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When Women Write Loudly:

Late 20th Century Feminist Fiction as Commentary and Consciousness-Raising Tools

A Thesis in English

by

Cece Ewing

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Abstract

The thesis examines *Fear of Flying* by Erica Jong (1973), *The Women's Room* by Marylin French (1977), *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (1982), and *Thelma and Louise* (1991) as examples of popular feminist fiction respective to the decade in which they were released. The works provide examples of consciousness-raising fiction in late 20th century America and how it has evolved over three decades. The thesis looks at some of the constants of feminist discourse such as sexual violence, while it also looks at the more shifting themes that emerge such as the nuclear family, intersectionality, and forms of resistance for women. Examining these texts in terms of their historical contexts reveals how they are informed by the political space they occupy and how the authors of those works intervene in the gender politics being discussed in the world around them.

By looking at these texts along a timeline, there is a possibility for variance in women's stories, but also a shift in the types of female characters allowed to exist in feminist fiction. While early protagonists are permitted to resist patriarchal oppression, they have no opportunity for moral ambiguity. But even in later works, the home has not stopped representing a form of entrapment. Each text offers intervention by the authors in the gender politics they face, whether that involves the nuclear family, female sexuality, intersectionality, anger, or retaliation. Looking back provides a timeline of how feminist politics have shifted over time and gives a clearer picture of how feminist fiction can be examined and defined today.

Table of Contents

Introduction

This honors thesis project will be focused on examining late twentieth-century U.S. fiction that has explicitly engaged with existing struggles around gender and sexuality. Beginning in the 1970s at the burst of the women's liberation movement and continuing through the 1990s, the project will discuss widely consumed popular fiction that has been considered by many to be feminist. Additionally, it will discuss how those works of popular culture were affected by the politics of their time, as well as how those works talked back to mainstream, patriarchal culture in the late 20th century United States. This will allow for an examination of how fiction interacts with real-world politics and how fiction can provide wide-scale consciousness-raising effects for those who consume it. Each chapter will include historical context in order to recognize how each work has been shaped by the time period, and how that work then debates the contradictions and arguments that the women's liberation movement was discussing at the time. The project will begin in the 1970s with a discussion of *Fear of Flying* by Erica Jong and *The Women's Room* by Marylin French, continue into the 1980s with *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, and then wrap up in the 1990s with the film *Thelma and Louise*.

A keystone of this thesis project is establishing how fiction can be defined as feminist. In her book *Feminism and Its Fictions,* Lisa Maria Hogeland describes the kind of novel that dominated feminist fiction in the early 1970s as the "consciousness-raising (CR) novel" (Hogeland ix). In Hogeland's view, feminist novels were an extension of the CR group phenomenon, a way to tell the stories of women on a wide scale that would allow female readers to recognize that their stories were not exclusive to them. In

Hogeland's view, feminist fiction that was to be described as consciousness-raising has to "depict a woman's process of consciousness-raising" (Hogeland 23). Also required for Hogeland is an engagement with the issues that the women's liberation movement was concerned with at the time. To add a final requirement, Judi M. Roller, a specialist in women's writers, put forward the requirement of feminist fiction that "the central character or characters… must be female and represent women generally as well as a woman specifically" (Roller 5). I draw on both Hogeland and Roller in characterizing the popular fiction analyzed in this thesis as feminist. Beyond that, each of the primary texts was written by a woman, and specifically women who are all self-identified feminists or womanists. Their own words and intention will be used to explore women crafting their own stories, and how those stories are created by the context of their time period. The first chapter will also discuss the relevance of women as authors of female-dominated stories.

Each of the primary texts will be broken down and examined alongside feminist literary theory, critical arguments about the texts, and works that provide historical context. This historical context will include both contemporary histories of women in each time period, as well as widely read feminist documents of each decade. Close examinations of the works as well as information from the authors as far as authorial intent will be used to break down the primary texts and discuss the moves they make within the context of feminism. Through all of these methods, a timeline of feminist works and the moves they make to both comment on and critique their time periods will emerge. Each work will come to be seen as an engagement with political and social

struggles for gender equality, as well as individual tools to allow for wide-scale feminist consciousness-raising.

Chapter 1

The first chapter analyzes the novels *Fear of Flying* by Erica Jong (1973) and *The Women's Room* by Merilyn French (1977). These novels will be used to examine the U.S. women's liberation movement in the 1970s and will also begin to articulate an overarching perspective regarding treating bestselling books as feminist fiction and as consciousness-raising tools. The time period characterized feminism in an inherently white, middle-class, heterosexual context. It was through this lens that feminists engaged with such issues as the invisibility of female sexuality and the entrapment of the home.

