiencing Lacan's Mirror Stage in which she is seen herself as a fragmented bodily unity. Celie cries out, "my body [. . .] my heart is broke" (CP 256). Likewise, in these scenes, she discovers her world as she identifies herself with images of the Imaginary order: nature, her sister, and God. The Imaginary order or register stands for the preoedipal phase of bodily pleasures and sensations in the form of images and preverbal communication. Celie accepts a reconceptualization of the power of God when Shug asserts that "my first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet [. . .] it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all" (CP 205). Finally, in approaching the end of the novel, Celie experiences a reconstruction of her female identity by accepting the reality of the Law-of-the-Father in the Oedipal stage. In the assumption of gender, she "takes her through recognition that the paternal signifier, the Phallus, lies only in the Other and that she herself comes at last under the authority of her father as the representative of Law" (Mellard 71). Each of these identity situations constitutes the formation of the Lacanian subject. Indeed, Celie experiences herself through the images of the Mirror Stage, the identity choices of her subjective formation, and finally, the impressions of the impositions of the Other placed at the level of the Name-of-the-Father; psychoanalytical concepts thoroughly explained thereafter.

The enterprise of desire starts at the level of the Imaginary realm of the unconscious. It is true that desire must be defined in relation to its object; however, it is not a simple relation between such desire and an object that will satisfy it, but instead, desire is linked in a complicated transaction with the desire of the Other. According to the Lacanian theory of the Subject, it is at the imaginary stage that the child starts to construct his/her own identity based upon the context of the Other which structures the unconscious. The concept of Other is clear when we come to the notion of Lacan's *Mirror Stage*. Before the mirror stage, the child perceives him/herself like an amorphous mass or a fragmented body. When entering into the mirror stage, the child fuses him/herself with the reflections of what s/he sees: s/he sees him/herself in the others. As we can see ourselves in the reflection given by a tangible mirror, the child starts to constitute him/herself as self, as a totality, when s/he sees him/herself reflected in metaphorical mirrors, represented by the people s/he is in contact with. Celie reflects her own identity in the metaphorical mirrors of other women as comparing herself with the lack of the alienated other: "Us sleep like sisters, me and Shug. Much as I still want to be with her, much as I love to look" (CP 154). Therefore, the identity Celie starts to create of herself results in a fiction based upon "*méconnaissance*," that is, an erroneous acceptance of herself because she internalizes external images as reflections of her own self. Hence, the child described by Lacan is a decentralized and alienated subject whose constitution lies at an external domain. The imaginary text, like Celie's letters which are written but not read, are then, by definition, inscriptions of characters immersed in a unidimensional mirrored text which constitute relations of agreement and correspondence.

The constitution of Celie's subjectivity then takes place along two important moments: first, through the Imaginary phase of the Mirror stage, and second, in the acceptance of the Law-of-the-Father to whose Name she has deposited her subjectivity. The problem so far is that Celie is confined to silence. She has been forced to reside in a wordless setting. She has no voice; the

only access to language is by means of writing letters which allow the intrusion of the father who initially impeded her possibility to speak. Indeed, the letters represent a paternal metaphor in which, for Lacan, "the metaphor [. . .] substitutes this Name in the place first symbolized by the operation of the absence of the mother" (*Écrits* 200). It is precisely in the absence of the mother and later her death, when Celie starts her identificatory process. As her mother, she is *absent* from the realm of language, and she has *died* to the enterprise of desire and her self-realization. Celie has realized that the place of knowledge (language) does not belong to her. This setting of knowledge is in the place of the Other (the father). As Lacan wrote, "it is in so far as his desire is beyond or falls short of what she (the mother) hints at, of what she brings out as meaning, it is in so far as his desire is unknown, it is in this point of lack, that the desire of the subject is constituted" (*Écrits* 218). In this respect, we can say that Celie is always in search of (desire for) a mother, a mother who had died because of an omen predicted in the opening prohibition of the novel: Do not talk, Celie, because speaking will kill your mammy. In fact, her mother died days after she started writing her first letters to God. Therefore, the story of Celie presupposes that a "powerful" husband/father dominates her and a weak, dead, and/or absent mother pervades her life. Celie's life experiences have defined her in her relations to the ego, the (m)other and the Other who suppresses her to the point of muteness, all in the context of the Law and the Name-of-the-Father as identificatory processes of the Mirror stage.

