

Marking the Body: The Material Dislocation of Gender in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Bodies are not easy matters in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Though cultural difference may appear at first to be materialized through the body, the relationship between the body and the text's symbolic economy is continuously put into question. A certainty about our ability to recognize and interpret the material difference between bodies informs much of the critical discourse about the text. Celie's initially subordinate gendered position, for example, is understood to be the result of a violent black masculinist and heterosexual inscription of her body through beatings and rapes. Her liberation, according to the prevalent critical interpretation of the novel, takes place through an intentional re-inscription of her body and thereby the renegotiation of her body's participation in the text's symbolic realm.¹ On the one hand, it seems preposterous to begin to challenge the obviousness of this initial dichotomous and violent cultural divide between the feminine and masculine and its corporeal effects on Celie. And yet, this kind of critical narrative assumes a mimetic relation between bodies and culture that text invariably challenges. Bodies in *The Color Purple* are ambiguously represented in relation to culture, both because the cultural contexts themselves are multiple and therefore difficult to assess, and because the process whereby culture materializes through the body introduces a slippage that interrupts any easy inscription of the emergent subject.

One of the more overt instances of the cultural marking of the body occurs toward the end of *The Color Purple*. A young Olinkan woman, Tashi, undergoes the ritual of scarification, her markings becoming a point of mediation between the material body and its symbolic representation in the novel. Tashi's facial scarification, which she shares with other members of her tribe, initially appears to signify the inscription of tribal heritage and tradition on her body (205), as if the act of marking

her face has brought to the material surface a cultural “essence” within the body. However, the racial signification of her bodily markings is disrupted in several ways. First, Walker has taken great care to illustrate that Olinkan tradition is everywhere threatened by contesting historical and economic change. The eradication of the Olinkan habitat to clear land for a rubber plantation threatens the extermination of Olinkan culture and makes of Tashi’s markings a belated, nostalgic, and perhaps futile cultural gesture.

Any singular interpretation of these markings are undermined even more significantly by their multiple representational contexts. Adam, the missionaries’ adopted son, becomes marked himself to symbolize his love and support for Tashi, but his doubling of Tashi’s markings dislocates them from the Olinkan cultural narrative. As an African-American, Adam’s adoption of Olinkan markings reads as either a form of strategic essentialism—an attempt to “become” African so that Tashi will feel less alienated among blacks in America who “bleach their faces . . . [and] try to look naked” (235)—or a form of colonialist cultural appropriation, that makes of the markings a symbolic gesture bereft of cultural significance.

Adam’s facial markings also offer the possibility of an inverse racial inscription on his body, for the name “Adam” in Olinkan folklore is given to the first white man born to black parents and allowed to live (231). No longer the collective markings of tribal culture upon the individual tribal body, as if cultural narrative and the individual body were one and the same thing, the markings on Adam’s body are the markings of African tribal tradition on an African-American body which is discursively troped as white.

On Tashi’s own body, the visible facial scars mark the eradication of the discernible signs of her sexuality, for they stand as a figuration of the genital excision Tashi has also undergone, as one aspect of the Olinkan cultural construction of dichotomized gender roles. The retention of the labia and clitoris is represented in Olinkan tradition as the metamorphosis of the feminine into the masculine: “Everyone knew that if a woman was not circumcised her unclean parts would grow so long they’d soon touch her thighs; she’d become masculine and arouse herself. No man

could enter her because her own erection would be in his way” (Walker 121).² The feminine is thus genitally determined, though not in the conventional way, given that it is the complete excision of the female genitals that marks the gendered production of Tashi’s body as female. The genital “production” of the feminine as feminine also ensures the sexual division of the collective cultural body into men and women: “It is only because a woman is made into a woman that a man becomes a man” (Walker 246). Although the division of the sexes through genital marking would appear to ensure a heterosexual culture, the final stage in the genital excision involves the suturing together of the sides of the cut vagina leaving an opening the size of a straw (Walker 65), which impedes heterosexual practice, and ensures its association with violation.³

These intertwined readings of the significance of Tashi’s facial markings indicate the problems with assuming a mimetic relation between the body and cultural narratives of gender and race in Walker’s text. Tashi’s body calls into question the connection between biological aspects of the body and culture—not only because sexual and morphological characteristics must be imposed upon her body for it to be understood as properly gendered and ethnic, but also because the body is not regarded even as fully sexed without these marks. Though the markings produce Tashi’s body as properly female and Olinkan, the body cannot be regarded as prior to and separable from culture. To borrow Judith Butler’s articulation of the relationship between sex and gender, Tashi’s body is not “‘prediscursive,’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts” (7). Her body may appear to exist within the discourse prior to its marking, apparently unmarked when the missionaries arrive, as if having an ontological priority to its cultural and gendered imprinting. However, it has always been a body-to-be-marked, born to be gendered and acculturated through the ritual, or a body that should already have been marked, as she matures beyond the traditional age for the ritual to occur (Walker, *Purple* 202).

As well, the multiple cultural contexts for her markings make it unclear what cultural narrative—gender or race—or indeed what racial narrative—African, African-American, or white—we are witnessing. Although the Olinkan mapping out of gendered and racial narratives

upon Tashi's body positions it as representational, or as a site of cultural performativity, the cultural narratives of gender and race are overlapping representative economies—what Homi Bhabha in another context has called “cultural hybridities,” “interstices,” and “‘inbetween’ spaces” (1–2). Finally, as culture performs through Tashi's body, her materiality itself vanishes, as if it is unnecessary or supplementary to the marks of culture themselves. Tashi's genital excision, for example, renders the body (in this case, the labia and clitoris) as supplementary to her sexed identity. The removal of her genitals indicates that the body is both a surplus, or material “excess,” to her gender, as well as intervening or existing “*in-the-place-of*” (Derrida 145) her sex, since the retention of her labia and clitoris will ensure her transformation into a male.

The inseparability of the representative economies laying claim to Tashi's body challenges the oppositional premises behind the major critical debate about *The Color Purple*. In a consistent interpretation of the novel, Celie emancipates a feminine and lesbian “self” through a revisioning and reclaiming of the “unacknowledged” distinctiveness of the female genital body (Christian, “Trajectories”; Abbandonato; Payant) and through writing. Her gendered liberation appears to take place as a consequence of a negative, even racially clichéd, representation of the black male characters as rapists and abusers, and one of the most vehement critiques of Walker by male African-American literary theorists has centred on the way in which her political commitment to gender abrogates her responsibility to their race.⁴

These critical interpretations, however, separate the cultural texts of gender and race and accept an uncomplicated relationship between the body and the cultural narratives that produce our interpretations of it. Walker is involved in a complex theoretical questioning of the relation between sexed and raced corporeality and our cultural narratives of gender and race, and the novel consistently disrupts any singular relationship between gender or race and the sexed or racialized body. Time and again in *The Color Purple*, gendered and racial narratives intersect and overlap, as they do when reading Tashi's bodily markings. Like the diverse significations of Tashi's markings, the bodies of the other characters are always “marked” within several representational economies.

Their bodily performances of the tangled web of cultural narratives they inherit disrupt a solely liberationist reading of Celie in terms of gender and an exclusively stereotypical reading of black masculinity in the novel.