Fear of Flying will bring to light the evolving nature of female sexuality in the decade and how it led to contradiction and confusion regarding how feminists were supposed to view men. Throughout the novel, the main character – a middle-class white woman – navigates the complex relationship she has to feminism and to her desire to still conform to certain internalized ideas of a woman's place in the nuclear family. These contradictions will be further examined within *The Women's Room,* with its more negative view of men and marriage. It will explore the oppressive force of the nuclear family from within the stasis of a home environment, as compared to the cosmopolitan, European setting of *Fear of Flying.* It will illuminate the 1970s as a time focused on individual agency and gaining momentum for the women's liberation movement.

Chapter 2

This chapter will serve to complicate core ideas of the women's liberation movement that were established in chapter one. It will offer an acknowledgement and discussion of the limits of 1970s feminism and its narrow individualistic view of women. The intersections of race, gender, and sexuality will be brought to light in the discussion of *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (1982). This chapter will provide new context and a deeper understanding of how marginalized women's voices were being silenced within the movement, and how these women were trying to be more vocal against the voices of white, middle-class, heterosexual women that dominated 1970s feminism.

The Color Purple is about a black lesbian woman being silenced and then finding her voice and personal identity in South at the beginning of the 20th century. The book emerged within the context of Reagan-era individualism, and offered an alternative narrative of personal growth through strong bonds and relationships with other women. Walker's novel sheds light on the black feminist movement and their frustrations in regards to the many people who were silencing them. Much like *Fear of Flying*, it counters a negative female perspective towards men and how they were viewed in the context of feminism. Walker navigates the negative perspective by finding a place where men can be involved, but only when they refuse to subordinate women and their voices. Overall, Walker navigates intersectional identity and the power that comes from fighting against oppression in the form of gender, race, and class as those identities intersect.

Chapter 3

The final chapter will be an examination of the 1990s through an analysis of the film *Thelma and Louise* (1991). The decade was characterized by a "backlash" against feminism – to drawn on Susan Faludi – along with a heightened attention to sexual violence and harassment. As a commentary on rape and gendered violence though a deep interpersonal relationship between two women, *Thelma and Louise* navigates a period centered on conflict over whether or not feminism was still relevant. Thelma and Louise are subject to gendered violence and stereotypes, which would put them in the box of being victims; and yet they also kill, steal, and otherwise react violently to the situations they are placed in. This stress on female rage and retaliation as a positive representation for these female characters reflects the anger of the rising third wave of U.S. feminism. Through discussion of rape culture and anger, the film provides a narrative in which women grow stronger through reliance on one another and the ability of women to come together to criticize the world they live in. It acts as a narrative that tells female viewers that it is can be acceptable to shed certain forms of enforced femininity, and also allows for retaliation as a form of response that can be embraced.

These three sections will create a picture of feminist fiction and the ways in which it shifts as a consciousness-raising tool over time. From decade to decade, each of these works was written by a woman and used to discuss the various issues that women's liberation groups were navigating. Though they all explore ambiguity and complex issues surrounding female bodies and spaces, each work serves as a way through which female

readers and viewers could learn about the gender politics being deliberated in the world around them. Though the works do not offer clear-cut solutions, they provide a method through which women could learn to respond to issues such as the emerging visibility of female sexuality, the complex nature of the nuclear family, the pressures of individuality, the nature of intersectional identity, the relationships to be built between women, and the pervasiveness of sexual violence in women's lives. These works explore women's silence and provide a way through which that silence can be exposed and questioned. And, though the issues change in each decade, they insist over and over again on the power in women recognizing the influence of patriarchal oppression in their lives, and provide a way for that recognition to occur.

