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From Overt Contentment to Hidden Space: Examining the Portrayal of Gender Fluidity in Naylor's *Bailey's Café* and Walker's *The Color Purple*

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FROM OVERT CONTENTMENT TO HIDDEN SPACE: EXAMINING THE
PORTRAYAL OF GENDER FLUIDITY IN NAYLOR'S *BAILEY'S CAFÉ* AND
WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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the Graduate School of
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English

By
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

I am examining the portrayal of gender fluidity in Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café* (1992) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1992). Both authors show how a break from gender assumptions makes the lives of their doubly marginalized characters easier. My thesis redefines the notion of gender fluidity by examining it through the lens of intersectionality. By looking at how numerous factors such as race and gender work together, I introduce a new concept known as Black gender fluidity, a form of gender fluidity that many African Americans use to fight oppression. Black gender fluidity, unlike gender fluidity occurs because a lot of African Americans were unable to conform to gender assumptions due to racial oppression. Unfortunately, there is numerous criticism against members of the African Americans who defy gender norms. This thesis shows how Naylor and Walker celebrate the Black gender fluid actions of their main characters, who are predominately African American women, by reclaiming negative stereotypes against African American women such as the Jezebel and the Sapphire.

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I.Introduction

Toward the end of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Celie, the protagonist, creates a pair of pants for her female lover, Shug Avery: "They soft dark blue jersey with teeny patches of red. But what makes them so good is, they totally comfortable...the pants can be let out without messing up the shape...And they full round the ankle so if she want to sing in 'em sort of like a long dress, she can" (212). While creating these pants, Celie takes into consideration Shug Avery's role as a female singer who travels and performs in front of large crowds. Celie places emphasis on how the pants allow Shug Avery to work comfortably. The red designs make the pants more stylish because they add additional color to them, and the alterations to the ankle temporarily change the pants into a dress that Shug Avery can wear onstage. Celie's transformation of pants, which are traditionally seen as being a masculine form of clothing in America, into a mixture of both pants and a stylish dress is a tangible form of gender fluidity. African American female writers such as Walker and Gloria Naylor use gender fluid items such as Celie's pants for Shug Avery as a way to celebrate black womanhood. In this moment of Walker's novel, the mixture of traditionally masculine and feminine traits improve the lives of Celie and Shug Avery. For Celie, these pants serve as both a sign of love for Shug Avery and for, eventually, the prototype of a garment for a successful business. For Shug Avery, these pants make her life on tour more comfortable and versatile. Walker shows how gender fluidity can assist Celie and Shug Avery, two African American women, in their everyday activities.

In Walker's *The Color Purple* and Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café* (1992), these authors expose double marginalization and provide their silenced African American characters with the opportunity to tell their stories. *The Color Purple* is a series of letters written primarily by Celie, a poor African American woman living in the rural South during the early twentieth century. She writes these letters to talk about her life and the years of abuse she suffers from her Pa and husband, Mr. _____. In *Bailey's Café*, the main setting is a supernatural restaurant in New York City that draws in emotionally and/or physically abused customers from predominately African American cities during the latter part of the Great Migration of the 1940s. A vast majority of the customers are African American women who are victims of sexual and physical abuse. In these novels, most of the characters are doubly marginalized, usually because of their race and gender. However, Naylor and Walker end their novels with their main characters gaining either happiness or the opportunity to heal from years of abuse. The satisfactory endings of these characters come from their willingness to accept their gender fluid nature rather than to conform to socially acceptable gender norms. In *Bailey's Café* and *The Color Purple*, Naylor and Walker present gender fluidity as a solution to the problems that their doubly marginalized characters face in their lives

II. Double Marginalization, Gender Fluidity, and the Importance of Black Gender Fluidity

In *Bailey's Café* and *The Color Purple*, the connection between the doubly marginalized characters and their gender fluid behavior highlights a concept known as Black gender fluidity. Double marginalization ties into the concept of intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw which argues for examining how different forms of oppression work together. In "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," Crenshaw examines how intersectionality applies to African American women, a group that faces both racial and sex discrimination. According to Crenshaw:

Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. (149)

The form of discrimination that African American women face can differ from that of African American men and white women. Unlike African American women, who can face both racial and sex discrimination, African American men and white women may only have to face one form of discrimination. Unfortunately, as Crenshaw points out, antidiscrimination laws and groups analyze oppression in a "single-axis framework" that privileges the problems of groups that only endure one form of oppression and ignore the unique problems of groups who experience multiple forms of oppression (139). To return to Crenshaw's analogy, in terms of African American women issues, "the tendency

seems to be that no driver is held responsible, no treatment is administered, and the involved parties simply get back in their cars and zoom away” (149). Groups like African American women experience multiple forms of oppressions; however, their needs are usually ignored in lieu of the needs of groups that may experience only one form of oppression. Hence, the term double marginalization.