I. The Ambiguous Marking of Gender

The marking of Tashi's face and the genital excision she undergoes offer distinct physical signs of gender and race as imposed cultural narratives that produce the body as a site of signification. Although one may be tempted to interpret her marks—and not her body—as the site of the ambiguously signifiable, the visible flesh is easily misread due to the influence of culture, as the contemporary prevalence of eating disorders proves. A reading of Celie's body indicates that the body itself, whether visibly scarred as Tashi's is or not, is always “marked” within a representational economy. We first encounter Celie in her preliminary letter to God, as she recounts the disturbing effects of the violent rapes by her stepfather. As Celie crosses out “I am,” the discursive sign of her material existence, she places her subjectivity *sous rature* in a repetition of the classic Lacanian split with the subject's entry into language, and her subjectivity is further fragmented and serialized by virtue of its representation through a series of letters. The content of the letters chronicles Celie's abuse and the “effects of sexual difference” (Meese 125), thereby setting the letters up as a metonymy for the corporeal feminine, their collectivity producing “an analogue to the female body within the text” (Wall 264). And the post-structuralist, insubstantial form of the letters—Celie's unsigned, mis-addressed, and presumably not sent, and Nettie's intercepted so that their reception is deferred and delayed—emphasizes that the corporeal body is itself insubstantial and ungrounded.⁵

While most of the novel follows the epistolary form, it opens with one of the few italicized passages that exist outside of the framework of Celie's and Nettie's letters to God and to one another: “*You better not never tell nobody but God*” (3). Presumably spoken by Celie's stepfather after he rapes her, this discursive prohibition against discourse intrudes in the place of Celie's beginning self-representation through writing. Indeed, her strict adherence to the letter of patriarchal law is the impe-

tus for Celie beginning to write to God.⁶ Celie's body is given no ontological priority to this prohibition or to the violent acts accompanying it. Although the act of heterosexual rape might be assumed to require a pre-existing body already understood to be female if not heterosexual, Celie's body emerges in the text only as the acts of violation trace sexual and heterosexual narratives upon her, as if the body cannot be represented apart from the cultural narratives that produce and inflect our interpretations of it. Because the acts of rape establish Celie's body within a sexualized and hetero-sexualized cultural narrative, they become ways of marking the body within a conventionally gendered, though violent, representational economy.

Celie obviously abhors the brutality she endures; yet the form her early opposition takes suggests that her body is at odds with the gendered economy itself, and not simply with the abusive nature of it. Her naive expressions for the sexual act in her opening letter—"his thing," "wiggle it around," "inside me"—may speak to her childlike incomprehension of the sexual act or of her wish to deny the violence of its particular manifestation. However, Celie's persistent incomprehension of the effects of the rapes helps to dislocate from her body the cultural narratives most often associated with the feminine—sexuality and maternity. Celie does become pregnant, her body thus speaking forth a corporeal narrative that appears to coincide with the cultural narratives accorded the feminine. And Celie's mother reads her pregnant body as a sign of Celie's enactment of sexual desire as transgression (3–4).

Though Celie is raped by the man she believes to be her father, and is thus structurally positioned in the place of her own mother, and though she bears children, her discourse indicates that the body-as-text mis-speaks these narratives of maternal subjectivity and sexual desire. To Celie, her bodily transformations confirm that her body is a site of meaning which signifies enigmatically according to what is imprinted on it by others: "Nettie still don't understand. I don't neither. All us notice is I'm all the time sick and fat" (12). She identifies only God as the father of her child (4), and while this paternal misidentification conforms to a variation on her stepfather's prohibition ("*You better not never tell [it was] nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy*" [14]), it also separates

paternity from the material body, situates pregnancy outside of sexuality, and emphasizes Celie's sense of the body's articulation of maternity as mysterious and surreal.

Celie's experience of maternity as a bodily enigma is only one example of the ambiguous and variable position accorded the maternal in the discourse. For the maternal remains a marking of the body which is never fused fully with the materiality of the body, as in Celie's case, or with any particular female body. If one can argue that the standard representation of the maternal image is defined as the mother with her biological child, then the text can be said to rarely reproduce this standard. Celie is never portrayed as a child cared for by her own mother: when Celie's mother enters into the representative domain, she is no longer the sexual partner of her husband or a functioning parent, and she is dead when Celie writes her second letter. Celie's position as child has already begun to merge with her mother's position sexually and in terms of domestic labour and child care when the novel opens. Celie herself is represented as pregnant (3, 4, 12)—one might say as the “coming-into-being” of the maternal—or as grieving the loss of her child, recently taken from her (4–5)—in other words, “no-longer-maternal.” When we do see Celie caring for children, she is at first a surrogate mother, reluctantly caring for children not her own. Later, she becomes one member of an unofficial feminine collective in which domestic labour and child-care become relational activities circulating among several women (Hite 271; Hooks, “Reading and Resistance” 294).

Collective child-care is only one part of Walker's reconsideration of maternity. Its revisioning also takes place through a dissociation of maternity from the dyad of mother and child and from the female body itself. The sexual relationship between Celie and blues singer Shug Avery is deliberately portrayed as a remembering of maternal and childhood loss: “Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth. Way after while, I act like a little lost baby too” (97). While Celie's depiction as a child and mother here most obviously acts as a metaphoric rendering of her incipient rebirth through the symbolic recovery of her lost children and her own childhood, its rearticulation also allows maternity to function as an alternative econo-

my of desire in the novel. Sexuality takes place in this scene not in terms of violence and prohibition, as in Celie's first sexual encounters, or as a continuation of some form of imposed domestic labour, as in Celie's sexual relationship with Mr. _____. Instead, the maternal marking allows desire to begin to circulate for Celie for the first time, and it helps to re-configure sexuality in terms of reciprocity and caring.

Harpo, Celie's step-son, is also defined in maternal language. As he attempts to gain weight in order to dominate his wife, his body takes on the form of a pregnant woman, until Celie asks him "When it due?" (55). Harpo's inscription by the maternal narrative represents a transition from his accommodation to a patriarchal notion of sexual domination, which he has inherited from his father, for his emulation of the feminine in his desire for power implicitly acknowledges the strength of his wife, Sofia, as well as his own preference for domestic labour. Eventually, Harpo functions in a maternal and nurturing role when rehabilitating his father: "Harpo force his way in. Clean the house, got food. Give his daddy a bath. . . [O]ne night I walked up to tell Harpo something—and the two of them was just laying there on the bed fast asleep. Harpo holding his daddy in his arms" (190–91).⁷

The attempt to mark Celie as conventionally gendered does not end when she leaves her step-father to marry the titularly-named Mr. _____. Instead, Mr. _____ begins to beat Celie so as to inscribe upon her body a complicated masculinist representative domain, in which Celie's body, marked in terms of her subordination, speaks forth Mr. _____'s own precarious position of familial and gendered dominance. As with the ritual excision of Tashi's genitals, which ensures the sexual division between men and women in Olinkan culture, beating Celie promises to secure the relationship between masculinity and femininity as one of domination and submission through the materiality of the body itself. Celie's wounds confirm to Mr. _____'s son, Harpo, that she possesses the characteristics, like ugliness and stubbornness, that Mr. _____ defines her as manifesting (22). They also offer Harpo legible bodily proof of the material methodology by which the cultural text of feminine submission is produced, and, even though his attempts to inscribe this text on Sofia will prove unsuccessful, the promise of retroactive confirmation of

his masculinity by grafting this cultural text upon the body of his wife proves too powerful for Harpo to resist. Though Celie acquiesces to Mr. ___'s beatings, her conformity to the gendered narrative of submission threatens her very materiality—the corporeal basis for that narrative. As Celie is repeatedly beaten, she is represented figuratively in disembodied terms. Her voice remains silenced, her body seems to be transformed into insensate “wood” (22), and she appears to others to be “buried” (18). This move towards a figurative disembodiedness of the feminine reaches its culmination when Celie first opposes Mr. ___'s will and is subsequently reduced by him to nothingness: “You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all” (176).

