"You have seen how a [wo]man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a [wo]man": Alice Walker's The Color Purple as a Neo-Slave Narrative

The nineteenth century popularized the art of the slave narrative—the "pioneer of the Afro-American novel" (Bell 29). According to James Olney, each slave narrative was "a unique production" as an autobiography, and "Is not every autobiography the unique tale, uniquely told, of a unique life?" (148). Despite its uniqueness, however, each slave narrative is also predictable insofar as it represents its genre: it tells the story of a black slave's struggle for literacy and freedom, while testifying against the "peculiar institution," which in practice meant human bondage and humiliation (Gates, "Introduction" ix). For many years slave narratives were overlooked and deemed of little importance to the American literary tradition. Their credibility and authenticity were questioned until black scholars initiated meticulous research into, and analysis of, the genre.

In the 1920s and 1930s the Federal Writers' Project commenced, amassing testimonies of bondage, thus providing painful and graphic illustrations of North America's chattel slavery and helping establish a legitimate African-American literary tradition. It was, however, the mid-twentieth century, especially the civil rights era, that brought about a formal rebirth of the slave narrative tradition. This literary form has inspired twentieth-century black writers' imagination and creativity, and induced them, in the words of Bernard Bell, to "experiment with modern forms of slave narratives," which led to the birth of the "neo-slave narrative" (245). This generic transformation, according to Beaulieu, is "one of the most powerful developments in the twentieth-century American literature" (4). Contemporary African-American writers recognize the vitality of the genre, and in their fictional or partly-fictional novels they make overt references to slavery and the slaves' lot. Toni Morrison's Beloved, Margaret Walker's Jubilee, Ernest J. Gaines' The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, and Octavia E. Butler's Kindred are but a few examples of the growing sub-genre. Its modern-day continuation is evident in works such as Phyllis Alesia Perry's Stigmata, Alice Walker's The Color Purple. This last case, however, requires a more detailed analysis.
While the slave narrative was "presented as nonfiction," the neo-slave narrative, its contemporary offspring, was "autobiographical fiction" (Foster x). The latter form was readily employed by black postmodernist writers in the process of rediscovering the beauty and vitality of their own folklore tradition: black English, music and religion (Bell 284). Neo-slave narratives depicted practices of "a vital slave culture" as means of coping with a hostile reality and an antioxidant to "becoming the docile or absolutely servile automatons found in the stereotypes of the plantation romance tradition," refusing to have their spirits broken down (Rushdy 533). Slaves cherished their folk culture by telling folk tales, by singing, and dancing. Women especially took to artistic expression, for example quilting. The protagonist of The Color Purple—Celie—lives in oppressive conditions in her own household and initially her method of sustenance is writing to God. Then she begins to make a quilt: "Me and Sofia work on the quilt. Got it frame up on the porch. Shug Avery donate her old yellow dress for scrap, and I work in a piece every chance I get" (The Color Purple 61). This quilt-making can be interpreted as a subconscious attempt to piece herself together and endure her joyless lot. She does not plan an escape or any personal uprising, as many slaves had in the past.