Most people associate gender fluidity with a visible mixture of masculine and feminine traits; however, the notion of gender fluidity is more inclusive. In “Situating “Fluidity”: (Trans) Gender Identification and the Regulation of Gender Diversity,” Eric Calhoun Davis argues that the mainstream idea that gender fluidity is “an escape from the constraints of gender assumptions and a refusal to stay within one category or another” is a simplified notion about gender fluidity (101). To some extent, Davis is correct in his assessment. Although he centers his discussion on gender fluidity around the issue of visibility for transgendered individuals, gender fluidity falls under queer theory, which argues that “gender, like other aspects of identity is a performance” rather than an innate aspect of an individual (Gauntlett 147). Being gender fluid does involve the ability to accept traditionally masculine and feminine traits within oneself, but it is also the ability to utilize these traits without concerns about acceptable gender norms based on sex. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler points out that a person’s sex does not necessarily determine a person’s gender. In fact, she goes on to say that “when the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (9). Since there is no strong connection between sex and gender, there are no

specific traits that come with being a man or a woman. If that is the case, where do the stereotypes associated with traditional manhood and womanhood come from? According to Susan A. Basow, the author of *Gender: Stereotypes and Roles*, the stereotypes associated with men and women come from what is considered the “norm,” which is the experience of “White middle-class heterosexuals.” “Typical” women, regardless of their occupation,¹ are “very submissive, emotional, dependent” and “are expected to be concerned with having and caring for children” while the “typical” man is “very dominant, logical, ambitious” and concerned with “status, toughness, and anti-femininity” (3-4). Gender fluid people, on the other hand, are people who do not fit into these gendered stereotypes, regardless if their gender fluidity is overt or covert. Thus, Shug Avery, an outspoken blues singer, is as much a gender fluid character as Miss Maple, an African American man in *Bailey’s Café* who wears dresses during the summertime.

At the same time, different forms of oppression play an important role in the portrayal of gender fluidity. A gender fluid individual breaks away from gender assumptions which usually center on the experiences of middle-class, straight, white people; however, the notion of gender fluidity is different for a marginalized group that is unable to conform to gender assumptions because of centuries of discrimination. For many African Americans, gender fluid behavior is relatively normal due to centuries of racial oppression. As Crenshaw points out, “Black men and women live in a society that

¹ Basow presents three stereotypes of the “typical woman” (the housewife, the professional woman, and the Playboy bunny) while only emphasizing the acceptable traits of men (4). This one-sided depiction of men highlights the lack of diversity in regards to masculinity.

creates sex-based norms and expectations which racism operates simultaneously to deny; Black men are not viewed as powerful, nor are Black women seen as passive” (155). Gender norms and racial discrimination are at odds with one another, and some African Americans cannot adhere completely to gender norms if they want to survive. The use of gender fluidity by African Americans can be described as Black gender fluidity, and the large number of African American women in the workforce exemplify it. In *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, bell hooks points out that the gender ideology that argues for men to bring in the money while their wives took care of the home is hard to achieve for many African American families since racial discrimination denied numerous “black men full access to employment while offering black females a place in the service economy” (8). African American women often had more employment opportunities than their male counterparts. As a result, many entered into the workforce and, in some cases, became head of the households.

Self-sufficient African American women are visible elements within Naylor’s and Walker’s novels. Most of the female characters in *Bailey’s Café* were self-sufficient and do not depend on men. Although Celie does not become financially independent until she leaves Mr.____, she works in the fields alongside her husband and stepson, Harpo.

According to Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought*, African American women like Celie endured hard labor in the fields without receiving any financial compensation themselves: “The majority of Black women worked in the fields, with the male head of the extended family unit receiving any wages earned by the family unit” (53). Celie, in addition to taking care of the home and children, works alongside the men in her family because her work is necessary for the upkeep of their family.

In spite of the criticism against Black gender fluid behavior, Naylor and Walker present it as acceptable behavior for their main characters. Many African Americans face criticism because of their Black gender fluidity. According to Collins, these accusations are more likely directed towards African American women and appear as negative stereotypes such as the Black Matriarch. The actions that many African American women take in order to survive after years of racial oppression become criticism against their womanhood. For example, the Black Matriarch references African American women who become head of their household due to the lack of employment opportunities for African American men. Their power in the home makes them “too unfeminine and too strong” because they emasculate African American men. The Black Matriarch’s inability to keep an African American man leaves her a single mother, which, according to some critics, leads to the collapse of the African American family (Collins 76-77). In *Bailey’s Café* and *The Color Purple*, Naylor and Walker do not present Black gender fluid behavior as a character flaw. Instead, these authors highlight moments when their doubly marginalized characters embrace Black gender fluidity to solve their problems. Toward the end of their novels, Naylor and Walker present Black gender fluidity as a means for their characters to improve their lives. Through the use of Black gender fluid characters, Naylor’s emotionally and physically harmed minor characters can enter into a space created solely for their emotional growth. After the main characters of *The Color Purple* reject harmful gender ideas, they become a close knit family.

III. Submission and the Disappearing Black Woman

Naylor and Walker's erasure of Sadie and Celie highlights the potential consequences for doubly marginalized individuals who internalize gender stereotypes. These authors "erase" their "good girl" characters from the pages of their novels. The format of Naylor's novel usually involves one of the owners of the café, Bailey and Nadine, setting up the storyline for their patrons and eventually letting these characters tell their own stories. The setup of Sadie's story is different, however. Bailey introduces Sadie, and her two requests for tea seem to indicate that she wants to tell her story. Naylor isolates Sadie's phrase of "—A little tea, please" from the rest of the text to indicate that Sadie is the one speaking; however, these moments of assertion quickly pass; Sadie is silent. Bailey continues to tell the readers about how Sadie's attempt to appease her abusive mother and husband leads to her becoming both an alcoholic "twenty-five cent whore" and a lady (39–40). As Charles E. Wilson points out, "Sadie elevates silence to a fine art; with her mother she softens a cracker in her mouth rather than chew it...And with her husband Daniel, she sews peacefully while even timing herself to bite the thread at the same instant when Daniel clinks the ice in his whiskey-filled glass." (123) Sadie's years of silence leave her unable to tell her story in a space created solely for that purpose, and she eventually fades out of the novel and only receives a brief mention by Bailey. In *The Color Purple*, Walker "erases" Celie's idea about herself after her Pa sexually assaults her. At the beginning of the novel, Celie writes to God that "~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl." (2) By starting off the novel with this statement, Walker indicates that Celie prides herself on her obedience in spite of her teenage status. However, Walker scratches out the present term of "I am" and

replaces it with “I have always”, which shows that Celie no longer considers herself “good” because of the sexual abuse (2). Unlike Sadie, who slowly disappears from *Bailey’s Café* after her verbal request for tea, Celie’s erasure involves her role in *The Color Purple*. Because of her Pa’s abuse, Celie believes that her role as ‘good girl’ no longer applies to her. As a result, she “erases” her title of ‘good girl’ and takes on the role of “abuse victim” who is incapable of fighting against her abusers.