As Irigaray reminds us, Mr. ___'s reduction of Celie to “nothing at all” is one manifestation of a more invidious cultural non-representation of woman's subjectivity and desire. Irigaray's critique of the oculo-centrism of psychoanalysis in *Speculum of the Other Woman* and *This Sex Which Is Not One* illustrates that defining female sexuality as the corporeal horror of “*nothing to see*” (*Speculum* 47) positions the body as the site of the ultimate alterity of the feminine: “*Nothing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing. No being and no truth*” (*Speculum* 48).⁸ Working in *Speculum* within and against Freud's theories of female sexuality, Irigaray uncovers the corporeal narrative that comes to define the feminine—sexual passivity and woman's sexual “lack,” for example—not as the opposite or “other” of male activity and male sexual organs, but as the necessary objectification and erasure of the feminine against which male subjectivity takes its form. The “*nothing to see*” (*Speculum* 47) of feminine sexuality is required for the ‘something to be seen’ of male sexuality, woman as “a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies” (*This Sex* 25).

The symbolic context that produces the feminine as the “blank screen of representation” in a masculine sexual economy renders the feminine supplementary to masculine self-representation. As with the excision of Tashi's labia and clitoris, in which the corporeal visibility of the female genitals is seen as supplementary to the production of men—“[i]t is only because a woman is made into a woman that a man becomes a man” (Walker, *Possessing* 246), Celie's bodily “nothingness” provides a

“blank screen” for Mr. ___’s self-representation. The symbolic erasure of the feminine through the act of beating marks the traces of a circuitous and repressed masculine desire. Mr. ___ has been forced by his father and, later, by Celie’s stepfather, to marry women who substitute for women he has desired. Anna Julia became Mr. ___’s first wife when his father refused to allow him to marry Shug Avery (104), and Celie represents, first, a substitute for Nettie, who was denied to Mr. ___ by Celie’s stepfather, and, ultimately, an inadequate replacement for Shug as well. Mr. ___ beats Celie, just as he has beaten Anna Julia, as an indirect outlet for his Oedipal anger against his father’s prohibition and his own acquiescence to it, his thwarted desires and impotence traced out upon the body of the female substitutes.

However, as Celie recognizes, her beatings also function as attempts to transform her body into Shug’s: “What he beat you for? she ast. / For being me and not you” (66). With Shug denied him and Celie’s beatings transforming her, at least metaphorically, into nothingness, the structural consequence of this attempt to merge Celie with Shug is to collapse the apparent heterosexual triangle between one man and two women into the Oedipal rivalry which is represented as its origin.⁹ While Mr. ___’s beatings of Celie, then, initially appear to function within a conventionally gendered representative economy, their structural effects focus attention on the homosocial generational relationship between father and son, in which masculine inheritance is itself a reluctant submission to the will of the father and a denial of masculine desire.¹⁰ A second and surplus effect of this symbolic merging is the physical intimacy between Celie and Shug, who are positioned not as rivals for Mr. ___’s affection but as lesbian lovers.

These explorations of the gendered markings of the body indicate that the paradigms which initially seem to locate the body within a conventionally gendered and heteronormative context are ambiguous and imprecise. Cultural characteristics rarely coincide with the materiality of the body, and their imposition on the corpus initiates either a slippage between that representation of materiality and the subject’s own self-perception, as is the case with Celie’s incomprehension of her pregnant body, or a rampant over-determination of the representative economy,

as when maternal symbolism overlays the sexual relationship between Celie and Shug, as well as Harpo's rehabilitation of his father. For Celie, the body's representation through gendered cultural narratives is lived and represented for the most part as a material enigma, and her body resists its interpellation by them, and particularly by a heterosexual economy, even when her demeanour may appear to indicate acquiescence to this interpellation. While the body cannot be thought outside of its cultural interpretability, its marking within and by culture gives us access to its cultural performativity alone and not to any material foundation for culture. Marking the body within gendered representational contexts, then, is a way of materializing cultural differences; however, what is made visible through the body is something other than materiality as such.

II Racial Doubling of the Gendered Mark

The slippage between cultural narratives of the feminine and the female body points to the arduous and perhaps futile task of pursuing the body as an unequivocal foundation for culture. As the materiality of the body eludes the cultural performativity imposed upon it, one might be tempted to imagine culture speaking in the place of the body—as if the body, while not offering prior evidence for culture, does provide the space for culture's enactment or articulation. To some degree, culture does stand in the place of the materiality of the body, as the maternal symbolism invested in Harpo, an example of a cultural narrative that seems to speak beyond the body, suggests. However, how culture is articulated through the body is not always straightforward. In addition to an incommensurability between gendered markings and bodies in *The Color Purple* there exists an over-determination of the signification of the markings themselves. In several key scenes in the novel, the cultural context framing the body is doubled, blurring how we read the representative economy in which the marking takes place.

The cultural interpretation of Celie's body becomes complicated by a gradual contextual expansion of the boundaries in which the marked body is placed. Certain acts of cultural inscription of Celie's body cannot be determined clearly, because they position the body within both gen-

dered and racial cultural narratives, so that we ultimately come to question not only the ontological placing of culture, but the interpretability of cultural performance itself.¹¹ In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the stealing of Sethe's breast milk is gendered as a rape, but at the same time it illustrates racial control and ownership over what she produces through her (maternal) labour. The scene in which Celie's body passes from paternal control to the control of her husband can be read in a similar way, through both gendered and racial cultural lenses. One can interpret this scene as the gendered construction of the feminine as object of display to the male gaze. Celie is called from the house by her father's command, and she emerges to be looked "up and down" (12) by Mr. _____. The equivalency established between Celie and the cow that accompanies her as her dowry seals her status as a commodity in a patriarchal system of exchange (10, 12). However, Celie's representation as the object of a masculinist exchange is complicated by the possibility of reading this scene as a re-enactment of a racial paradigm. As Mr. _____ and Celie's stepfather discuss her attributes, they focus on her potential as a breeder (10) and her strength as a labourer, as if she were a slave on display on the auction block before a potential purchaser. Jacqueline Bobo, who comments upon the racial resonances of this scene, connects it with the image of Harriet Jacobs's [Linda Brent's] grandmother on the auction block in her 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (*Black Women* 64; see also Morgan 179–80).