Rushdy maintains that neo-slave narratives were characterized by "the use and celebration of 'oral' modes of representation" (533). Orality was a feature dating back to the times of slavery when many tales were told and re-told in the slave cabins. Because it was inherent in the slave culture, slave-writers attempted to install this verbal quality into their written narratives and oral performances—tools of the antislavery crusade. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues, the "black speaking subject" strove for more than two centuries "to find his or her voice," and this ambition and hope for some articulateness constitutes the "most central trope" in the African-American literary tradition (Signifying 239). According to Butler-Evans, in The Color Purple Walker employs this trope of orality and weaves it into the narrative strategy (163). This "interjection of verbal discourse" (163) manifests itself in Celie's precious and unique gift—she possesses a lively command of black English, which has been a hallmark of the African-American oral tradition and its vivid expression (163). Butler-Evans argues that Celie's first-person narration does not attest to the fact that she is writing, but that she is in fact speaking or, as Gates asserts, "she writes her speaking voice and that of everyone who speaks to her" ("Color..." 243). Celie's language is marked by black English grammar, colloquialisms, characteristic spelling, ordinary speech-like qualities of sentences, and is more reminiscent of informal dialogue than of a written form (Butler-Evans 163-164). Gates remarks that we as readers have an impression of "overhearing people speak," for Celie's written narration is "identical in diction and idiom to the supposedly spoken words that pepper her letters" (Signifying 249).
briefly outlines the history of the genre and divides it into two time periods: "before and after 1966" (534). The Sixties with their Civil Rights Movement opened university careers to black scholars and urged historians to focus their attention on slave narratives and visions of history these narratives depicted (534). A surge of novels on American slavery followed. Rushdy continues to distill further divisions and specifications within the sub-genre, arriving at a list of four types of neo-slave narratives written in the "post-civil rights era": "historical novels about slavery," "contemporary novels about the ongoing effects of slavery," "genealogical accounts tracing family roots," and "contemporary adaptations of traditional slave narratives"' form and conventions (534-535).

The major characteristic of the neo-slave narrative is, according to Rushdy, the representation of chattelhood "as a historical phenomenon that has lasting cultural meaning and enduring social consequences" (533). While this trait is overtly represented in Margaret Walker's Jubilee or in Morrison's Beloved, where literal slavery is ubiquitous, The Color Purple's allusions to the legacy of this system are less apparent. I would like to place The Color Purple within the literary tradition of the neo-slave narratives, and demonstrate that it fits into Rushdy's category of "contemporary novels about the ongoing effects of slavery" (535). He labels them "palimpsest narratives," because they usually involve stumbling upon some sort of a narrative, or a story inherited from an ancestor slave. He characterizes them as first-person writing featuring "a contemporary African-American subject" who functions within "modern social relations that are directly conditioned or affected by an incident, event, or narrative from the time of slavery," and who usually experiences some sort of personal destruction due to the legacy of slavery as it exists in the collective memory (535). Celia is enslaved by her husband, because he has internalized the racist stereotypes of the master-slave position as exercised during the times of slavery. In Audre Lorde's rewording of Paulo Freire's assertions expressed in The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, the patriarchs from her immediate surrounding are guilty of having this "place of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactics, the oppressors' relationships." These patterns must be subject to immediate change and revision if we hope for a non-sexist and non-racist society (Lorde 287).

The underlying concepts of the neo-slave narratives are trauma and postmemory, and in her novel Alice Walker unpacks these notions from the point of view of a black female author. These psychological phenomena occur years after the actual tragic event took place. Robert Burns Stepto sees "remembering" as the "most impressive feature of slave narrative" (225), while Barbara Christian adds that it is "a critical determinant," for it defines the manner in which "we value the past, what we remember, what we select to emphasize, what we forget" (333) and what writers choose as their subject matter. Carl Plasa and Betty Ring recognize this phenomenon and state that "forms of historical reflection play a crucial role in any attempt to counteract oppression in the present: a culture that seeks to evade the more violent aspects of its own history will only perpetuate them" (xiii). If "remembering" was pivotal to antebellum slave narratives, then my contention is that post-remembering, also referred to as postmemory, or "re-memory" (Christian 329), has been incorporated into the contents of the neo-slave narratives, and has bridged the past (hence the "postness") with the present (hence the "neoness").