Walker and Naylor blame the erasure of these characters on their complete adherence to the idea of being “good girls.” Celie and Sadie try to maintain a “good girl” status by remaining obedient and passive to their parents and spouses. In “On *the Color Purple*, Stereotypes, and Silence,” Trudier Harris points out that Celie’s passive response to her years of abuse depicts a completely unrealistic portrayal of how other women in similar situations would respond in real life. As Harris points out, “Even slave women who found themselves abused frequently found ways of responding to that—by running away, fighting back, poisoning their masters, or through more subtly defiant acts such as spitting into the food they cooked for their masters” (157). Harris’s critique of Celie’s passive behavior is valid to some extent. Throughout most of *The Color Purple*, Celie does not fight back against the emotional, physical, and sexual abuse that she endures from her Pa and Mr. __. At the beginning of the novel, Celie’s only form of revolt is writing about her abuse; however, she does not actively try to stop the horrors she experiences. Sadie acts in a similar manner. Sadie’s mother refers to her as “The One The Coat Hanger Missed” and ignores Sadie’s existence until she needs something from her (41). In spite of her mother’s cruelty, Sadie tries to gain her love through housework: “Now her mama could drag in from the streets and drink herself into a stupor across a

clean table; the dishes were all washed and put away. And she always found the sheets on her bed freshly changed if she dragged in a man or not.” (43) Sadie associates good housekeeping with being “good,” and she continues to use these skills when she marries Daniel, a man who generally dislikes her but needs her to upkeep his home.

Celie and Sadie’s “good girl” status leaves them vulnerable to sexual assault due to double marginalization. Christopher S. Lewis in “Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*” points out that Celie’s emphasis on “her long-standing status as a ‘good girl’ is a condition determined by her adherence to the salvific wish and the politics of respectability. Celie believes that her ‘good girl’ behavior can spare her from the “sexual violations of men” (161). Unlike other girls, who are not “good,” Celie deserves the right to preserve her chastity from unwanted sexual advances. Sadie’s desire to appease her mother ties into the idea that her dedication and obedience will protect her. At a young age, Sadie dreams of success and the idea that her mother will tell her, “I am so proud of you. You’re a good girl, Sadie” (44). In Sadie’s fantasy, her mother’s acknowledgement of her years of dedication not only provides Sadie with the love she desires, but it also serves as both an acknowledgement of Sadie’s years of dedication and as vindication for her “good girl” status. Celie and Sadie focus predominately on how engaging in “acceptable” female behavior will keep them safe from harm without taking into consideration how their blackness counteracts these ideas. According to Crenshaw, a lot of raped African American women do not receive any justice because of the lack of “institutional effort to regulate Black female chastity” (157). African American women were “sexually vulnerable” because of their gender; however, their “Blackness effectively denied them any protection” from sexual assault

(158–59). If they were white women, Celie and Sadie’s actions would more likely protect them from being raped; however, as Walker and Naylor show, their characters’ actions leave them more susceptible to sexual assault. Walker shows the results of Celie’s “good” behavior on the opening page of *The Color Purple* when she presents a vivid image of Celie’s rape and impregnation by her Pa immediately after her claim of being “good.” In *Bailey’s Café*, Sadie’s mother forces her into a life of prostitution. Sadie and Celie’s gender leaves them vulnerable to sexual predators in their own communities, and their blackness keeps them from getting legal assistance. Finally, Celie and Sadie’s submissive state as “good girls” allow the abuse to continue unabated.

Walker presents Black gender fluid behavior as a potential solution to Celie’s abuse early in the novel. Celie encounters numerous women in her life, and most of them encourage her to fight back against Mr.____ and his children. Her sister, Nettie, tells Celie, “Don’t let them run over you.” (17) Her sister-in-law, Kate, tells Celie that she has to fight Mr.____ and the children in order to gain some respect. Finally, Sofia, her daughter-in-law, suggests that Celie “bash Mr.____ head open...Think bout heaven later.” (42) The theme of these women’s arguments are similar, that Celie needs to stand up for herself; however, the advice that she receives becomes more progressively violent as Celie endures more years of abuse. Initially, her sister encourages Celie to not allow the people that harm her to control her. Then, her sister-in-law suggests that Celie not only stand up to abuse but to actually combat it. Finally, her daughter-in-law encourages Celie to attack the people who harm her rather than wait for them to strike. As an African American woman, Celie cannot get help from members of the dominant culture, and her “obedience” to Mr.____ does not protect her from violence. The women around Celie

believe that she needs to ignore the idea that women should remain passive to their husbands. Instead, they encourage Celie to actively fight back against Mr. ___ and his children before the abuse can end. At these moments in the novel, Celie is too afraid of Mr. ___ to accept Black gender fluidity; however, the female characters suggestion of an African American woman using violence to fight against her oppressors rather than remaining obedient shows that Black gender fluidity is beginning to be an accepted idea in Celie's community.