The possibility of interpreting this scene within two cultural contexts has an effect on how we understand both Celie's position and the positions of the male characters who facilitate her exchange. While it is true that Celie remains dominated in either case, her potential for gendered liberation becomes significantly circumscribed when gender is viewed as part of the history of racial domination. The doubling of her gendered submission by invoking the enforced historical submission of her race augments Celie's experiential struggle, but it also suggests, as black feminist critics have long argued, that the domains of gender and race are separated only at the cost of simplifying one's inscription by cultural narratives and only through homogenizing the culture that so inscribes. Situating Celie's submission within the historical legacy of slavery also

undercuts symbolically the gendered authority of Celie's stepfather and Mr. ____, because their actions become understood as a repetitive parody of the mastery, domination, and ownership of blacks during slavery. The black male characters may hope to confer upon themselves a position of masculine dominance by transferring the structure of slavocracy to the relationship between men and women within the black community; however, they have internalized this structure without questioning the implications of its cultural legacy. Their gendered inheritance is bankrupt by its formation through a racial system that has emasculated them. Like Celie, the black male characters "become" gendered *through* the imitation of this historical racial ritual, which itself inscribes black masculinity and femininity within the parameters of white cultural power.

Squeak, Harpo's mistress, is raped by her white uncle, the warden Bubber Hodges, but our interpretation of the consequences and effects of this gendered violation, as with Celie's gendered subordination to her stepfather and Mr. ____, is complicated by its racial context. Squeak, or Mary Agnes, is set up as a surrogate for Celie in the novel. Celie recognizes that Squeak is "like [her]. She do anything Harpo say" (73), and Squeak is described, as Celie is, as voiceless and submissive. She "duck[s] her head" (81), speaks in a "little teenouncy voice" (73), and "don't say nothing" (80). Like Celie, she is raped by a family member. Whereas Celie has been impressed into silence and writes of her violation only to God, Squeak tells the story of her violation to her supportive family, and Squeak's voicing of her violation allows Celie to imagine the possibility of voicing her own. Within the black community, Squeak's rape prompts her entry into narrative and the reclaiming of her name, Mary Agnes (84–85). She asserts herself with Harpo, and when he begins to interpret the rape as an affront to his masculinity—"My wife beat up, my woman rape" (83)—she silences him and insists on her right to tell the tale. Soon afterward, she begins her singing career, apparently gaining independence and strength as a direct result of this cathartic revelation.

Though Squeak's liberation from her violation can be read as prefiguring or foreshadowing Celie's own escape from her sexual and domestic subordination to Mr. ____, her rape is also specifically racialized. As the

warden of the prison in which Sofia is incarcerated, who can assign Sofia to one of several punishments, Hodges stands for white control and confinement of the black body. Although the family hopes to save Sofia from prison by having her work as a maid for the white mayor's wife, Squeak must mis-represent her own and Sofia's positions and argue that Sofia's punishment in prison is too lax. She trades upon Hodges's innate racism, capitalizing on his desire to ensure that Sofia receive the maximum possible punishment for her 'crime' of hitting the white mayor after he has slapped her. Squeak is raped by Hodges, apparently in payment for granting her mis-spoken desire, and Sofia is sent to work for the mayor's wife. Hodges illustrates that the black subject is caught in a racialized system in which the black discursive appeal is interpreted materially, with black bodily payment required as part of a racial system of exchange. Though this material exchange appears to function as a bribe to pay for Squeak's request, Squeak knows that she cannot speak her actual desire.

Squeak's strategy of "uncle Tomming" (82)—mis-representing the situation so that Hodges will enact the outcome the family desires for Sofia—suggests that she recognizes her racialized discourse in a white system as a refraction, or turning back on itself—a "discursive self-alienation" (Berlant 844) rather than a discursive self-revelation. Even the mis-speaking of that desire is circumscribed, limited to the two impossible options of remaining in the poisonous atmosphere of the prison or enduring an extended slavery or captivity (90) in the mayor's house. And though Squeak gains back her Christian name, Mary Agnes, when she tells the story at home, the warden's act of "fornication" (84) is premised upon his denial of any family relationship to her and thus a withholding of her white patronym. As Linda Selzer has noted, "Squeak's rape exposes the denial of kinship at the heart of race relations in the South and underscores the individual and institutional power of whites to control the terms of kinship" (75). Like Lucas Beauchamp in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, Squeak can lay claim to her first name, but she has no right to claim her white family inheritance.¹²

The scant information we receive about Celie's biological father provides a final example of the overlapping economies of gender and race in

the novel. In one of Nettie's letters, she reveals to Celie in the form of a fairy tale that their stepfather is not their biological father and that their biological father was lynched because of his prosperity (148–50). The erasure of the paternal here—"Pa not pa" (151)—functions in the same manner as the problematic representation of maternity, by reinforcing the slippage between gendered narratives and sexed bodies in the novel. More crucially, telling the story of the loss and substitution of the father begins to recontextualize Celie's rapes by historicizing the figure of the black male rapist within white ideological fictions. The absence of any prior knowledge about Celie's biological father has allowed his position to be usurped by her stepfather. It is no accident that the figure of the rapist is substituted for that of the successful businessman, because it was invariably the ostensible threat of sexual perversion that was used to mask economic and political motivations when black men were lynched by whites. After the abolition of slavery, when white regulation of black labour and sexual practice was no longer ensured, the number of lynchings increased dramatically. The ritual practice of lynching a single black body functioned as a cautionary tale to the entire black population to remain in a subordinate position, socially and economically, to whites. As Hazel Carby, paraphrasing Ida Wells, reminds us, "[t]he emancipation of the slaves represented the loss of the vested interests of white men in the body of the Negro . . . and lynching should be understood as an attempt to regain and exercise that control" (112). Lynching became one of the central mechanisms for oppression, a tactic of political terror to repress black political, social, and economic advancement (Carby 141; Berlant 841; Schwenk 321).

The white population was incited to accept lynchings because its black male victims were portrayed as sexual predators raping, or attempting to rape, white women. In this white discursive construction, the narrative of a black rapist of white women reverses the customary racial positioning of victim and victimizer. Squeak's rape by the white warden, the fact that the warden's brother is Squeak's father, and Shug's suggestion that Celie's stepfather was an aberration in the black community—"Wellsah, and I thought it was only whitefolks do freakish things like that" (97)—all bear witness to the more common racial positioning

of victim and victimizer in forced or coercive inter-racial sexual encounters.¹³ The figure of the black male rapist was a cultural myth, a projection onto the victim of the historical sexual profligacy of white men, which also functioned to erase the legacy of the sexual victimization of black women, and to replace the possibility of any normalized inter-racial sexual encounter with the story of sexual perversion. This cultural myth protected against any questioning of white vigilante practices, since it played upon the violation of the sanctity of white womanhood and the indignity produced in the minds of white supremacists by even the possibility of such violation. What the mythos ensured, then, was white support for a practice that guaranteed the continuation of white economic and social domination of blacks.