Chapter 1

Sexuality and the Home: Feminism in the 1970s

In the 1970s, the women's liberation movement and steps made towards gender equality that had begun in the 1960s spread across America. The movement was focused on a large variety of issues that were pertinent to women's place at the time. A large piece of making changes in these issues involved consciousness-raising groups, a time for women to discuss their lives and consider the ways in which, though they were all drastically different types of women, they had similar feelings about the world and how they fit into it. In this period, there were also a variety of novels published that many began to define as "feminist novels". These novels were read and discussed widely, especially amongst white, middle-class women, and remain relevant and frequently read even decades later. The novels that were most widely read explored the subjective experience of women living under the patriarchy. Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying (*1973) and Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* (1977) were both novels that were read widely at the time of their releases. They were labeled by many as feminist novels, voices within the movement that could act as consciousness raising tools beyond the scope of the average consciousness-raising groups. Throughout this chapter, *The Women's Room* and *Fear of Flying,* as examples of feminist fiction, demonstrate how American Feminist Fiction raised the consciousness of readers in struggles of second wave feminism such as freedom of sexuality and departure from the nuclear family.

Consciousness-raising was a key part of the women's liberation movement. It was, as Sara M. Evans describes in her book on the history of second and third wave

feminism, “an intense form of collective self-education” (Evans 30). By talking about issues in groups, women were able to realize that the problems they had been experiencing were not exclusive to them. This was an essential part of recognizing feminist issues in a world where communication between women might have been limited to only women in their immediate area. In discussing their lives, women found that many of them faced the same problems, which allowed those issues to be recognized on a much larger scale. Betty Friedan recognized such a phenomenon in her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique,* a book that was widely read by feminists and non-feminists alike at the time. In the first chapter, Friedan discusses a common feature that united many women in the 50s and 60s. She explored the housewives who felt that there was something innately wrong in their lives, though they did not have the vocabulary to explain it. Friedan specifically notes a conversation she saw a group of mothers having in which they desperately tried to explain how they felt about their current lives. As they talked, they “realized they all shared the same problem, the problem that has no name” (Friedan 54). This recognition was central to consciousness-raising groups; it was a realization that all of these women in their varied and vastly different lives were confronting the same problem. Feminist novels were an extension of the CR group phenomenon, discussing issues that women dealt with on a day to day basis and giving them a vocabulary to name and understand what they faced.

For both Erica Jong and Marilyn French, the value of the female experience being written from an explicitly female perspective is essential in creating stories that women could benefit from as readers. In the afterward of the 2003 Signet edition of *Fear of Flying,* Erica Jong specifically references that her book was an effort to go against the

expectation that in order to be taken seriously as a writer, you had to be male. In those days, she said, "Women writers were confined to the ghetto of popular culture", only valued as long as they did not aspire to write serious literature (Jong 432). Similarly, in the preface to the 2009 Penguin edition of *The Women's Room,* Marilyn French complains that convention made women's work "illegitimate as a subject matter for serious literature" (French xxvi). Both authors of these novels point to the fact that their writing, as female authors, could not be taken seriously, just as female experience was not taken seriously. Jong and French both aimed to portray complex female characters, and both aimed to go against the oppressive conventions of female authorship. They wrote books about women's lives and demanded those lives be taken seriously, after experiencing years of seeing nothing but men writing women's experiences and seeing those experiences as only comic or unimportant.

Emphasis on the importance of the female perspective was not limited to the authors of both novels. *The Politics of the Feminist Novel,* Judi M. Roller begins by pointing out that many critics think the authentic portrayal of a character is based on the author's skill, not their sex. And by extension, this can lead people to conclude that considering the author's sex is not important to the discussion of the text. However, as Roller continues, "one must add that many women agree with Isadora Wing that the women characters men create never represent anyone with whom the female reader can identify" (Roller 3). Isadora Wing is the main character of *Fear of Flying,* and is a writer who frequently comes up against a wall of feeling the male experience of her life is being pushed down her throat. This is something that Mira, the main character in *The Women's Room,* experiences as well. The presence of women having control over their own

narratives cannot be overlooked in terms of their relevance as CR novels. As Judith Fetterley points out in *The Resisting Reader,* "Our literature neither leaves women alone nor allows them to participate. It insists on its universality at the same time that it defines that universality in specifically male terms" (Fetterly xii). Isadora and Mira represent the efforts of female writers to make their experiences of being women heard. But while Marilyn French used Mira to represent a more bleak outlook on female experience, Erica Jong embraced humor as a method through which to tell Isadora's story.