IV. Black Gender Fluidity, Violence, and Conformity

Even though Walker presents Black gender fluidity as a relatively accepted idea in Celie's community, she also shows the opposition that her characters face when they display Black gender fluid behavior in predominately white racialized spaces. In *The Color Purple*, Walker portrays Sofia as a sympathetic Sapphire character.² Like most Sapphire characters, Sofia openly displays her anger and does not hesitate to use violence against anyone who tries to hurt her. Walker justifies Sofia's Sapphire tendencies by depicting them as Black gender fluid behavior. When Sofia tells Celie to fight back against Mr.____, she talks about her own experience protecting herself against male family members: "All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (40). Sofia is aware of her vulnerable state as an African American woman who lives with abusive African American men. Since she cannot get help either from members of the dominant culture or even the men in her family, Sofia decides to defend herself by any means necessary, even if these "means" go against gender assumptions about women. Although Sofia's behavior protects her from abuse in black spaces, it leads to different results in predominately white spaces. Walker shows these different responses to Sofia in two incidents that mirror each other: the confrontation between Sofia and Squeak at Harpo's jook joint and the one between Sofia and the Mayor and his wife in the town. In both situations, a woman (Squeak or the Mayor's Wife) approaches Sofia and disrespects her, and then Sophia

² In "Sapphire Bound", Regina Austin defines the Sapphire, or "*Black Bitch*," as a stereotype directed toward African American women that depicts them as being "tough, domineering, emasculating, strident, and shrill" whenever they show anger (426).

verbally defends her position, gets slapped for her noncompliance, and quickly punches the person who hits her. After her confrontation with Squeak, Sofia continues her conversation with Harpo, and she and her boyfriend “go out the door and don’t look back” thereby ending the confrontation without receiving any criticism from the people around her (83). In the town, however, Sofia’s violent display against the Mayor and his wife ends with the cops beating her and to her imprisonment for the next six years.

Like Sofia’s violence in *The Color Purple*, Miss. Maple and his father’s attempts at redefining what it means to be an African American man also lead to harassment in white racialized spaces in *Bailey’s Café*. Miss. Maple’s father endures years of physical harassment when he enters into town due to his “dandy clothing” and passive response to racist men (173). When Miss. Maple asks him why he does not fight back, his father tells him that, “I wanted their words to be babble, whatever they printed, whatever they sent over the radio. Babble—as you learned your own language, set your own standards, began to identify yourself as a man” (182). Miss. Maple’s father wants him to define what it means to be an African American man rather than “believe, in this case, that white reality (with its presuppositions of white supremacy and black bestiality) should define his self-perception” (Wilson 129-30). His father’s understanding of an African American man is one who can retain his masculinity while wearing tailored suits and remaining passive when racist people accost him. Miss. Maple eventually comes to accept this ideology when he starts wearing dresses to his job interviews. Even though Whites refuse to hire African American candidates like himself, Miss. Maple confesses that he “never felt more like a man” when he starts wearing dresses (204). Unfortunately, Miss. Maple’s

confidence in his manhood means that he risks imprisonment for “impersonating a female” when he walks around in public wearing female clothing (204).

Sofia and Miss. Maple’s father face harassment from white people because their display of Black gender fluid behavior are threats against white supremacy. In “‘My Man treats me like a Slave’: The Triumph of Womanist Blues Violence in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*,” Courtney George argues that Sofia’s altercation with the Mayor “threatened the white-dominated social order.” (137) Sofia’s willingness to fight against the Mayor, a white man, regardless of her role as an African American woman, reveals a lack of fear for white people that, according to George, leads to the white police force “[reasserting] their power” through the use of violence against Sofia (137). Miss. Maple’s father’s redefining of his masculinity threatens white supremacy because it challenges stereotypes about the inferiority of African Americans. According to Rebecca S. Wood, “[Miss. Maple’s] family combines these diverse individuals into a unit which overturns turn-of-the century stereotypes about minorities in general, and African Americans in particular, through their financial success in southern California’s cotton industry” (384). Miss. Maple’s family, in spite of their blackness in the early twentieth century, is extremely wealthy, and Miss. Maple’s father displays this wealth with his clothing: “Papa tended more toward *Esquire* casual...there was no mistaking that his hunter jackets and foulard scarves were straight out of Palm Springs” (173). His father’s “dandy” clothing was both a break from the acceptable masculine outfit of “short-sleeved shirts” and “cotton slacks” and also a sign of African American wealth (172-73). Unlike the white townspeople, who suffer economic hardship during the Great Depression, Miss. Maple’s father, an African American man, is able to purchase expensive clothing.

In order to avoid physical harm, Miss. Maple and his father overemphasize acceptable gender norms for African American men occupying white racialized space. According to Davis, gender fluid individuals often visibly conform to one gender because the “policing of gender boundaries” within society places more who are “visibly” fluid in danger (115). African Americans characters in *Bailey’s Café* and *The Color Purple* are always in danger because of their race. However, Black gender fluid behavior puts these characters in more danger because it could be considered a direct threat against white supremacy. Therefore, when a police officer attempts to arrest Miss. Maple for wearing women’s clothing, he points out that “if I intended to be impersonating a female, wouldn’t I have done a better job than this? They could smell my aftershave. See the way my hair was closely trimmed. Short fingernails. A heavy briefcase” (204). Naylor presents opposing images of Miss. Maple to the readers, yet she also places emphasis on his masculine characteristics. Rather than focus on the dress, Naylor forces the readers to notice Miss. Maple’s smell, his short haircut, and his briefcase, traits which are associated with masculinity. The emphasis on masculinity also applies to Miss. Maple’s father. When a group of white men trap him and Miss. Maple in a storage room, he resorts to violence to escape from them and also to gain Miss. Maple’s respect. His passivity is not helpful when faced with white people who want to kill him and his son.