I am not trying to argue here that Walker is putting forward the figure of the black rapist as an illusion. Celie is raped within the realm of the “real” in her fictional world. However, the substitution of the story of black sexual perversion and white sexual morality for one of economics in the lynching myth should make readers of Walker’s novel cautious about her use of the narrative of sexuality and sexual morality here. One must question why Walker chooses to employ both the rapist and the economically successful black man he supplants, given the problematic history of this dual configuration, and, furthermore, why one part of this configuration is revealed through the fairy-tale, a mythic fictional genre. Some critics find that Walker’s use of the black male rapist illustrates her willingness to jettison more productive representations of black men to assist her articulation of the problems black women face, but is she pandering to white racist assumptions about black sexuality in this case, or is she playing upon those expectations in the hope of undermining them? As the portrait of Celie’s biological father emerges, one is led to wonder what additional purposes the issue of black male sexual immorality might serve. Bell hooks argues that the eradication of the fact of incest compromises the gendered implications and emotional intensity of Celie’s sexual confession, causing these scenes to “assume the quality of spectacle, of exaggerated show” (“Reading and Resistance” 287). To hooks, these scenes maintain the stereotypical and pornographic image of the black male rapist (“Reading and Resistance”

288) and the representation of patriarchy through “black male domination of black females” (“Reading and Resistance” 285). However, historicizing the story of Celie’s biological father and black sexual immorality within the lynching myth suggests that the narrative of aberrant sexuality operates beyond a mimetic reading of the novel and outside of a solely gendered domain.

The historicizing of the paternal rapist through the myth of lynching suggests that the line of demarcation cannot be so clearly drawn between gendered and racist economies. In the overdetermination of the scene in which Celie is “betrothed” to Mr. ____, the characters are gendered through their repetition of a racial ritual that subverts black masculinity. Here, the merging of the figures of rapist and businessman situates black sexuality—particularly black sexual perversion—as a façade that hides a subtext of economic subordination and racial violence. The (lynched) black male body becomes marked as the figure of the black male rapist, and this representational marking masks the act of violence that racializes and victimizes the male body. As Berlant indicates, “[l]ynching, in this narrative, has a structural equivalence to Celie’s rape, in its violent reduction of the victim to a ‘biological’ sign [. . . It] was the act of violence white men performed to *racialize*—to invoke the context of black inferiority and subhumanity—the victim” (840–41). Sexuality stands in the place of a productive black economy by reducing the black body to the biological, and racial violence is the methodology whereby black economic prosperity is eradicated and the cultural narrative of sexual perversion is preserved. Not only does the configuration of black sexual perversion operate beyond the realm of sexuality and gender and within a racial context, but there remains a question as to which racial context we are in, for situating the successful black businessman within the genre of fantasy and allowing his position to be usurped by the black rapist implies that we are within the context of a white racist myth. The merging of the two fathers and the expropriation of the story of economic success by a sexual one suggest that black narratives are destined to be sexualized, and this may be one reason why Celie’s liberation through the economic success of Folkspants ultimately takes precedence over her liberation through sexual awakening.

As these instances illustrate, there is an expansion of the representative economies in the text, so that what initially is marked as gendered or within a masculinist and patriarchal representative domain is seen to exist within a racial context that complicates its interpretation. The analysis of the gendered marking of the body in the novel demonstrates that the gendered cultural narratives inscribing the body never merge fully with the body's materiality. Though culture may be inseparable from our interpretations of the body, the body escapes from its imprinting by culture, leaving behind either a cultural residue, as when maternal symbolism is dispersed beyond female bodies, or a material residue, as when Celie's bodily enigma refuses to be explained by the maternal and heterosexual narratives tracing her body. While the body resists its full interpellation by cultural narratives, the cultural markings themselves are found to operate within more than one representative economy and thus their interpretability is at best imprecise. A racial interpretation of the heritage of masculinist domination undercuts the patriarchal security of Mr. ___ and Celie's stepfather, and the revelation that their individualist actions of power are circumscribed within a system that disenfranchises them limits their pseudo-liberty and also any possible liberation Celie may later effect. Even acts of sexual violation resonate insecurely within a solely gendered framework when they are inter-racial or when they reverberate within the context of racist myths. As gendered narratives become rewritten within racial paradigms, one begins to question whether the marking of the body as gendered, heterosexual, and maternal is solely "about" gender.

The multiple contexts in which the body can be read illustrates the excess of cultural imprinting on the body and thereby the difficulty of interpreting the body as a site of cultural performativity. Though the body is marked within gendered and racial representative economies as a way of materializing cultural differences, on the one hand the body elides these markings, refusing to "ground" culture, as if giving us access to culture's performativity alone. On the other hand, culture "performs" a narrative surplus, so that it becomes difficult to determine what is speaking through or in the place of the materiality of the body. While the materiality of the body is supplementary to the cultural narratives

through and by which we interpret it—as the relationship of Tashi's genitals to her sexed and gendered identity shows—the cultural narratives themselves operate within an economy of excess and replacement or substitution. When Celie is paraded before Mr. ____, the possibility of interpreting this scene as both gendered and raced reinforces Celie's submissive position, one cultural economy supplementing, or adding to, the other. However, the dominance of the male characters becomes subverted by the supplementarity of the racial narrative *for* the gendered, the substitution of a racial paradigm undermining and calling into question the masculinist primacy that their gendered narrative requires.

III Performativity and the Gendered Liberation of the Body

The relationship of the subject to the body and culture in the foregoing instances has been one of passivity, with Celie a reluctant witness to the cultural imprinting of her body, and the male characters, though they facilitate culture by marking the female body as heterosexual or submissive, interpellating themselves by cultural paradigms that undermine their conscious intent. Though the subject is often an unwitting participant in culture in *The Color Purple*, Walker also invokes instances when the subject chooses to inscribe her body by and through culture as an act of agency. For Celie, this reinscription necessitates revisiting the corporeal sites on which the narratives of gender as violation have been staged. She dons the costume of heterosexual desire, she examines her genitals in a mirror, and she redefines her sexuality through her relationship with Shug Avery. Because these moments are often cited as fundamental steps toward Celie's ultimate liberation, with the reinscription of her body a way of rearticulating her gendered subjectivity, it is important to examine their emancipatory potential in light of the cultural ambiguity of bodily representations in the novel. While Celie's own acts of re-marking her body position her as both the subject and the cultural inscriber, it is not clear that this control eradicates the material divide we have witnessed between culture and the body.

Celie's first experience with gender performativity occurs early in the text, when she worries that her stepfather will require sexual services from Nettie. In order to protect Nettie, Celie dresses up as a heterosex-

ual, sexually available woman, in imitation of a promotional picture of Shug Avery (8–9). She appears to adopt strategically, if not entirely by choice, the sexual and heterosexual narratives inscribed upon her by her stepfather. Celie’s decision to imitate the heterosexual feminine does not eradicate the slippage between these cultural narratives and her body, but, instead, these narratives are dislocated from her body through the very nature of the performative. Because Shug’s picture has initiated lesbian sexual desire in Celie, this imitation must be seen as a transvestism, a drag performance of the heterosexual feminine. As Judith Butler notes, most male drag performances play “upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed” (137). Butler quotes anthropologist Esther Newton to clarify drag’s role in reformulating the relationship between inner and outer psychic space. “‘Drag says “my ‘outside’ appearance is feminine, but my essence ‘inside’ is masculine.” At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; “my appearance ‘outside’ is masculine but my essence ‘inside’ is feminine”’” (Butler 137).¹⁴ In Celie’s performance, drag signifies instead a suturing together of the gendered text of femininity with a female body already marked in terms of that same cultural text. Though the linking of the feminine with the female body might appear to support an unequivocal parallel relationship between sex and gender, the insistence upon the feminine as performance overdetermines the feminine, thereby dislocating the gendered narrative from the body. As in other drag performances, the question of gender is displaced onto a retrogressive surface materiality (from garb to body in Newton’s two “outsides”). Not only is the performer’s “essence ‘inside’” not reflected in Celie’s external costume (in this case, Celie’s lesbian desire is masked by the heterosexual implications of her costume), but it also implies that the question of the “essence ‘inside’” is yet another costume in the infinitely regressive *mise-en-abyme* of gender and the body. “*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*” (Butler 137).¹⁵