Through the acceptance of the authority of the father as the paramount Oedipal goal, the child inevitably first focuses upon the mother as his/her first reference to the outer world. This is exactly the entrance to the mirror stage. Because Celie is expelled from the realm of language and hindered from self-realization, she is an accurate character who easily exemplifies those Lacanian principles. The first image for the construction of the subject is situated in the unsignifiable image of the mother's body which also represents the unconscious. Here, the mother has a scopic

dimension linking the child's experiences to other objects (of desire). With the appropriation of the vision, the infant will start the recognition of others, and his/her desire is now displaced to other objects. By a metonymic process, the primal object of Celie's desire (her mother, both literally and metaphorically dead) is left behind to open the possibilities to other objects. Nevertheless, this desire will inevitably reside in the Other. Celie assumes her desire for an other symbolically accepting the picture of Shug's: "I ast her to give me the picture. An all night long I stare at it. An now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery" (CP 9). The quest for appropriation of desire turns impossible since it is always in the place of the Other. However, the aim of "feminist" psychoanalysis consists on deconstructing the hegemony of the phallus and turning desire into the site of reappropriated objects.

According to Lacan, the signifying image representing the interrelation between the mother and the child is usually the maternal breast. In Celie's case, however, the image of her mother's breast is missing since her mother is also a silent, effaced object by the imposition of the Law of the Father. In opposition, the identity of her mother is first translated to her own motherhood: "I haul up my dress and look at my titties. Think bout my babies sucking them" (CP 82) and "I got breasts full of milk running down myself. He say Why don't you look decent? Put on something. But why I'm sposed to put on? I don't have nothing" (CP 4). Likewise, Shug Avery represents the imago of the lost, dead mother: "Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my mama" (CP 7). Celie also writes, "I work on her like she a doll or like she Olivia--or like she mama" (CP 57). Metonymically, Shug's breasts stand for the breasts of the first object: the (m)other herself. Shug Avery becomes the object of Celie's fantasy because she (Shug) stands for the lost breast of her mother that is also the cause of her desire. Nevertheless, the object of fantasy and desire (Shug) leads to ambiguity as Lacan may point out. The desire for the object may never fulfill the satisfaction of the unconscious drives. On one hand, the drives motivate the behavior of the

subject initially, turning her acts into psychological satisfaction. On the other hand, the subject realizes the object does not belong to her whatsoever so she is led to alienation and inconformity. Contradictory feelings, as a differentiation, overlap in the process of the constitution and formation of Celie as a (Lacanian) subject.

In fact, the image of appropriation stands in for the mother or a representation of her. However, the child moves through the passage of the mirror stage which, also, brings out the first outsets of differentiation. At this stage, the infant develops antagonic relations to his/her mother and, consequently, to the images or symbols representing the mother. This ambivalence is also depicted in Celie's behavior towards Shug. Through the image of Shug as the object of the Imaginary identification, Celie also attacks this loving image of her beloved: "By the time she finish talking about his neat little dancing feet and git back up to his honey brown curly hair, I feel like shit. Hold it, I say. Shug, you killing me. But I hurt you more" (CP 255). In this ambivalent process of identification, Celie develops an awareness of *Otherness* between the mother (Shug) and herself directed as aggression. This object of love is then turned into an object of attack that may come to reconcile the antagonism between both registers: the Imaginary (Celie *possessing* Shug) and the Symbolic (Celie *attacking* Shug). Celie's text is also ambivalent not only because of this point of aggressiveness but also because the Imaginary stress is placed on the mother's as well as on the father's. Nevertheless, this register of paternity, in Celie's case, is directed in the dimension of the Imaginary, not in the Symbolic as analyzed previously.

The dimension of the Imaginary order is specifically placed onto Celie's mental image of God--the imaginary father. Later on in the text of *The Color Purple*, the signifying meaning she gives to God dramatically changes by the discussion she has with Shug, the desired (m)other. By the end of the novel, God is not the protective father she was looking for. This "father" lies somewhere else: "The God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens. I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown"

(CP 199). Celie's changing attitude to the image of God as the "phallic" father is an important aspect of her emancipation and the formation of her own subjectivity. Indeed, the fact that the God she knows is white and male strikes her to the point of revelation: she feels just as forsaken by this old gray-bearded man with blue eyes as she does by all the other men in her life. Both the imaginary and the symbolic fathers are definitely fundamental for the (re)construction of her identity. Eventually, Celie will figure out that her imaginary father (God) and the symbolic one (Alphonso) are linked and fused to determine her desire for other men.