In her essay "Mother's Milk and Sister's Blood: Trauma and the Neoslave Narrative," Naomi Morgenstern analyzes Deborah McDowell's evocation of the theory of trauma and how it is related to the compulsion of remembering, retelling and rewriting the experience of slavery, resulting in such literary forms as the neo-slave narrative, "the twentieth-century novel about slavery" (Morgenstern 101). McDowell presupposes that repeating the stories of the past is an effort to claim control over history (Morgenstern 101), or as Timothy Cox puts it "to recover the past and to recover from it" (Cox 2). Morgenstern, however, suggests that the neo-slave narrative "marks the undesirable return of an unforgettable past" (102), thus giving birth to postmemory, which has lingered at the back of our heads, waiting to be unleashed and allowed to interrogate the past. It is not irrational to assert that, Walker, as a black American conscious of her people's past, has carried the burden of postmemory all her life and vented its fragmented aspects into her writing, which is haunted by denigrated images of black women. Cox asserts that the neo-slave narratives (he coins his own terms for this sub-genre: novel slavery novel, new literature on slavery, the New World slavery novel, recent slavery novel) "create a time-space in the past for working through questions of the present" (3). Accordingly, The Color Purple constitutes an attempt to quell the fragments of history together, to show enslavement as it is carried on in the twentieth-century environment, and to articulate questions of how to counteract this morbid, internalized legacy of racism and sexism. Walker admits that "all history is current; all injustice continues on some level" (qtd. in Davis, T. 26), and informs her writing with issues of twentieth-century personal struggle for freedom of all kinds (30).

Morgenstern bases her analysis on two neo-slave narratives, Gayl Jones' Corregidora and Toni Morrison's Beloved. The novels' plots are brimming with traumatized memory of past events that influence the contemporary protagonists' life. Bearing witness, giving testimony, Morgenstern insists, is an integral element of the African-American experience: it stems from the compulsion to articulate and reanimate the history of violence as lived by blacks (105). Slave narratives are the earliest written evidence of this compulsion. If, as she claims, the neo-slave narratives are "fictional testimonial literature" evoking the painful memory of slavery (105), then The Color Purple can also be viewed as such. The
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*Color Purple* employs themes of an antebellum slave narrative and implicitly refers to the legal system of chattel slavery while telling a traumatized tale of sexual oppression and violence. The protagonist is not haunted with the memory of past ordeals of her people, but she faces her own enslavement and her own traumas. Neo-slave narratives come to life out of a growing need to share an ancestral tale of slavery, to pass it on to the next generations. Moreover, Walker attested to that tradition by rewriting her grandmother's traumatic experience. She adapted the form of the slave narrative and produced a legitimate, one-of-a-kind contemporary neo-slave narrative.

John Bayliss observed that slave narratives are “the Blues in prose,” for they record the hardships as they were experienced in order to commemorate them and come to terms with them (9). The African slaves’ musical inclinations were a coping mechanism developed by their culture. Eleanor Traylor analyzed the theme of music, the blues in particular, in Margaret Walker’s neo-slave narrative *Jubilee*. She asserts that “a legacy of two centuries of singing” cannot pass unnoticed in contemporary African-American creativity (Traylor 512). This “blues mode of Afro-American narrative and fiction,” which manifests itself in the oral qualities of many texts, becomes an embodiment of tradition and uniqueness, an “ancestral touchstone” (513). *Jubilee* abounds with quotations of spirituals, gospel and early blues songs. Alice Walker also paid a tribute to this tradition by placing the blues-singer protagonist Shug Avery in *The Color Purple*. While the book only hints at the songs she is repeatedly humming, Quincy Jones, a musician, co-authored the score to Steven Spielberg’s film version of the novel, thus giving a specific shape to our fantasies of the blues-singing and performing Shug. Along with Rod Temperton and Lionel Richie, Jones wrote “Miss Celie’s Blues (Sister),” a song which presents the quintessence of African-American female experience from a historical point of view. It is a woman’s manifesto song, which Alice Walker “immediately imagined as a signal of affirmation that women could hum to each other coast to coast” and saw as “an immeasurable gift to the bonding of women” (The Same... 31). Shug addresses and dedicates the song to Celie, with whom she begins to form a personal female bond—only a step away from establishing a supportive community of women.