Celie’s drag performance of the heterosexual feminine does have the potential to disrupt the domain of heterosexual activity in the novel. Her mimicry of Shug in response to her feelings of lesbian desire may oper-

ate within the domain of the hetero-normative according to the male characters—her stepfather, for example, perceiving her performance as a heterosexual advance.¹⁶ But Celie’s sexual desire for Shug initiates her heterosexual performance and thus positions same-sex desire within the site of heterosexual sex. The articulation of lesbian desire within heterosexual activity offers the possibility of usurping the hetero-normative. Bell hooks—who ultimately reads as a political failure the text’s decision not to name lesbianism as such and the foreclosure of lesbianism as a practice when Shug rejects Celie for a relationship with a young male musician—agrees that “Walker makes the powerful suggestion that sexual desire can disrupt and subvert oppressive social structure because it does not necessarily conform to social prescription” (“Reading and Resistance” 285). However, the outcome of Celie’s gendered performativity in this instance—yet another rape—does not bode well for her future attempts. As this troubling consequence suggests, the cultural project of remapping the topography of the body in an attempt to reclaim it may be doomed to a repetition of the plotted narratives already tracing the body, with the subject’s agency, ambivalently expressed in adopting a subject position otherwise enforced upon it, the single differentiating factor.¹⁷

The “French Feminist moment” when Celie is encouraged by Shug to examine her clitoris and labia in a mirror, and the representation of her sexual desire and orientation through her relationship with Shug, are more commonly cited as positive moments of gender performativity for Celie. From the bath Celie gives Shug, in which she characterizes herself as “turn[ing] into a man” (45), to her recognition of the sexual and gender fluidity around her (54, 58, 72, 141, 228), Celie’s letters record a reinscription of her sexual identity, orientation, and desire. Shug begins to increase Celie’s sexual vocabulary (“a little button that gits real hot” [69]) in order to address her “virginity,” redefined by Shug as someone who has not experienced an orgasm (69). She encourages Celie to look at her own genitals, and Celie appears to assume material control over her sexuality by reinscribing its discursive representation:

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. (69–70)

With the redefinition of Celie's sexuality outside of the parameters of the presence or absence of the phallus, most critics interpret these representations as bringing to the surface what masculine history has repressed: the genital and libidinal difference of the feminine from the masculine. The discovery of the clitoris is perceived to offer a new bodily site (Hite 266; *Abbandonato* 304), representative of Celie's control over her own sexuality, which positions her within an alternate symbolic from the lack or hole of patriarchal representation (*Abbandonato* 304). For *Abbandonato*, the central problem of the "cultural scripts of sexuality and gender that produce her as [a] feminine subject" (297) can be resolved through the representation of a politically charged lesbianism, as sexuality, formerly the site of the regulation of Celie's subjectivity, becomes a site of "subversion" (298–304). The redefinition of "the conventional terminology for the female genitals" (Hite 266) also becomes the evidence for Celie's ability to "re-inscrib[e] the imprints and contours of her body in such a way as to allow self-expression" (Wall 261). Celie can alter her world, because the "reconstitution of society is largely a matter of redefinition, presented as the inevitable corollary of taking seriously the view from underneath" (Hite 266).

These positivistic interpretations of Celie's reconstruction of her subjectivity through re-marking the body are supported by the progressive developmental plot line that Walker's text shares with the conventional *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman* and by the text's utopian conclusion. However, they take the representation of Celie's "glance" in the mirror as an uncomplicated reflection of the body, and this "making visible" the body as synonymous and instantaneous with control over it. Although Celie does re-mark her body—noticing her clitoris and labia for the first time and redefining the discursive framework in which her body has been placed by using the metaphor of a "rose" (69)—just what

is made visible in Celie's re-inscribed cultural text of the body and how is it represented? And how does the specular image function in this cultural text? In the Lacanian psychoanalytic account of subject formation, the specular image in the mirror facilitates the subject's first mis-recognition as a unitary body, rather than a fragmented aggregate of sensations. This image of individual totality is a mis-recognition, not only because the image is idealized in that it projects aspects such as motor capacity that the infant does not yet share, but also because it is externalized and alienating. The source of its representation is, literally, a deception contained in an object external to the infant (2–4). The represented body offers the site for this mis-identification, and it situates “the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone” (Lacan 2).

Irigaray's radical questioning of Lacanian psychoanalytic theories of the formation of the subject suggests that they betray an ocularocentrism that excludes or appropriates the feminine and female desire in the process of the subject's mis-recognition; her theories thus call even further into question the possibility of Celie's glance in the mirror as a guarantee of subjectivity. Although the representation of Celie's genitals in the mirror may appear to offer a visible “presence” which elides the representation of feminine sexuality as lack or “*the horror of nothing to see*” (Irigaray, *This Sex* 26) in Lacan and Freud, and thus to offer a reflection of the sexual organs and sexual specificity of the feminine, Celie's re-visioning remains fixed on the precise bodily sites where culture has framed sex and gender problematically.¹⁸ Not only is it difficult to envision detaching the sexed body from the way in which subjectivity and culture have been defined in the novel, but the apparent redefinition of Celie's bodily sites (ugly to beautiful) remains within the masculinist paradigm of lack and excess accorded the feminine.

Celie's experiments with gendered performativity also take the form of her mimicry of Sofia's position of resistance, ultimately “talking back” to Mr. ___ as Sofia would. Whereas Squeak reflects Celie's physical submission, her rape functioning as a corollary to Celie's, Sofia, defined from the outset by her strength and power, contests the position of submission. Sofia refuses to be silenced verbally or physically by men, con-

tinuing to talk when Harpo and Mr. ___ walk into the room (a fact Celie notes with surprise [34]) and fighting back when Harpo begins to beat her in an attempt to assert his position of power in the family. Celie first takes on Sofia's subject position discursively, through her letters. As Celie begins to retell the story of Sofia's struggles in the white mayor's household, she lets Sofia's voice take over the narrative, allowing the first-person pronoun in her own letter to represent not her subjectivity but Sofia's, as if investigating the possibility of enacting Sofia's subject position as her own (90–92). Later, when Celie and Shug discover that Mr. ___ has been hiding Nettie's letters to Celie for years, Celie's anger transform her actions into an imitation of Sofia's: "I begin to feel a lightening in the head. Fore I know anything I'm standing hind his chair with his razor open. [. . .] All day long I act just like Sofia. I stutter. I mutter to myself. I stumble bout the house crazy for Mr. ___ blood. In my mind, he falling dead every which a way" (102–03). Finally, in two scenes frequently cited as evidence of Celie's ascension to a black feminine and lesbian subjectivity and voice, Celie adopts Sofia's position of resistance to deflect Mr. ___'s abuse of her back onto himself as she moves from silence to speech (170–72; 175–76).