It is precisely in the Imaginary register that Celie finds a space in which she becomes author of her own self without the impositions of either father. This is structured in the same way the Lacanian child starts to form an identity based on mimesis and assimilation of a scopic image. The process of "subjectivization," that is, the construction of the self as subject, starts with the corporeal image of an autonomous and unified ego that discards the previous fragmentation perceived by the individual of the Mirror stage. As depicted in the scene of the protagonist's exploration of her intimacy, for Celie, the affirmation of her existence precisely stems from the valorization and esteem of her own body:

I lie back on the bed and haul up my dress. Yank down my bloomers. Stick the looking glass tween my legs. Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose. [. . .] It a lot prettier than you thought, ain't it? she say from the door. *It mine, I say.* (italics mine, CP 82)

Indeed, the estimation of her body serves as a basis for Celie's self-valorization. Thus, the experience of a scopic self-discovery brought up by Shug serves as a source to provide the protagonist the possibility for autonomy and self-appropriation—one of the most important scenes in Celie's process of subjectivization.

Definitely, Celie's story is the herstory<sup>3</sup> of that initially fragmented subject. Walker's representation of Celie is the real normative Lacanian subject entailed through the mirror stage, the appropriation of gender and sexuality,

and finally, the resolution of the Oedipus complex assuming the "Law" by the position of the Name-of-the-Father. Alice Walker starts her novel whereas Celie starts her identifiable journey of the subject at the imaginary and symbolic *infans* stage. For Lacan, the *infans* stage refers to the out-of-speech moments; moments in which the access to language is absolutely denied. In fact, Celie starts her story forcefully silenced by a sentence of death (by her father). At the opening of the novel, Celie is incapable of uttering a word. From the very first moment, she is paralyzed to the point of total muteness. Hence, her discourse, at this point, will be exerted by writing letters to the Unknown and by effacing visual and auditory stimuli.

In a painful but rewarding journey, Celie goes through the complex layers of the reappropriated female subject formation. In order to construct herself as a subject, Celie first had to undo the reflection coming from men, shown as absence or lack. Now she can create another reflection or identifying image woven in the imaginary order and inscribed in her psyche. Therefore, the contemplation and acknowledgment of this inner image results in a kind of reading. In a reciprocal activity, the protagonist reflects in the looking glass of her interior the in-search identity created by herself and constructs her as a subject of dynamic and creating presence. By means of this continuous contemplation and self-acknowledgment, Celie inscribes a feminine text which is her own self and that text (her letters) reflects the image she looks for. That image thus unveils the object of her own desire. In other words, Celie's body becomes a text to be read, first, by herself and then, by others. Her desire inscribed in her text is also read and interpreted and might become her body as well. That is to say, Celie herself may become the object of her own desire.

## 2. Celie's Story: Gaze as Desire

One of the main theories in the study of female subjectivity from a psychoanalytical

perspective is precisely the visual experience or scopic image. The use of the visual experience is manifested in The Color Purple as a mechanism of establishing the relationships between the male subject and the female object of patriarchy, that is, the phenomena of voyeurism and exhibitionism. In his article "Lacan, Poe, and Narrative Repression," Robert Con Davis describes the visual experience as a continuous movement of positions between the subject who sees and the object who is seen. Based upon "The Instincts and Its Vissicitudes" by Freud and the Lacanian interpretation of the scopic drive, Davis shows that in the first stage of the scopic process, "the subject 'sees', performing signs about controlling and possessing the object visually" (985). In this respect, Celie constructs her subjectivity by the fact of looking: "I don't move at once, cause I can't. I need to see her eyes. I feel like once I see her eyes my feet can let go the spot where they stuck" (CP 48). Later on, the subject and the object are introduced in a mirror stage<sup>4</sup> in which "there is an imaginary equivalence between the two, [. . .] as if they were perfect doubles" (Davis 986). In this process, the subject is now transforming itself in object. The visual experience confines the subject and object to an endless series of relationships that oscillate from one given position to another, and viceversa. That is, at times, the object becomes subject and the subject happens to be object at a given moment in the signifying chain of the scopic experience.