Fear of Flying¸ released in 1973, portrays Isadora Wing on a journey to find sexual fulfillment. Her story begins in flight, on a plane full of psychoanalysts, one of whom is Isadora's second husband. The setting is European and cosmopolitan, free of the constraints of domesticity. Throughout the first-person narrative, Isadora takes readers through her romantic and sexual history, recounting her many experiences with men, while also having an affair in the present day with a psychoanalyst named Adrian Goodlove. Her ultimate fantasy, throughout the novel, is to have what she calls a "zipless Fuck". This concept became the defining passage of the book, in which Isadora describes the zipless fuck as a sexual encounter with a man, which requires brevity though "anonymity made it even better" (Jong 18). Isadora discusses her experience with her own sexuality in irreverent and humorous tones, revealing her sexual appetite as voracious while it is simultaneously left often unsatisfied. Isadora's story focuses primarily on making female sexuality valid and exciting to explore, but she also spends a good deal of the novel working through the expectations of femininity placed on her by her family, her lovers, and by society itself. In a time when, as a feminist, Isadora should have been rejecting standard conceptions of marriage, she still finds herself longing for

that stability and male presence in her life which leads to her feelings of ambiguity and frustration.

This central issue that Jong addresses in her book is the link that feminists debated existed "between women's oppression and the nuclear family" and the desire Isadora still has to be connected romantically to another person (Evans 54). She both despises marriage and wants it desperately. She wants "all the romantic nonsense you yearned for with half your heart and mocked bitterly with the other half" (Jong 14). On one hand, traditionally gendered socialization has led Isadora to desire romance and marriage, while her feminist ideology rejects the oppression she sees as accompanying it. In describing her relationship to marriage over time, she explains "All my fantasies included marriage" (Jong 110). And then, only a paragraph later, she continues "But what was so great about marriage?" continuing on to the explanation that "being unmarried in a man's world was such a hassle that *any*thing had to be better" (Jong 110). Isadora fantasizes about marriage, while also hating it and the pressures that lead to it. She complains that without marriage, women run the risk of poverty, social expulsion, and the sense of vulnerability incurred by the threats of men. She does explain in more explicit terms a few pages later, "the big problem was how to make your feminism jibe with your unappeasable hunger for male bodies" (Jong 135). What she understands about feminism implies that she should be trying to break away from traditional marriage and the longing for a nuclear family, but she also longs for the companionship and societal acceptance she will receive only if she bows to the whims of gendered socialization. The novel portrayed the anxieties of many feminists of the time and their attempts to navigate how marriage and

sex with men factored into their lives. This is only played up by the fact that Isadora is also quite frank about the factor her own sexuality plays in her desire to be married.

By writing about marriage this way, Erica Jong was able to do on a large scale what consciousness-raising groups aimed to achieve. In CR groups, Lisa Maria Hogeland explains, women "shared and analyzed personal narratives in order to shift the terrain of their interpretation from the personal to the political" (Hogeland 23). Jong, through Isadora, examined her relationship with marriage and made her experience available to read on a large scale. Isadora reveals the conflicting mindset that she experiences when it comes to marriage. The book made this personal experience a public issue, and the women's liberation movement was focused on then making these public issues political. Throughout the early years of second wave feminism, feminists pushed to bring together private and public, "a fusion of private life and political action that allowed women to make *public* claims based on personal experience" which worked to challenge the naturalized appearance of women's experiences as secondary to men's (Evans 59). Many who were part of the women's liberation movement strove to prove that "power operates even at the most intimate levels, that the personal is political" (Evans 59). The "personal" experience of marriage was absolutely included in that, as feminists strove to point out the negative aspects of the nuclear family. The term nuclear family, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, refers to "the basic family group consisting typically of father, mother, and their dependent children" (OED). This is the general experience that Isadora is resisting throughout the novel. As Jong lays out her complicated relationship with marriage, women around the world – or, more specifically – middle class, white, heterosexual women in the U.S. – grew closer to their own CR experience. Their

ambiguous feelings on marriage were not exclusive to them after all. Much as it would have worked in a CR session, *Fear of Flying* operated as an "absent member" of the group, amplifying the discussion to "enact it as a transaction between character, author, and reader" (Hogeland 24). As Isadora explores her difficult relationship between the expectations she faces as a woman, and the resistance she feels towards those expectations as a feminist, she is also validating those women who have felt similarly trapped.