Celie's imitation of Sofia can be read as the transformative power of the production of subject positions through the performative, with Celie successfully reinscribing or reconstructing an alternate subjectivity for herself. While Celie does gain liberation from Mr. ___ through her mimicry of Sofia, the unfortunate outcome of Sofia's resistance to the position of domestic submission ultimately calls into question the circumstances and context of Celie's own. The mayor's wife sees Sofia with her children and the prizefighter on the street and, after "[s]he look at the prizefighter car. She eye Sofia wristwatch" (76), she asks Sofia to act as her maid. As Tuzyline Jita Allan notes, the symbols of status threaten the mayor's wife's "class privilege and [provoke] jealousy and, consequently, a cutting-down-to-size reaction" (91). When Sofia defies her interpellation into the domestic narrative—a scene that re-enacts her physical resistance to Harpo and prefigures Celie's verbal resistance to Mr. ___—her defiance in a racial context fails. Constructed according to the domestic by the mayor's wife, Sofia verbally opposes her as

she has disputed Harpo, but her resistive discourse—“Hell no” (76)—transgresses the boundaries of submissive black behaviour. Interpreting black discourse materially, as Hodges has done with Squeak, the mayor responds by hitting Sofia, and her physical rejoinder results in her incarceration. Allan, reading the implications of class in this scene, sees it as a “lesson in humiliation [that . . .] serves to confirm Sofia’s racial inferiority. It is a painful reminder that neither shared gender nor economic success can make Sofia an equal of the white woman” (91–92). Sofia survives in prison only by acting like Celie. “How you manage? us ast. Every time they ast me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I’m you. I jump right up and do just what they say. She look wild when she say that” (78).

With the submissive subject position enforced upon her by whites, Sofia illustrates that the gendered disempowerment of black women is experienced as a consequence of race. The story of her predicament as a black servant for the white mayor’s family, in which the façade of benevolent white liberalism is undermined, makes clear the connections between the position of submission and racism.¹⁹ While the ambivalent outcome of Squeak’s “signifying” suggests that Celie’s liberation is delimited and localized, Sofia’s story recontextualizes Celie’s liberation from her gendered submission to Mr. ____, for in a racial context Sofia cannot escape a domesticized and subordinate “performance.” Washing laundry in prison, or on parole as the mayor’s maid, Sofia’s two options merge into a racialized Same, in which her salvation necessitates succumbing to the very construction she had initially resisted, adopting Celie’s submissive strategy of self-erasure to ensure her self-preservation. As Sofia illustrates, resistance to a racialized interpellation inevitably becomes sublimated into submission and self-erasure of the black subject, an internalized invisibility that ensures the false homogeneity of white culture.

As the novel comes to a close, the fragmented epistolary moments begin to collect together into their own textual body as Celie’s letters to Nettie return to her unopened in a bundle. The metaphor of quilting establishes the methodology whereby the letters form this corporeal text—a stitching together of epistolary fragments, a re-membering of

the torn limbs of the discourse by piecing together the disparate fragments into a tentative, fragile, and deliberately constructed entirety. The final discursive gesture is for the text to assert the fictional utopia of its own holism. The addressee of the concluding letter attempts discursive inclusivity and closure: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (242). And Celie transforms and reinscribes all of her losses as an utopian fiction of return. Africa joins with America; lost siblings reunite; male abusers become sisters in the sewing circle; confession becomes thanksgiving; age is transformed into youth, as the letters discount conventional temporality.²⁰ That this fictive holism of the discursive and communal body is provisional is made certain by Harpo, who makes ironic reference to their day of celebration taking place on July fourth, the holiday when whites celebrate an independence that does not include blacks.

Harpo’s reference to an all-but-absent racial context in this final scene underscores the constructedness of any assertion of familial or communal totality and thus the contingency inherent within it. As with the individual body, the communal body does not exist *a priori* as a foundation for cultural narratives of gender and race. The new collective established by Celie—a familial, sororal, and racial collective—is not a politically neutral communal body, but a body already marked and informed by culture and, as Nettie’s and Samuel’s recent experiences indicate and Harpo seems to imply, a body doomed to continue to be culturally marked in the future. As with the individual body, the communal body is a site of cultural performativity, with the sexed and ethnic markings a materializing of cultural differences that do not rest easily upon it. Though Africa may appear to unite with America on this occasion through Tashi’s emigration, the Olinkan disinterest in their connectedness with Nettie and Samuel undermines any romantic longing for a pan-African communal body, and the destruction of Olinkan culture to facilitate the production of rubber during the war bears witness to larger social and cultural forces that over-write racial communal concerns. The family’s admiration of Tashi’s and Adam’s markings may indicate a unification of the full spectrum of racial and cultural markings; however, Squeak’s concern that her light colour is the source of Harpo’s

attraction to her points to the viability of Tashi's fears that American blacks have internalized a preference for women who "bleach their faces [. . . and] try to look naked" (235). Even Mr. ___'s participation in a sororal sewing circle is a gendered supplement—a surplus to the domestic collectives already established, and part of the overdetermination of a concluding representation of a productive gendered economy.

The culminating portrait of a communal body, then, illustrates the same slippage between the materiality of its members and the cultural paradigms that initially seem to locate them collectively within gendered and racialized contexts. Reading this final letter as evidence of the assertion of communal and familial self-definition (as its utopianism prompts one to do), one perceives that cultural narratives begin to take the place of that communal body. It does so both by homogenizing the material differences of those who partake in it, as with Mr. ___ and Tashi, and, on the other hand, by "performing" a discursive surplus, the narrative desire for the cultural text of communal holism doing its best to smooth over even the representative tensions that remain. It is utopian holism itself that is now the overdetermined cultural text, so that it becomes difficult to ascertain what form that communal self-definition is attempting to take through the materiality of the collective body, as each individual gives up his or her resistance to interpellation by culture—as with the abandonment of sexual relationships for example, for the sake of the whole. Perhaps Walker has chosen to represent the inherent possibility residing within Bhabha's cultural hybrids or the potential sanctity of his "'inbetween' spaces" (1–2). However, the looming irony of the failure to effect full racial independence suggests that this, too, is a cultural imposition, a means of mapping out a cultural topography through the corporeal which manipulates bodily sites to accommodate the cultural narrative. What does not fully escape from the imposed utopian landscape in the concluding letter, then, is the threat to corporeal existence posed by these cultural narratives, as many of them are and have been produced by acts of violation. The insufficiency of the suturing of text to body, whether individual or communal, underscores the problem with imposing systems of cultural representation on materiality. Though marking bodies through culture brings the body and our

representative economies into visibility, we materialize cultural differences only by eradicating distinctions between what should be diverse cultural sites through the apparent self-evidence of the body. What we make visible through the body, then, forms the first of our many cultural mis-recognitions, the body's perception as the foundation for identity the primary paradigm for the continual dislocation of the body from culture.