In the elaboration of the visual process, Lacan considers the "gaze" as the intersection between sight and desire. Lacanian gaze, situated in the place of the Other, is something intangible that eludes the individual, but it always produces an effect:

[We must not] confuse the gaze with the fact that people see with their eyes. A person may feel pried into by someone whose eyes and physical being are invisible. A mere suspicion of the presence of others may catalyze an inner resonance. (Ragland-Sullivan 94)

As mentioned by Davis, "the subject who sees [. . .] is precisely the one who is seen, that is, the implied by the desire of the unconscious

discourse" (987). For Celie, this unconscious process is determined by the mirror stage promoted by Shug, "sometimes I think Shug never love me. I stand looking at my naked self in the looking glass [. . .] I talk to myself a lot, standing in front the mirror" (CP 266). For Lacan as well, the gaze is determined by that thing that turns one into a picture seen by others, as Celie's mirror and Shug's reaction.

Davis also elaborates on the possibility of "perverting" the visual experience. In the "normal" process of gaze, there is always a position that is repressed temporarily, but in the case of the "voyeur," and its extreme pole, the exhibitionist, there is a permanent repression of the movement between oscillating positions. The "voyeur," refusing to be seen, denies him/herself to be transformed into object. S/He concentrates exclusively in possessing and dominating the object visually. Celie adopts the "voyeur" position by the perversion imposed by the phallus and also in the constant search for possessing the lost object--Shug Avery. The exhibitionist, on the contrary, intends to show him/herself as the possessed object but never the dominating subject. In Psychoanalytic Criticism, Elizabeth Wright states that

unconscious and repression, desire and lack--this dialectical opposition is present in every visual recognition. The pattern is exaggerated in the perversions: the exhibitionist seeking a perfect confirmation of his desire in the imagined desire of other; the voyeur finding all his desire in his own looking, afraid to accept the Symbolic Order's dictum that it is not to be found there. (116)

In Lacanian terms, the exhibitionist denies him/herself the chance to see a lack and the voyeur refuses to acknowledge him/herself as a lack, that is, as a castrated self. Indeed, "both perversions are denying the uncanny duality of all looking, all objectifications. Lacan identifies a 'scopic drive' for this lodging of desire in looking, a subject's search for a fantasy that represents for him/her the lost phallus" (Wright 117). Shug is definitely the object of desire and fantasy for Celie which takes place in the moment of gaze development: "Lord, I wants to go so bad.

Not to dance. Not to drink. Not to play card. Not even to hear Shug Avery sing. I just be thankful to lay eyes on her” (CP 26). Celie’s voyeurism stands for her acceptance to control the object of her desire, fearing to be discovered as a castrated self. Therefore, Celie, “the voyeur”, avoiding castration, intends to be situated in the realm of the subject.

Larysa Mykyta, in her article “Lacan, Literature, and the Look: Woman in the Eye of Psychoanalysis,” develops an interpretation of the Lacanian gaze from a feminist perspective that helps to explain Celie’s castration. For Mykyta, the visual experience represents the desiring experience in which the Other is discarded in order to create a narcissistic illusion of unifying reciprocity:

For Lacan this happens when the child learns to signify the presence and the absence of the mother. The sexual drive is now deflected from the child’s primal object, the mother, into seeking an object always out of reach, to be found only by discovering its trace as an absence in every signifier. This signifying process comes to affect all looking, every recognition at once finding and a failure to find. (Mykyta 53)

The result of the visual experience is that the subject illusorily believes s/he is looking at him/herself. According to Mykyta, scopophilia is a male phenomenon in which “the woman is repressed as subject and desired as object,” (54) in order to keep the self-erotic principle characteristic to the visual experience. The patriarchal system tries to keep the woman “blind” when she has projected her own fear to become blind. In psychoanalysis, blindness is related to castration, or as in this case, to the lack of phallic eye that “possesses” and “dominates” everything visually. The man, who fears not to be “all,” projects his insecurity and his own lack on the woman, elaborated as blindness. In Walker’s text, Celie recognizes this lack of visibility in the fact that the one possessing the phallus is Albert: “He love looking at Shug. I love looking at Shug. But Shug don’t love looking at but one of us. Him” (CP 77). Here this insecurity is confirmed. At this point, Celie accepts her lack and affirms her castration since she is not the one enthroning the phallus.

She does not want to become “blind.” She wishes to see in order to monopolize the object denied by the patriarchal system.