Unlike the men in Naylor’s novel, who draw attention to their masculine attributes, Sofia draws attention away from her physical body to conform to acceptable gender norms for African American women occupying white racialized space. After being released from prison for good behavior, Sofia works as a maid for the Mayor’s wife, and she follows her around the town, carrying her supplies. When Walker portrays

Sofia through the eyes of Nettie, a woman who is not familiar with Sofia, she also highlights the opposing notions about her. On one hand, Nettie points out that Sofia's physical appearance does not fit the standard image of a white woman's maid; however, when Nettie attempts to draw attention to Sofia, she begins to disappear in front of Nettie's eyes: "One minute I was saying howdy to a living woman. The next minute nothing living was there. Only its shape" (131). After her altercation with the police, Sofia attempts to erase herself from the public eye when she enters urban space. To an outsider, Sofia becomes nothing more than an inhuman shape rather than a strong willed African American woman. This process of erasure is a common practice for African American women who engage in domestic work. According to Collins, "Deference mattered, and those women who were submissive or who successfully played the role of obedient servant were more highly valued by their employers, regardless of the quality of the work performed." (56) Rather than risk facing the violence she endures after her confrontation with the Mayor and his wife, Sofia conceals her Sapphire tendencies and takes on the behavior deemed acceptable for African American women in a white dominated space, which is silence and erasure of their presence.³ In this situation, Sofia uses her role as a doubly marginalized individual as protection against harm.

³ It is important to note that Sofia does not completely lose her Black gender fluid traits. After her release from prison, Sofia confesses that "I yearn for murder...I dream of murder sleep or wake" (89). She hides her anger toward the white people she works for; however, she is capable of intense rage in spite of her imprisonment.

V. Sex and the Black Gender Fluid Individual

Through the character of Jesse Bell, Naylor shows that her characters can use Black gender fluid behavior to gain control over their own sexual identities. Unlike Miss. Maple and his father, who experience opposition from whites in public spaces for their Black gender fluid behavior, Jesse Bell endures criticism from affluent members of the African American community because of her sexuality. Dorothea Buehler, the author of “Below the Surface: Female Sexuality in Gloria Naylor’s *Bailey’s Café*,” claims that it is not a coincidence that Jesse Bell, an African American woman who loses everything because of her sexuality, has a name that is similar to that of Jezebel, the name associated with “sexually wicked women.” According to Buehler, Jesse Bell is a “parallel character” to both the biblical and “bad black girl” stereotype of the Jezebel figure (437). In *Bailey’s Café*, Jesse Bell engages in a nineteen year power struggle with Eli King, the patriarch of the affluent King family, after she marries one of his nephews. The struggle ends in Jesse Bell’s defeat when Eli King catches her in a lesbian club and exposes it to the public: “Jesse Bell came to mean that no-good slut from the docks and the nineteen years I’d put into my marriage didn’t amount to dog shit; the care I’d given my son—dog shit; the clothes I wore, the music I liked, the school I went to, the family I came from, everything that made me *me*—dog shit” (Naylor 131). Jesse Bell’s reference to herself as “that no-good slut” in her rant connects her to the Jezebel stereotype, which labels African American women as being “hyper-sexualized nymphomaniacs;” however, the constant repetition of “dog shit” also connects her to the biblical Queen Jezebel, who battles the prophet Elijah and ends up being thrown from her palace window and being eaten by dogs (Buehler 437). Naylor draws strong connections between Jesse Bell and the Jezebel

figures; from her battle with Eli King to her ultimate demise in the public eye when her sexual reputation leaves her as nothing but “dog shit”; however, Jesse Bell refuses to take on that role. Instead, she, like Sofia, rejects the idea of a submissive woman and fights against the label of “Jezebel.” Unlike Sadie, Jesse Bell tells her own story and speaks out against the King family. When Sister Carrie, a patron of Bailey’s Café, calls her a whore, Jesse Bell fights to retain her honor. When men approach Jesse Bell for sexual favors, she gives them “a good dose of verbal and physical abuse” rather than succumb to their advances (117). Through the use of her Black gender fluid traits, Jesse Bell maintains control over her identity and actively challenges anyone who goes against it.

Even though Jesse Bell faces criticism because of her sexuality, Naylor argues that Jesse Bell’s approach to sexuality gives her the healthiest approach to Black female sexuality in *Bailey’s Café* since it goes against gender assumptions about sexuality. When Jesse Bell uses her Sapphire tendencies to fight against the label of “Jezebel,” she does not fight against her sexual reputation. Instead, she fights against the idea that African American women who enjoy sex are automatically whores. As a bisexual woman engaged in a polyamorous relationship with her husband and female lover, Jesse Bell takes pride in her sexual prowess and claims that it is what initially attracts her husband: “I got [my husband] the same way I kept him—with the best poo tang east of the Mississippi. And just cause it was 1924, don’t let people tell you that *nice girls* didn’t. They did then, they do now—and I bet my grandma’s drawers they always will” (122). In addition to being open about her sexuality, Jesse Bell does not consider sex dirty. She does not believe that a woman has to remain chaste in order to be respectable. Instead, she claims that a woman can maintain her respectability even when she has a healthy sex

life. According to Adrienne Levy, Jesse Bell's ideas about sex go against those of the affluent King family, which leads to her eventual downfall: "In the strict codes of a patriarchal system such as represented by Uncle Eli and his family, a woman can be only one kind of wife and mother. Any deviation in terms of sexuality is ostracized" (92). According to the King family, a woman is unable to maintain both a healthy relationship with sex and also be a proper lady, and Jesse Bell, due to her overt sexuality, is a prime example. In spite of Jesse Bell's defeat at the hands of Eli King, Naylor shows that the King family's idea about sexuality is wrong since Jesse Bell's use of her sexuality leads to years of marital happiness. As Buehler points out, "Naylor portrays Jesse Bell's sexuality as a celebrated act shared equally by her and her husband" (438). Rather than present a marriage where the man (Jesse Bell's husband) is the active participant within the bedroom and the woman (Jesse Bell) is the submissive partner, Naylor shows an equal participation between an African American husband and wife in regard to their sexual relationship. During their marriage, both Jesse Bell and her husband engage in gender fluidity.