Slave narratives contained themes of black Americans’ tradition, be it telling stories, quilting, dancing or singing spirituals and early blues compositions. By incorporating this particular element of African-American tradition—singing the blues—Alice Walker, later on aided by Jones’ musical rendition of Shug’s presence, equips us with evidence proving that her novel can be seen as a neo-slave narrative, which will accompany her in this process of recreating the “enslaved motherhood” (Beauiieu 25). Moreover, each of these writers reawakens not only “the woman who is her enslaved ancestor,” but also “the woman who is herself” (25). This concludes with “personally driven and socially charged” literature—the neo-slave narrative—which pays a tribute to the tradition as well as “creates it” (25). For Beauiieu these narratives are “imaginative in ways [their] predecessor could not possibly be and yet factual in content and faithful to the spirit of the original slave narratives” and “responsible for adding a new voice into American literary discourse” (143). As Andrews puts it, the neo-slave narratives “testify to the continuing vitality of the slave narrative, as contemporary African-American writers probe the origins of psychological as well as social oppression and critique the meaning of freedom” (670).

Alice Walker recognizes her literary and cultural heritage, she “celebrates her people” and manifests “a deeply-rooted consciousness of her role as an artist in a socially and politically complex world” (Davis, T. 32). As a black writer, she is aware of her people’s folk tradition and pays homage to her ancestors by conceiving a neo-slave narrative that features a twentieth-century female character, who—although living under the yoke of psychological and social “slavery” imposed on her by the patriarchs of her clan—is capable of re-affirming and re-claiming her self.

In order to grasp the structural essence of the literary tradition of slave narratives, and their subsequent adaptations and variations, and to speculate about Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) as a contemporary variation on this form, I have examined recognized critics’ definitions of the slave narrative as a genre. In what follows we will examine the specific plot analogies between Alice Walker’s novel and Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published in 1861. I will juxtapose the nineteenth-century and twentieth-century contexts by analyzing the relation between Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents* and *The Color Purple*, and demonstrate a parallelism of plots, in order to substantiate the contention that Alice Walker wrote a slavery novel including a motif of the slave-master relation—a neo-slave narrative.

According to Frances Smith Foster, slave narratives are “the personal accounts by black slaves and ex-slaves of their experiences in slavery and of their efforts to obtain freedom” (Foster 3). They were retrospective accounts stating, and sometimes creating, the slave’s identity. They soon became political acts challenging this “peculiar institution” of exploitation and domination. The authors used a simple, but graphic style bearing in mind the need to reach diverse sensibilities, and the subject matter they sought to express was “the inhuman and immoral characteristics of slavery” (3). Slave narratives employed a set of conventions, recurrent themes which were deemed representative of the slave’s lot, and therefore determined the form and content of the narratives. I will...
mostly address themes related to women's situation during slavery. The recurring plot patterns characteristic of the genre concern, for example, the woman's treatment as a human being as opposed to her status as a slave, the peril of being a woman, the tragedy and frustration of being a mother, and the woman's survival instinct which gives birth to the spirit of an activist.

I have chosen *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, because this particular narrative is considered exemplary of the slave narrative genre in general, despite the fact that for quite a long time academia focused its interest on the narratives authored by male slaves, thus leaving out half of the story of slavery (Braxton 18). Joanne Braxton states that slave women were often represented by men as helpless mothers, or "as degraded and dehumanized individuals who have lost their self-respect and self-esteem" (19). Jacobs' account depicts a different type of first-hand experience, thus bringing up from obscurity "an archetype of an outraged mother" (19) and an ardent freedom fighter who refuses to comply with the rules of bondage forced upon her. She is a mother "because motherhood was virtually unavoidable under slavery," and she is outraged "because of the intimacy of her oppression" (19). As one of thousands of slaves in the slave-holding South, she is "an element" or exemplification of this system, but she is also enslaved as an individual, within her immediate, intimate context: her white master wants to reign in her own bed and would go to any lengths to have her succumb to his will.

After a relatively enjoyable childhood spent first with her slave parents, and later on with a kind mistress, Jacobs is willed to a five-year old white girl, whose stepfather, Dr. Flint, desires to gain complete control over the slave. A lifetime of sexual oppression commences for Jacobs, who is determined not to submit to her master's lust. She is not allowed to marry the free black man she cares for. However, she insists on picking her lover herself, and—to her master's outrage and amazement—has an affair with a white man, Dr. Sands, who fathers her two children. Dr. Sands promises to emancipate them, yet it is not due to his efforts that they eventually obtain their freedom. Jacobs flees North and there, thanks to the kindness and compassion of Mrs. Bruce, her white employer, hers and her children's freedom is guaranteed with a bill of sale.