What is the structure that supports this visual objectification of Celie? Mykyta points out that the sexual identity of the Lacanian subject is based on the fact of visibility. Thus, the placement of Celie as subject in the unconscious and in the Symbolic register is predicted by something seen in reality, that is to say, the penis. From the male perspective of *The Color Purple*, the protagonist, as the other women of the novel, does not have “anything” while the man possesses “everything” so that she is defined as a “hole” in the realm of representation. In a metonymic sense, Celie, being a hole, represents what cannot be seen. “Not having,” thus, means “not being.” If identity springs from what can be seen, Celie represents, symbolically and literally, the hole not able to be seen. Therefore, woman cannot be represented or identified in the Symbolic order. Mykyta asks: if identity is based upon the symbolic use of the penis, how might a hole, a not-having, possess an identity? How might this not-having exist in the Lacanian Symbolic register? The woman lacks representation because she is out of language, and therefore, she is out of the symbolic domain. The protagonist, as an object, does not look, she lacks her own point of view. On the contrary, she is constructed as “an image of the phallus that supports male desires” (Mykyta 51). In sum, the woman works as a mirror in which the man looks for his image. By seeing himself in this mirror, his narcissist look is reflected in return. However, Celie’s subversion relies upon the refusal to be “seen” as the mirror of the male Other. She prefers to construct her subjectivity by seeing the objects of her own desire.

Thus, the Lacanian issue in *The Color Purple* now pertains to the lost object Celie cannot see. According to Lacan, this object has to be the phallus which can be substituted for any other symbol representing this “loss.” In the characteristic narcissism of the Imaginary stage of Celie’s life, she means to believe she is the phallus, the “little old thing” (CP 81). Celie thinks she has privileged it. Having the phallus

gives her the opportunity to become powerful. That is why she adopts the homosexual drive as her basic instinct of gaze development. She wants to steal the authorized force that has subdued her so far. She wants the power, that is to say, the phallus. She clearly states, "First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth. I thought I had turned into a man" (underlined mine CP 51). Of course, she neither is the phallus nor has it. She has only a replacement, a symbol of that phallus and that replaced object is signified in/by Shug Avery. Celie realizes that she can possess the phallus by having Shug since Albert has had Shug for his phallus. "All the men got they eyes glued to Shug's bosom. I got my eyes glued there too. Shug, I say to her in my mind, Girl, you looks like a real good time, the Good Lord knows you do" (CP 87), says Celie. However, because Celie does not have the phallus by herself, she struggles to have the total access of the gaze for she can possess Shug by looking at her and desiring her. Celie's only way of having Shug is to turn herself, visually, into that man who has the signifying phallus.

Since Albert has the power (phallus) to have Shug Avery whenever he wants, Celie gets very jealous because Albert has sexual intercourse with her (Shug):

I don't care if you sleep with him, I say. And she take me at my word. I take me at my word too. But when I hear them together all I can do is pull the quilt over my head and finger my little button and titties and cry. (CP 82-3)

At this point, the figure of the mother analyzed so far melted into the image of a lover. It is here that the homoerotic drive becomes the intersection between the scopic dimension, desire, and the phallus. Celie is homosexual because she longs for the "thing" that will give access to her loving, lost object of affection--Shug. Celie writes, "Most times mens look pretty much alike to me" (CP 17). In conclusion, the protagonist's lesbianism results in the need of a phallic father replacing the desire of the phallic mother, who is here, turned into a lover.

The protagonist of Walker's text, as the unconscious, is seen and grasped in the gaps of the discourse. She oscillates and moves along the gaps between words and lines: "What the woman says as 'not-all' is written in the body--en corps--of any text or even in her body" (Mykyta 54). She is invisible, she is what is lacking in her text. The solution Mykyta offers to this phenomenon of invisibility is that the woman has to subvert and break the male sight which repressed her and so return this new look to the Other. She has to disrupt the structures of power and repression because "each phallic mode of representation has to be accompanied by a female look [that is] also, the questioning of power conditions and discourse conditions" (Mykyta 55-56). This is precisely what Alice Walker does with Celie: to try to break the male gaze because it objectifies her (Celie). The protagonist of The Color Purple subverts the visual process of men as an effect of a "perverted" desire. Celie tries to "penetrate" the male look, discovering the structures that support the patriarchal system predicted in the visual experience and, scopically, stealing the object of her desire (Shug) who has always been placed in the realm of the phallic father.