In *The Color Purple*, Walker goes a step further than Naylor and uses Shug Avery to show that a Black gender fluid approach to sexuality is healthy for double marginalized characters since it promotes self-love. When Shug Avery asks Celie about her sexual experiences, Celie confesses her dislike for sex: "What is to like? He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in" (77). After years of sexual abuse because of her role as an African American woman, Celie assumes that all forms of sexuality involve men using women as property. The man moves the woman around and puts her in a good position, then, without any concern for the woman's well-being,

penetrates her. In actuality, Walker's depiction of Celie's sexual experiences reveal a distortion of the stringent gender norms that present a binary in regard to sexual activity (man is active and woman is passive). For Shug Avery, a woman who is comfortable with her sexuality, sex is a pleasurable, necessary part of her life that she can experience with both men and women. As a blues singer, Shug Avery uses her overt sexuality in her performance, but she also uses her own ideas about sexuality to teach Celie about a healthier understanding of female sexuality. Initially, Celie and Shug Avery's sexual encounters involve Shug Avery, an African American woman, taking on the role of teacher and Celie, another African American woman, the role of student: "Listen, [Shug] say, right down there in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody. It git hotter and hotter and then it melt. That the good part" (77). Shug Avery's emphasis on female pleasure points out two important ideas about sexuality. The emphasis that Walker put on Celie's clitoris shows that sexual pleasure is not solely for men. Celie, like all women, have the biological material for sexual satisfaction, and she can use it for her own purposes.

Walker also presents a Black gender fluid relationship as a way for Celie to heal from her sexual trauma. Molly Hite, the author of "Romance, Marginality, Matrilineage: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, points out that the description Shug Avery gives Celie about her clitoris redirects sexual intercourse away from heterosexuality: "if the important organ is not a hole but a button, then simulation can come from such androgynous appendages as 'fingers and tongue,' and intercourse is not only insufficient but unnecessary for female sexual pleasure" (266). According to Walker, a woman does not need to be penetrated to feel

sexual satisfaction; their bodies allow them to gain pleasure from another woman. Later in the novel, Celie, who lacks any interest in male companionship, realizes that a relationship with another African American woman can give her the love and respect denied to her by the men in her life. When Celie is more confident in her sexuality, she is able to pleasure Shug Avery while being pleased by her: “Us kiss and kiss till us can’t hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other” (113). Walker emphasizes the oneness that occurs during this sexual encounter. Celie and Shug Avery lose themselves in pleasure and give equal amounts of physical attention to one another. At this moment, Celie and Shug engage in a sexual version of gender fluidity that involves equality on the part of both partners. According to Linda Abbandonato, the gender fluid relationship that Celie and Shug Avery forms “enables Celie to bury her sad double narrative of paternal origins and construct a new identity within a feminine domain.” (1111) Celie gets the opportunity to destroy the images of herself as being both a defiled “good girl” and an abused African American wife. Through her loving relationship with Shug Avery, Celie can once again define herself based on her own principles.

VI. When Gender Fluidity and Tradition Combine

Toward the end of *The Color Purple*, Walker shows that Celie is capable of improving herself through Black gender fluid traits because of her community's acceptance of gender fluid behavior. In "Significance of Sisterhood and Lesbianism in Fiction of Women of Color," Uplabdhii Sangwan argues that Celie's development throughout the novel comes not only from personal growth but also through the general acceptance of Celie as a gender fluid woman:

Celie's bildungsroman is marked by milestones where she liberates herself from the control of cultural and historical stereotypes. For these milestones to be reached, dismantling of internalized racial attitudes-and not merely gender relations-need to occur within her community. By the end of the novel, Celie's community becomes supportive of the liberated Celie. (183)

Celie no longer needs to take on the role of a submissive wife since her community becomes more accepting towards a mixture of traditional values with gender fluid ideas. A prime example is when Sofia and her sisters decide to carry their mother's casket. In spite of Harpo's claims that their behavior will cause a major disruption at the funeral, the event actually consists of "Folks crying and fanning and trying to keep a stray eye on they children, but they don't stare at Sofia and her sisters. They act like this the way it always done" (221). Here, Walker emphasizes the elements of a traditional funeral and points out that the actions of Sofia and her sisters redefine this tradition. Sofia and her sisters can carry their mother's casket, a task usually designated for men, without any objection from the people around them. This is the community where Celie lives starts her career in pants making.