The 1861 publication of *Incidents* marked a new era in the African-American literary tradition of slave narratives. So far only men had voiced their victimization under slavery and had very briefly and from a very different perspective mentioned the condition of female slaves. *Incidents* was a revolutionary work in that it paved the way for other female authors to voice their experience and to address an involved audience that would listen. The *Color Purple*, published only twenty years ago, continued the tradition of *Incidents* like revelation, and verbalized tabooed, yet legitimate issues referring to women's experience as human beings, women, wives, mothers, daughters, sisters.

While *Incidents* had been welcomed as a controversial, yet worthy and eye-opening tool in the abolitionist activism, *The Color Purple* incited much fierce censure, as well as widespread national attention. It also opened new horizons in the ongoing debate on the position of black women in the discourse of feminism. Numerous critics dismissed and condemned Walker's book because it did not fulfill their expectations of what a good black novel should be like. Walker writes in one of her essays: "The attacks, many of them personal and painful, continued for many years, right alongside the praise (...) I often felt isolated, deliberately misunderstood and alone" (*The Same...*) (22) She catalogues the charges she was faced with: that she hated black men; that because of her work and other women's being published black male writers were having difficulties publishing their writing; that her "ideas of equality and tolerance were harmful, even destructive to the black community" (22). Walker confessed that "of all the accusations, it was hardest to tolerate the charge that I hated black men. From infancy I have relied on the fiercely sweet spirits of black men; and this is abundantly clear in my work" (23). Walker was also accused of "degrading" black speech, but the novel "was deliberately written in a way that would not intimidate (...) readers (...) with only a grade school education and a lifetime of reading the Bible, newspapers and magazine articles" (24). Walker claims that "when *The Color Purple* was published and later filmed, it was a rare critic who showed compassion for, or even noted, the suffering of the women and children explored in the book, while I was called a liar for showing that black men sometimes perpetuate domestic violence" (39). When Spielberg offered to adapt the book into a movie, Walker was reluctant: "I feel some panic. I want so much for this to be good. Something to lift spirits and encourage people" (18). When the movie was finally released, Walker had mixed feelings, yet she realized the undertaking was a challenge well-worth the effort: "Having a film made of one's book is an agonizingly complex gamble, with hundreds of people having something to say. Though *The Color Purple* is not what many wished, it is more than many hoped, or had seen on a movie screen before" (40-41). Both the book and the movie had their enthusiasts and enemies, which is bound to be the case whenever controversial themes are at stake.

*The Color Purple* tells the story of Celie, a poor, barely literate black woman living in the South. As a fourteen-year old girl she is repeatedly raped and beaten by her "Pa," and sacrifices herself for her sister Nettie, whom "Pa" also wants to rape. She has two babies by her "Pa," and he gives them away. Then she is forced by him to marry Mr. , a nameless patriarch and a widower with four children, who mistreats her even more and conceives of her as a "mule." She is his servant, who, while raising his children, constitutes "an occasional sexual convenience" (Watkins 16). Her beloved sister runs away and goes to Africa. The vicious Mr. intercepts the letters she writes to Celie. After the first traumatic
event Celie takes to writing a diary in the form of letters to God, and right before our eyes she “writes herself into being” (Gates, *Signifying* 239). One day Mr.____ brings home his sick lover Shug Avery, a charismatic blues singer, for Celie to nurse back to life. Celie launches her long journey to mental and physical liberation when she forms a supportive relationship with Shug, first as her friend, then as her lover. She leaves Mr.____ and starts her own business designing and making pants. The book ends with a family reunion: Celie’s children and her sister Nettie come home, and, surprisingly enough, Celie becomes friends with Mr.____, whom she learns to address by his first name, Albert.