Voyeurism is therefore one of the most important determinants in the relationships between men and women in The Color Purple. The paralysis of the oscillating correspondence between the subject and the object within the visual experience is shown in the preoccupation, that is to say, the obsession, of the male characters of the novel to manipulate women's gaze. The woman of our text, as the unconscious, becomes a force that threatens to burst into male consciousness to penetrate it and disrupt male structures. In this process, the man throws out his own insecurities: "Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ going to hear her. He dress all up in front the glass, look at himself, then undress and dress all over again" (CP 25). The man is unconsciously afraid. The "eye" becomes the symbolic phallus; therefore, all penetrating visual practice in the novel results in what men look for and what they try to deny to and refuse from women. In a "normal" visual experience, the desire of the Other is expressed in the change of positions, yet the male voyeur



tries to paralyze this oscillation of relationships in order to exterminate the desire of the female other. The Color Purple explores the male gaze as a strategy to possess woman and turn her into the maximum object of contemplation as if she were a piece of art: “He look at me. It like he looking at the earth. It need somethin? His eyes say” (CP 21). Visual penetration hence equates sexual penetration in that both result in a desire of possessing the object: the woman who is visually desired is sexually coveted as well. Nevertheless, the visual perspective suddenly changes and the male voyeur ends up being seen (without knowing) by the female eye. Celie is always “observing” Albert with that impulse that makes her curse him: “I curse you, I say[. . .] I say, Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble [. . .] Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice, I say” (CP 213). Thus, female view-point procures a dominating role in the oscillating movement of subject-object relationships and subverts the positions that were previously established around a male center.

Many letters in the novel present “complete” stories about women who are in the process of receiving the power to see. In fact, letters of The Color Purple depict sub-plots of women “seeing” to construct their own selves and relationships with others. Women are really looking for the plenitude of their desire, the unity and the imaginary fusion with their objects of love by means of their capacity to see. The visual power that Celie accomplishes is precisely the recognition of her own submission against men and the manipulation they exercise over her: “I stand there with the mirror. She say, What, too shame even to go off and look at yourself [. . .] I look at her and touch it with my finger” (CP 82). Indeed, The Color Purple delves into a transaction among Celie’s interior monologue depicted in her letters, her gaze, and her conversations with Shug Avery and other women, especially Nettie, her lost sister. These interwoven texts represent Celie’s repressed preoccupation (her unconscious) which is deciphered through the intertextual nexuses analyzed so far in this article.

In short, this article revises the cornerstones of the protagonist’s identity

model that explores desire through the exploration of Celie’s own body and the possibility of her capacity to see. The whole novel is a collection of letters written by and to Celie along times of repression, oppression, love, and desire. In those terms, we can say that Celie is a “text” because she inscribes in herself a series of maxims in relation to her body and the gaze which resolves as desire. Using her body and her capacity to see to appropriate her own desire, Celie moves from the paralysis of being an object to the plenitude of being a subject. Therefore, through her discourse and her loving (sexual and non-sexual) encounters, her desire, first repressed and later reappropriated, becomes the text of her body.

## Endnotes

- 1 The Color Purple is hereafter cited in this article as CP followed by parenthetical page number.
- 2 The term “subject” is defined as an identity model in which the rhetoric of differences replaces the emphasis on similarities and objectification. The subject has an individual sense of self regardless the imposition of the other. This sense of self is for the subject primary, elemental, and private, but always unstable, constantly challenged, and revised. In sum, subject is the one (not the Other, although determined by the Other somehow) who expresses the “authentic self”, that is, the private thoughts, emotions, the personal, and the interior. See Diana Fuss’s Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference.
- 3 *Herstory*, opposed to history, refers to feminist fiction concerned with sexism, sexual politics and the historical effects of racism and patriarchal gender on the lives of women. The term *herstory* is taken from Alice Walker’s feminist prose. See especially In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden (1984).
- 4 According to Jacques Lacan in “The Mirror-phase as Formative of the Function of the I,” women’s use of scopie elements is closely related to the Lacanian “mirror stage.” The child constructs his own image, at an early age, by identifying himself

with his reflection in the mirror: “We have only to understand the mirror-phase *as an identification*, in the full sense which analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation which takes place in the subject when he assumes an image--whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytical theory, of the old term *imago*” (*Ecrits* 72). This identification leads the child to recognize that he is a divided self, that he is in dissonance with his own reality.

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