Celie's pants have made gender fluidity more accessible to the people in her community. After she leaves Mr. ____ and moves in with Shug Avery, Celie begins to make pants. Initially, she makes them for her friends that accentuate their admirable traits. In addition to Shug Avery's pants, which help with her job as a blues singer, Celie also makes pants for Jack, Sofia's brother-in-law, and they help with his childrearing. The pants "have big pockets so he can keep a lot of children's things," and they are flexible enough so that he can run after his children (213). In Celie's description of Jack's pants, she emphasizes the traits that are not usually associated with men. Rather than focus on his strength and role as a veteran, Celie lauds how good he is with children, a task traditionally taken up by women. Eventually, Celie receives numerous requests from people in her community, and she starts a pants making business. According to Lindsey Tucker, the author of "Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: Emergent Woman, Emergent Text," Celie's pants offer the people in her community clothing that is necessary for their lifestyles: "Beyond the need for more sensible working clothes, pants have always represented a freer form of clothing, one usually denied to women...Celie's pants are associated with freedom and movement—all kinds of movement" (90). Celie's pants are visible representations of Black gender fluidity as they offer African American women who work outside of the home the freedom to move without constraint. In the case of Jack and Shug Avery, Celie's pants highlight the traits that defy gender norms. For Shug Avery, it is her outspoken, overt sexuality. For Jack, it is his childrearing skills. The popularity of Celie's pants in her community allows Celie to profit off of her Black gender fluidity. Even though Celie engages in tailoring, a traditionally masculine skill, she 'feminizes' this skill by 'tailoring' her pants around the needs of the people who wear

them. In addition, her tailoring skills give her financial independence within her own community.

The acceptance of gender fluid traits in Celie's community helps her empower other Black gender fluid characters. As Sangwan points out, [Celie] makes the transformation with the support of black women. Her business is supported by and serves her community. Her business employs members of her racial group" (186). One of the people that Celie hires is Sofia. When Celie inherits a dry good store from her father, she sells her pants in the store and hires Sofia as a clerk because of how she responds to customers: "Sofia in there to wait on colored cause they never had nobody in a store to wait on 'em before... [Sofia] real good at selling stuff cause she act like she don't care if you buy anyhow...plus she scare the [white clerk]" (280). Celie's use of Sofia makes Black gender fluidity both normal within her community and also a necessary asset. Sofia's job is to assist African American customers, who usually face discrimination from the white clerk. Sofia does not use her aggressive behavior with the African American customers; she remains respectful and allows them to move freely within the store. However, Sofia does use her bluntness to protect African American customers from dealing with harassment from the white clerk. Her ability to "scare" him ensures that he will not make African Americans uncomfortable when they enter into this space. Critics such as Linda Seltzer argue that Sofia's employment in Celie's general store also represents an improvement in racial relations in general. Seltzer states that Sofia's employment, "represents Sofia's final escape from her position as mammy but also because shops are used throughout *The Color Purple* to represent the status of economic and social integration between blacks and whites" (137). Sofia no longer needs to work in

white spaces as a maid who hides her physical presence from the public space. With the help of Celie, Sofia is free to gain employment and acceptance within her own community.

VII. To Heal and Strengthen the Community

In *Bailey's Café*, the character Eve uses Black gender fluidity to give double marginalized characters a form of power over their bodies. Naylor's novel does not have a traditional ending. The characters do not come together as a community, and most of them do not even receive a proper ending to their stories. Nevertheless, characters such as Eve offer a lot of these characters a form of power that they never had before. In "Healers in Gloria Naylor's Fiction," Kathleen M. Puhr argues that Eve's boardinghouse differs from Bailey's Cafe in that "whereas Bailey's can provide an end to it all through its back porch offering painless exits and painful possibilities. Eve's [boardinghouse] can provide a reason to go on living, a sanctuary and a place for physical and psychological healing" (525). In the novel, Eve evaluates the women who seek her help and looks for similarities between them and herself, i.e., the "delta dust" that she alludes to in her story (90). Even though she does not display her Black gender fluidity as overtly as Miss. Maple or as loudly as Jesse Bell, Eve does not fit into traditional gender norms because her journey from Pilottown to New Orleans leaves her physically and mentally transformed. According to Maxine Montgomery, Eve is "Neither an Eve, in the biblical sense, nor strictly a Madonna, she resides somewhere between the two extremes" (29-30). Ironically, Eve, named after the Mother of humanity, is sterile after her interaction with the "delta dust" leaves her sterile and "born of the delta" since it seeps inside of her and shields her from a vast majority of emotions (90). Although she identifies as a woman, the intense life she endures as an African American woman who is rejected from society teaches her how to conceal her emotions. Eve is not a biological mother in the novel; however, she is mother figure to both the women who reside in her boardinghouse and

her flowers. In *Bailey's Café*, Eve looks for women who share her tenacity and helps them in unconventional ways. Naylor shows this visual image through Eve's flowers. Eve's connection to the "delta dust" allows her to grow beautiful flowers throughout the year, and she sells them to male suitors. As Bailey points out, "her flowers are like my food. She begs no man to buy them. But if they're coming there-and they're only coming because there's a particular woman they want to visit-they either fall into the routine or not" (92). The flowers that Eve grows in the novel are physical representations of the women who reside in her boardinghouse. Although she sells the flowers to men so that they can interact with the women in her boardinghouse, she lets the women choose not only the flowers but what they will do with the men who enters into their space. As Lynn Alexander argues in "Signifyin(g) Sex: Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café* and Western Religious Tradition," "the flowers become part of the healing process for the women coming to Eve, blurring the issue of prostitution by moving the cash nexus while nurturing their sense of self-worth through their association with natural beauty"(95). Characters such as Jesse Bell and Miss. Maple reside in Eve's boardinghouse, and Jesse Bell even requests daisies from Eve. However, Eve allows these two characters to use their bodies as they wish. Jesse Bell rejects her suitors and throws their daisies in their face. Miss. Maple, after his numerous failures at finding a job, works as both a housekeeper and security guard for Eve's boardinghouse. Eve allows him to display his Black gender fluidity, and she pays him for it. Eve does not try and tell the people she helps how to use their bodies; instead, she gives them the opportunity to gain both self-love and power.