Black female slaves wove autobiographical texts focusing on the oppressed woman’s journey from literal, physical bondage to freedom. *Incidents* is a good example of such a plot. Even though Celie is a fictional character, and her enslavement is enforced first by her black stepfather and later by her husband, her experience was modeled on the lot of Walker’s own ancestral figure: her grandmother was violated at the age of twelve by her master, i.e. the author’s own grandfather (Henderson 67). The plots of these two books differ discernibly, yet they employ common motifs of the enslaved woman’s ordeals. Jacobs lived under a slavery sanctioned by the white, male-dominated American society, while Celie endured paralyzing bondage from the hands of black patriarchs: her stepfather and her husband. Jacobs fought most of her life, whereas Celie needed a spiritual awakening of her strong inner self in order to commence the battle for her own freedom, voice and happiness.

Walker adapts the form of the slave narrative to her own purposes: she makes Celie’s journey to freedom individualized and very specific. Walker modifies the conventions of the genre with respect to racial conflict and oppression. While *Incidents* have a white slaveholder as the oppressor, *The Color Purple* features black patriarchs. Both works, however, “prioritize” the sexual bondage of their heroines as pivotal to their experiences and consequent struggle for self-sovereignty.

We have examined the similarities between the plots of *Incidents* and *The Color Purple*. Let us now proceed to a detailed analysis of situations which are parallel in both works, despite the gap of over one century between their dates of publication. As mentioned before, slave narratives included certain leitmotifs and stock conventions constituting the pattern of the plot. *The Color Purple* modifies these requirements, following some more attentively than others. I will group the recurrent plotting devices according to their commonalities. Slave autobiographies authored by women told stories of females who were treated like chattel property, mistreated as human beings, mothers and women, and grew to become survivors and activists.

The course of a female slave’s life was determined by obligatory work that significantly overshadowed all the remaining activities of her existence such as familial responsibilities. Slave women were seen as “profitable labor-units” (Davis, A. 5) and toiled for the white man’s economic benefits. Jacobs is a servant and a nursemaid for white men’s babies, while Celie plays all the roles assigned to black female slaves in the previous centuries: she labors in the field, kitchen, and in the washroom: “she can work like a man” (*The Color Purple* 9). Significantly, she, too, nurses someone else’s children. Her life as a family slave is a chain of degrading experiences, unhappiness and hard work.

Viewed not only as a commodity and a worker, but also as a breeder, the female slave was subjected to economic exploitation in the literal sense: her body produced more slaves’ bodies for her owner. Her children were often sold away from her, or the slave herself might be sold. Slave markets were a venue of human degradation. Jacobs witnessed one herself but escaped this humiliating lot. Sandi Russell claims that passages in *The Color Purple*, like the one below, make the reader think of a nineteenth-century slave narrative (Russell 130): “She ugly. He say. But she ain’t no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it” (*The Color Purple* 9). Thus advertised, Celie is sold to her husband. She is not placed on the slaves’ auction block, yet she is treated like a commodity by her “Pa” and Mr.____. As Mae Henderson rightly points out “the buyer” comes for an inspection (69):

He say, Let me see her again.
Pa call me. (...) Like it wasn’t nothing. Mr.____ want another look at you.
I go stand in the door. The sun shine in my eyes. He’s still up on his horse. He look me up and down.
Pa rattle his newspaper. Move up, he won’t bite, he say.
I go closer to the steps, but not too close cause I’m a little scared of his horse.
Pa look me, but not too close cause I’m a little scared of his horse.
I turn round Pa say,
I turn round. (*The Color Purple* 11-12)

The transaction is agreed upon when Pa assures Mr.____ that a cow is “still coming” along (*The Color Purple* 12). Celie shares the female slave’s experience of being sold away as “a voiceless chattel” (Willis 119), except that she is not handed over to a white slave owner, but to her future husband. She is sold away into a loveless marriage where all that awaits her are back-breaking chores and humiliation.