Notes

1. This interpretation of the novel has been a critical commonplace since its publication. Some examples are: Ross; O'Connor; Proudfit; Babb; Dawson; Gates "Preface"; and Davis.
2. Walker's representation of the gendered implications of the cultural practice of female circumcision and clitoridectomy in these novels and in the book and film versions of *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Binding of Women* (coauthored with Pratibha Parmar) has become part of a political debate about the practice of first-world feminism as it engages with cultural traditions in the third world. My interest in this article is in the multiple frames of interpretation for Walker's fictional representation and the effects of those frames on our understanding of the cultural narratives of gender and race, not in the political implications of the text as a mimetic representation of contemporary cultural circumstances.
3. Heterosexuality is represented as torture in Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*: "he had cut her open with a hunting knife on their wedding night, and gave her no opportunity to heal.[. . .] The young woman explained that she bled. Her mother told her it would stop: that when she herself was cut open she bled for a year. She had also cried and run away" (138).
4. The stereotyping of black masculinity and the dichotomy between gender and race this stereotyping ostensibly creates is discussed by Harris; Bobo "Sifting through the Controversy"; Christian "But What Do We Think We're Doing," esp. 65; McDowell, esp. 88; hooks "Reading and Resistance," esp. 288; Bobo *Black Women*, 61–90; and Schwenk, 317–18. See also Morgan, who suggests that *The Color Purple* is "an allegorical construct which personifies the traditional gender roles of women as constituting slavery" (179).
5. The letters also lack any mention of the material conditions required for writing letters, such as a private place or space for the act of writing, the pens and papers with which to write, or a hiding place for them once they are written. Consequently, the represented letters appear to the reader as Celie comes to imagine her "self"—as disembodied and oddly non-corporeal. As bell hooks has noted, given the enormity of Celie's workload, her letter-writing takes on a fictitious and imaginary quality in the novel:

Taken at face value, Celie's letter writing appears to be a simple matter-of-fact gesture when it is really one of the most fantastical happenings in *The Color Purple*. Oppressed, exploited as a laborer in the field, as a worker in the domestic household, as sexual servant, Celie finds time to write—this is truly incredible. There is no description of Celie with pen in hand, no discussion of where and when she writes. She must remain invisible so as not to expose this essential contradiction—that as a dehumanized object she projects a self in the act of writing even as she records her inability to be self-defining. Celie as a writer is a fiction. (“Writing the Subject” 466)

6. Christine Froula, in “The Daughter’s Seduction: Sexual Violence and Literary History,” invokes the ambiguity of Celie’s writing as Walker’s representation and deconstruction of “the hysterical cultural script: the cultural text that dictates to males and females alike the necessity of silencing woman’s speech when it threatens the father’s power” (623).
7. My discussion of the ambiguous mark of gender focuses on the over-determination of maternal symbolism in the novel and on the structural effect of material erasure or disembodiment that the rapes and physical abuse have on Celie’s body. For a reading of the proliferation of masculine symbolism in the novel, including a discussion of black women’s oppression of other black women, see Allan’s “Womanism Revisited: Women and the (Ab)use of Power in *The Color Purple*.”
8. Irigaray argues that it becomes “unrealizable to *describe the being* of woman” (*Speculum* 21). When asked in *This Sex Which Is Not One* what the motivation for her work has been, Irigaray returns to this impossibility of “being sexualized” as feminine:

I am a woman. I am a being sexualized as feminine. I am sexualized female. The motivation of my work lies in the impossibility of articulating such a statement; in the fact that its utterance is in some way senseless, inappropriate, indecent. Either because *woman* is never the attribute of the verb *to be* nor *sexualized female* a quality of *being*, or because *am a woman* is not predicated of *I*, or because *I am sexualized* excludes the feminine gender. (*This Sex* 148–49)
9. I am borrowing the methodology of a sexual triangulation from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) and Luce Irigaray’s “Women on the Market” and “Commodities Among Themselves” in *This Sex Which Is Not One*.
10. That masculine legacy is an ambivalent patriarchal inheritance, which both subsumes masculine desire and eliminates the feminine, can be seen not only in Mr. ___’s reluctant submission to his father’s will when he marries, but in his emulation of his father’s bankrupt masculine heritage. When Harpo approaches his father, wanting to marry Sofia who is pregnant with his child, Mr. ___ questions

- the paternity of the child, just as his father had questioned the paternity of Shug Avery's children (Walker, *Purple* 104), and tries to prevent Harpo from marrying her. Though Harpo does marry Sofia, his own desire has been compromised by his father's dismissal of his wishes, and in compensation for the lost paternal blessing, Harpo himself begins to mimic his father's domination of Celie by attempting to beat Sofia, even though this imitation threatens his happiness.
11. As my reading of the overlapping representative economies of gender and race will illustrate, I approach the blurring of these cultural narratives quite differently from bell hooks. Hooks perceives that the focus on Celie's sexual oppression de-emphasizes the "collective plight of black people" and "invalidates [. . .] the racial agenda" ("Writing the Subject" 465). My interpretation ultimately argues that the cultural narratives reinforce each other.
 12. Earlier in the scene, Squeak succumbs to the denial of her white patronym when she claims she "Ain't got no daddy" (84).
 13. While Celie and Squeak are obviously raped, the nature of the relationship between Squeak's mother and Jimmy Hodges is less clear. The secrecy surrounding his paternity and Squeak's embarrassment when she must reveal him as her father may indicate the possibility of a coercive relationship between Hodges and her mother. Bubber Hodges' assumption that he has sexual access to Squeak against her will, while on the one hand an assumption based upon racial inequity, may stem in part from his brother's attitude toward Squeak's mother (81).
 14. There are some questionable aspects to Newton's characterization of drag here. First, she uses gendered attributes even for bodily definitions, when it would be more usual, as Butler later outlines, to counterpose the sexed body (male) with the gendered performance (feminine). As well, her second "opposition," between a "masculine" body and a "feminine" essence or being, misreads the cultural practices of drag and cross-dressing within a heterosexual paradigm.
 15. In this particular discussion, Butler relies upon a distinction between anatomy and gender that does not apply to Celie's case. "If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance" (137). However, Butler's larger project in *Gender Trouble* is to articulate gender as a structure of impersonation, a gesture or corporeal style not founded by a sexed body.
 16. Celie also imitates what she imagines to be Shug's heterosexual activity with Mr. _____. Again, Mr. _____ interprets her sexuality conventionally, but their persistent sexual failure—"Us don't git nowhere much" (95)—undermines his heteronormative interpretation.
 17. In this way, I read Celie's adoption of the position of the heterosexual feminine as different from Irigaray's notion of "mimicry," in which the position accorded the feminine is neither accepted nor refuted, but strategically adopted in order

- to explore the dislocation of the subject from a masculinist interpretation of the feminine. Although Celie's "drag" performance may operate as Irigarayan "mimicry" for the reader, it does not do so for her.
18. Irigaray attempts to move beyond the genital definition of the body in her discussion of the morphology of the placenta in *Je, tu, nous*, and Shoshana Felman articulates the navel as a crucial link to reproduction in *What Does Woman Want?* (112–20).
 19. Pretending they are doing Sofia a favour by allowing her to work out her prison sentence as a maid in their house, offering Sofia her first day off in five years one Christmas and then arranging circumstances so that she can spend only fifteen minutes with her family, the white family blames blacks for their failure to retain the benevolent institution of slavery, even as Sofia's circumstances clearly indicate that the institution has been perpetuated. See Allan (91–4) for an extended analysis of racial and gendered politics between Sofia and the mayor's wife, Miz Millie, and her daughter, Eleanor Jane.
 20. Steven C. Weisenburger, in "Errant Narrative and *The Color Purple*," recounts the problems in assigning temporal order to the novel. At the novel's conclusion, Olivia and Adam should be well into or even beyond their thirties (259–60).

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