But while *Fear of Flying* discussed marriage – and many other issues – with comedic flair, *The Women's Room* approaches the topic much more seriously. First released in 1977, *The Women's Room* follows Mira beginning in her childhood and continuing through her experiences in education, marriage, motherhood, divorce, and ongoing feminist awakening. The story is narrated by her, looking back through her life, as she narrates from the year 1968. Throughout the book, narrated in first person just as *Fear of Flying* was, Mira experiences numerous instances of oppression from the men in her life, and also tells story after story of the other women she knows and their experiences as well. These experiences are generally tied to how the women have felt trapped in some way by their marriages. Though it sometimes feels desolate in its portrayal of absolute female oppression, the narrator herself admits that she feels sick just writing it, but insists, "It's all true, it happened, and it was boring and painful and full of despair" (French 135). While Jong aimed to talk about her experiences using anecdotal humor, French goes in the opposite direction and focuses on abject realism. This is largely due to the fact that, despite the fact that *The Women's Room* was written four years after *Fear of Flying*, the narrative all takes place at least five years before Isadora's

story begins. By placing the narrative in the 1950s and 60s, French takes advantage of portraying women's lives as they were in more suburban, domestic areas and as they slowly came into a more feminist consciousness, their own beginnings of a relationship to women's liberation.

Jane Elliot, in *Popular Feminist Fiction as American Allegory*, discusses French's decision to set a bulk of the story in the 60s. She believes that this setting of total oppression was intended as a commentary on the political standing of the 1960s, "in which domination is so sweeping that radicals can find no grounds on which to resist it, and change therefore appears foreclosed" (Elliot 51). This, Elliot explains, is why she feels Marilyn French dedicated so many pages to telling the many stories of the housewives Mira knows in her life that occasionally verge into feeling redundant in their dismal nature. There is an implication in telling all of these stories that for every story told there are hundreds that remain silenced. As painful as it may feel to read about these select women's lives, there are so many more that do not get their chance to speak up. In this way, Elliot continues, "the narrator leaves us in no doubt that they would only serve to amplify our sense of patriarchal domination" (Elliot 62). This appears to be French's own form of consciousness-raising, though it differs from Jong's considerably.

Where Erica Jong told a fictionalized version of her own story in order to make a female experience heard, French aimed to tell a variety of stories that housewives across America would be able to identify with in some way or another. Where *Fear of Flying* follows Isadora across Europe, on a journey of self-discovery, *The Women's Room* finds Mira trapped in the domestic sphere for decades. Her experiences reveal, "the feminist trope of enclosure within the domestic sphere as a form of deathly stasis" (Elliot,

Cambridge 148). Mira remarks, early on in her marriage, “Life felt hideously empty”, and this feeling only worsens as her marriage continues (French 36). As years go by in her life, and after she has been a mother of two for numerous years, she begins to remark on the fact that she doesn’t *feel* anything. At one party in particular, she remarks, “Things that happened no longer made her feel: they made her think” (French 125).

In these scenes, French’s explorations of enclosure resonate strongly with Betty Friedan. In *The Feminine Mystique,* Friedan discusses the fact that so many housewives in the 50s and 60s remarked that they felt empty or unfulfilled, though they felt it was their own fault, and that they had failed by not being feminine enough. After all, Friedan remarked, “What kind of woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfillment waxing the kitchen floor?” (Friedan 54). Mira is clearly experiencing this same form of dissatisfaction that Friedan found in so many housewives. They were living as the Ideal American Housewife, “healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfillment”, and yet they did not actually feel fulfilled (Friedan 53). This resonates strongly with Mira’s life, as she spends her days cleaning and looking after her husband and children, yet she also feels disconnected. She, somehow, does not feel happy doing what everyone says she should want to be doing. As the passage about Mira and her feelings of emptiness goes on, Mira describes herself as being unwilling to play the game of happy housewife. She cannot seem to ignore how the women in her life are treated anymore, but she also doesn’t know what to do about it. As her life has continued, Mira has experienced a slow form of consciousness-raising, but while she has “undergone the process of awakening associated with the feminist novel of development, she presents her own raised consciousness as

something of a curse" (Elliot 64). Mira finds herself trapped in a horrific stasis of finally recognizing that things are wrong but being unable to affect the world around her.