Physical abuse was a part of daily existence, both for male and female slaves. Masters exercised random brutality as well as systematic violence upon their slaves in order to keep them in their place. If a woman spoke “too sassy” to her master or mistress, she would be mercilessly flogged by the overseer or the master himself. If caught running away, she would have the letter “R” branded on her skin. Throughout her life Jacobs witnessed many atrocities. She managed to avoid certain experiences, but she had a fair share of torment from her master. She proves to be a clever narrator, aware of the future role her narrative will play in the abolitionist cause, for under the pretext of telling the reader what has not
been a part of her own experience, she catalogs various abuses and crimes of slavery, as she has seen them happening around her.

"Pa" and Mr. abuse and objectify Ceiie without a second thought. Violence becomes a tool for controlling her and crushing her spirit. They treat her as if she were a thing, their property, as if she had no feelings. Mel Watkins pinpoints the following quote: when Mr. 's oldest son, Harpo, asks him why he beats Ceiie he replies: "Cause she my wife" (qtd. in Watkins 16). Ceiie endures this abuse: "He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Ceiie, get the belt. (...) It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Ceiie, you a tree" (qtd. in Watkins 16).

The narratives of slaves emphasized and insisted on the slave women's status as human beings. Jacobs objects to inhumane treatment: "When he told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in everything; that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt half so strong" (352). Though she is probably the least powerful being under the system of slavery, Jacobs will not settle for her own degradation, which she has made up her mind to resist. Ceiie, despite her troubled body, mind and soul and the overwhelming abuse she has to suffer daily, learns how to forgive, how to heal her wounds and how to liberate herself from under the influence of the ruthless patriarchs.

Hard labor, floggings and mutilation were common to the male and female slaves. Jacobs objects to inhumane treatment: "When he told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in everything; that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt half so strong" (352). Though she is probably the least powerful being under the system of slavery, Jacobs will not settle for her own degradation, which she has made up her mind to resist. Ceiie, despite her troubled body, mind and soul and the overwhelming abuse she has to suffer daily, learns how to forgive, how to heal her wounds and how to liberate herself from under the influence of the ruthless patriarchs.

Apart from the economic aspects of rape, it was the white master's idea of extra-marital sexual encounters without having to face legal punishment. Dr. Flint is infamous for his sexual relations with female slaves and his desire for control. When Jacobs is only fifteen years old, he wants her to the point of obsession. He manipulates each situation so as to have her submit to him. Thus, it is in the context of sexual pressure that she begins to experience first hand the cruelties of slavery. Jacobs objects to inhumane treatment: "When he told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in everything; that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt half so strong" (352). Though she is probably the least powerful being under the system of slavery, Jacobs will not settle for her own degradation, which she has made up her mind to resist. Ceiie, despite her troubled body, mind and soul and the overwhelming abuse she has to suffer daily, learns how to forgive, how to heal her wounds and how to liberate herself from under the influence of the ruthless patriarchs.

The experience to Shug Aver, her husband's lover: "I don't like it all. What is it like? He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain't there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep" (The Color Purple 81); "He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged, Nobody ever love me, I say" (117). She recounts these secrets to Shug, who immediately scorns Mr. for treating Ceiie object-like and develops feelings of contempt towards her former lover. Thus, both Ceiie and Jacobs are sexually abused. In Ceiie's case the abuse was fulfilled, while Jacobs' it was resisted and finally conquered, but the parallel is nonetheless significant. Moreover, both picta give the heroines a chance to tell another woman about their sexual oppression, and both examine the consequences of such confidences.

Initially Ceiie is not allowed to choose her beloved. In the course of the novel, as she undergoes a metamorphosis and liberation of the mind, body, and soul, she falls in love with Shug—a vibrant independent woman. Jacobs is also not allowed to marry the black man she chooses. Dr. Flint makes it clear to her that he wants her as his concubine. He disparages her capacity for love; according to him, slaves have no free will and no mind to decide. He threatens to have her jailed or to kill her, and schemes to break her spirit. Against all adversities, she
claims her right to love whoever she will. She is not allowed to marry the man of her choice, but no one can stop her from having a relationship with a white man, Dr. Sands, who eventually fathers her children. Both Cee and Jacobs triumph over their masters, each choosing her own preferred kind of love, one charged heavily with social taboo. A black female slave has an affair with a white gentleman, not her master; a black woman feels for another black woman—willful miscegenation and lesbianism, both in the name of love and personal autonomy.