The owners of Bailey's Café use Black gender fluidity to form a safe space for the characters who suffer from various forms of discrimination. Numerous critics offer different readings on Bailey and Nadine. According to Wilson, "they serve as protectors of these castaways whose vulnerabilities are heightened in their efforts to regain sanity and/or equilibrium" (123). Ivey argues that Bailey and Nadine are "parallel two primary figures of the Hebrew Bible, Abraham and Sarah" because they are in charge of the café which temporarily holds the lost African Americans who live in urban areas (94). Naylor presents them as a married couple through Bailey himself; however, readers cannot completely trust his narration about his life since he does not provide his name: "folks think my name is Bailey and I see no reason to tell them otherwise...Some of them think Bailey is my surname and they'll call Nadine, Mrs. Bailey. And she answer to that as much as she'll answer to anything" (28). In his refusal to give his name, "Bailey" extends this level of mystery to his "wife" who is also a mysterious figure without being attached to Bailey. A major distinction that Bailey brings up about Bailey's Café is that it only appears for people who need it, so why is Nadine within these spaces? Naylor does not offer her readers a background for Nadine; instead, she provides one for Bailey. The lack of information continues on between these two characters. Bailey does not have a name; Nadine does. Bailey has a specific reason for residing in this particular space; Nadine does not. Nadine has a distinct physical appearance; Bailey does not. Neither of them are able to speak when the other speaks. Bailey speaks for most of the novel, while Nadine remains silent and allows Bailey to translate her emotions. Nadine only speaks when Bailey leaves the café. The only similarity between these two characters are their mean behavior. In actuality, these two characters, rather than be separate beings, are one and

the same. The two of them complete each other and provide a solid identity. Viewing these characters as one entity provides a more accessible space for double marginalized characters to heal. Unlike Eve's boardinghouse, which only allows strong-willed women to enter, Bailey's café "welcomes anyone" because of the presence of an individual who contains both masculine and feminine traits that accepts harmed individuals in this area while also pushing them out at the same time (Wilson 114). Bailey/Nadine provides a space that allows characters like Sadie, the silent prostitute and Miss. Maple, a crossdressing man reestablishing his identity, a chance to temporarily escape from oppression while also telling their unique tales.

At the end of *The Color Purple*, Walker shows how the acceptance of Black gender fluidity reforms Sofia and Harpo's broken marriage. Even though the men in *The Color Purple* have more privilege than the female characters due to their gender, they also must accept their gender fluid traits in order to find happiness. According to Hite, "If Albert and Harpo 'find themselves,' it is within a context of redefinition that not only denies male privilege but ultimately denies that the designations 'male' and 'female' are meaningful bases for demarcating difference" (266). The development of Sofia and Harpo's marriage reveals the need for Harpo to ignore gender assumptions. Of the marriages portrayed in *The Color Purple*, the marriage of Sofia and Harpo starts off as one of the healthiest. Harpo and Sofia get married because they love each other, and they initially work together because they acknowledge and accept that they do not fit into traditional gender norms. Harpo shows pride in Sofia's tough nature, and Sofia likes that Harpo enjoys taking care of their children and engaging in domestic work. However, their relationship fails when Harpo attempts to conform to gender norms within his

marriage that puts him in control and leaves Sofia as his servant. At the end of *The Color Purple*, Harpo, after years of trying to prove his manhood, accepts both his and Sofia's gender fluid nature. He supports Sofia's employment in Celie's store, and he takes care of the home. To some extent, Sofia must also relearn how to accept Harpo's gender fluidity behavior. As Sofia points out, she "start to feel again for Harpo" when she sees him having an emotional moment with Mr. ___ (224). After years of conflict, the two of them are able to come together as a stronger couple and take on similar roles that they had during their earlier years of marriage.

Walker also shows how Celie and Mr. ___'s acceptance of each other's Black gender fluid traits can result in a friendship. When Celie moves into her father's old home, she and Mr. ___ slowly begin to bond over her business. Like Harpo, Mr. ___ comes to terms with his gender fluid nature by doing housework and even sewing shirts that matches Celie's pants. At one point, Mr. ___ apologizes to Celie for his years of abuse and proposes to her again; however, she refuses: "Mr. ___ done ast me to marry him again, this time in the spirit as well as in the flesh, and... I say, Naw, I still don't like frogs, but let's us be friends" (283). Mr. ___ is respectful to Celie during his proposal, and he emphasizes that a marriage between the two of them would result in equality. Celie, being a lesbian, cannot accept his proposal; however, she offers him friendship. According to Kevin Everod Quashie, Celie's offer of friendship to Mr. ___ shows that she also accepts his gender fluid behavior since she sees him as being her "male girlfriend." Quashie argues that Mr. ___ "can and has become a part of Celie's beloved community, a community that previously had been only women. Celie at this point (and perhaps as a result of the work that she and [Mr. ___] have done) is not 'afraid' of men" (205). Celie,

once an African American woman who silently takes the abuse of her Pa and Mr. __, is able to engage in a friendly conversation with her ex-husband and accept him as her friend because of his transition from an abusive man into a friend/possible business partner.

VIII. Conclusion

Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* are novels about the unique struggles of African American women. However, these novels also celebrate Black womanhood through the reclaiming of racialized stereotypes. Naylor and Walker reclaim the Jezebel, Sapphire, and to some extent, the unfeminine Black woman stereotypes as necessary attributes for many African American women. A major way that Naylor and Walker reclaim these stereotypes is through their portrayal of Black gender fluidity in their novels. In *Bailey's Café* and *The Color Purple*, Naylor and Walker elevate the everyday lives of African American women by showing how their doubly marginalized characters break gender assumptions in order to make their lives easier in lieu of racial and sexual discrimination. With their works, Naylor and Walker empower themselves through the celebration of Black womanhood, and like Celie's pants' for Shug Avery, these novels are a sign of their love for African American women.

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