Slaveholders refused to see slave women as mothers and perceived them as "instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labor force" (Davis, A. 7) who were, more often than not, denied the "luxuries" of traditional motherhood. Masters sold their slaves’ children to far-off plantations, thus destroying, sometimes irreparably, the family structure among slaves. Jacobs’ first baby is a son, her second a girl: “When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women” (405). Jacobs is deeply upset by the fact that her children are born as slaves. Because she knows what awaits female slaves from the hands of their lecherous white masters, she is already worried about her daughter’s future.

Both Cee and Jacobs are mothers who experience a phase of frustrated motherhood, but in the end were reunited with their children. When Jacobs can no longer endure Dr. Flint’s abuse, she runs away. While in hiding, she has to part with her children for almost seven years. More separations follow until she is freed, but undoubtedly her children are her links to life, a reason to continue. Literacy (and the quest for it) was irreplaceable in the slaves’ journey to freedom. Cee initially writes (to God) because she is ashamed of what happened to her. She is not yet conscious of the process of writing in terms of self-definition and gaining power. It is her subsequent telling of her story to Shug that sets her free. She ceases to address her letters to God, and writes to Nettie, a change which constitutes "an act of self-affirmation" (hooks 225).

In the course of her lifetime Jacobs grows stronger, whereas Cee first discovers the strength in herself and then learns how to exercise it and how to claim agency over her life. Jacobs was humiliated and objectified, yet she persevered, cherishing the thought of being free one day. Her inner strength stems partly from her relatively happy and intact childhood, and partly from her grandmother’s power of spirit and ongoing heartfelt support. Not all women slaves had such luck, yet many were able to resist, thanks to the support given them by their communities, and especially by other women.

Cee’s awakened homosexuality comes as a revelation of a new, alternative form of love. When Jacobs says: "Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others" (386), she, too, demands a new standard of morality, new definition of womanhood. Jacobs, having had a voluntary liaison with a white man, asks for the reader’s authorization and understanding, while Cee simply lives her life loving Shug and asks no one for permission. Both works were controversial due to their overt treatment of taboo subjects: sexuality and sexual exploitation. While Jacobs was supported in her literary initiative by a white woman, her editor Lydia Maria Child, and rewarded with a wide readership, Alice Walker’s under taking was recognized by the prize her book was awarded—The Pulitzer, and by the successful film adaptation.

Slave narratives and The Color Purple have one more important feature in common: they end on an optimistic note. Jacobs escapes bondage, gains freedom and bears witness to the inhuman oppression exercised by whites. She speaks up as an activist in the anti-slavery campaign. Cee escapes another kind
of slavery: an abusive husband and family. In the end, she wins all forms of empowerment and fulfillment: love, capital, happiness, and independence. "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time" (The Color Purple 222).

Nineteenth-century slave narratives marked the beginning of the African-American novelistic tradition. These autobiographical works told true tales of chattel slavery and its horrors. They also told stories of a slave's quest for literacy, independence and freedom. Alice Walker is well aware of the black literary tradition, she acknowledges and praises the authors and their works in many of her essays. I have attempted to prove that The Color Purple is fashioned after antebellum slave narratives. The slavery this contemporary novel depicts is no longer a legal system of chattel slavery: it represents subjugation endorsed and exercised in a post-slavery family context. By comparing it with Harriet Jacobs' The Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl written in 1861, I wanted to point at the thematic analogies and bring to light as many plot parallelisms as possible, thus showing the presence of conventions characteristic of the traditional slave testimony. While Incidents were written during the time of abolitionism and at the outset of women's rights activism, The Color Purple came as a result of its author's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and her concern for the welfare of black women. Walker adapted the form of a slave narrative, and produced a legitimate, contemporary neo-slave narrative featuring a twentieth-century black female character, who—although living in a state of psychological and social slavery imposed on her by the males in her family—is capable of liberating herself and claiming her inalienable right to be happy, free and independent.

WORKS CITED