Imelda Whelehan, author of *The Feminist Bestseller,* describes this awakened stasis as a feature of many of those books she describes as feminist bestsellers, in that "They consciously or unconsciously reinforced the key political principles of feminism while showing an understanding that the sacrifices feminism required were not always easy" (Whelehan 60). *The Women's Room* acknowledged that perhaps coming into a feminist consciousness would not be easy, and that there is no going back once that consciousness has been reached. The novel recounted Mira's awakening, while also acknowledging that in the 1960s, the time Mira is a part of, there was little to no traction for women to feel like change was possible. When the novel ends, Mira is divorced and free, but she is still unhappy, still unfeeling. When she talks about her friends in 1968, she doesn't talk about them as happy, she says, "the rest of us survived" (French 459). Mira's place in the world at the end of her story is survival, not a miraculously changed world. The novel depicted the problem, but did not offer a solution. But one of the most essential things that Mira changes in her life is that she escapes her marriage. Just as *Fear of Flying* shows Isadora feeling trapped by the idea of a nuclear family, *The Women's Room* paints another picture of marriage. But the picture it paints, much like the portrayal of women's lives in general at the time, is a dim one.

Mira is unhappy with her marriage, as are most of the other women in the novel whose stories are told. Many women reveal their feelings of possession. One recounted story follows Lily, who was beaten frequently by her father. But this physical abuse stops the moment she is engaged to her fiancé. She, the novel explains, "understood that she

was now seen as the property of another man" (French 144). To Lily, the process of being married feels transactional. She goes from the ownership of one man to the ownership of another. Meanwhile, Mira remarks that she feels like "an unpaid servant" for her husband and sons (French 139). Another woman, Bliss, notes that marriage is purely economic. It is necessary, "there was no way out. A woman had to be married" (French 119). These are only a few of the portrayals of women and their feelings on marriage at the time. While *Fear of Flying* acknowledged that marriage, and especially the nuclear family, was seen by feminists as a potentially oppressive force, it seems to be *most* of the point that Marilyn French is attempting to make. *Fear of Flying* validates the potential for ambiguity surrounding the patriarchal forces of marriage, but *The Women's Room* sees no such reason to see those patriarchal forces as anything but utterly oppressive. These women are oppressed, completely and constantly, and it is almost all tied back to how the men in their lives exert power over them. "The Women's Liberation Movement expressly positioned being female as the primary ground for women's oppression, and by and large the women's liberation novel reflects this view", which is emphasized throughout *The Women's Room* (Elliot, Cambridge 145). Marilyn French reflected that the women in these homes, in these situations, had no power and had no real way to escape the oppression they were stifled within. And this representation of married women as stifled and powerless was likely also a way for French to comment on the more negative representations of feminism.

As Susan J. Douglas talks about in her book *Where the Girls Are,* feminism in the 1970s was once again starting to be viewed in a negative light and more undesirable stereotypes began to pop up in regards to women involved in the movement. These

women were portrayed as “shrill, overly aggressive, man-hating, ball-busting, selfish, hair extremist, deliberately unattractive women” (Douglas 7). Feminism was not an attractive feature. But more than that, women who were feminists were seen as the ones to blame for various evolutions regarding traditional family life. These feminists, apparently, “detest the family and think all children should be deported or drowned… they are singlehandedly responsible for the high divorce rate, the shortage of decent men” (Douglas 7). Feminists were stereotyped so that their perceived lack of femininity was the enemy. The unhappy housewives Betty Friedan described were the ones living to “glory in their own femininity” while feminists took on unfortunately masculine behavior (Friedan 50). But what French highlighted in her novel was that these women who were suddenly distancing themselves from their families or their husbands were doing it for specific reasons. They had not become man hating, they were just waking up and realizing that there was a reason they were so largely unhappy. The women were coming together and talking, and finally they were seeing that their power had been taken away, and that the men in their lives were a source of the oppression they felt. The point that French drives home again and again is that the force of the patriarchy is the weight under which women struggle.

This novel served as a way to raise the consciousness of many white, suburban housewives in the U.S. who would eventually read it. It showed, as Mira learned over time, that things were not as they should be. It was popular most likely due to how, “it seemed to contain every possible dimension of a woman’s existence from courtship to young, married life and children, through college, politicization, and the inevitable confrontation with the dynamics of male power” (Whelehan 94). It got the attention of

women because they recognized, most likely, their own experiences in the novel. It is remarkably similar to the ways in which Sara M. Evans describes why the women's liberation movement itself gained such momentum so quickly. She explains, "The contagion of feminism lay in its ability to touch women at a deeply personal level, politicizing matters that were previously taken for granted as 'the way things are'" (Evans 41). Mira reflects on this feeling of accepting things as the way they are when she mentions the frequent long talks she would have with the other housewives. Through their discussions, Mira remarks that they would spend hours making little comments about the usefulness of their husbands. They would laugh at how ridiculous these men were, with their demands, but "no one ever questioned such statements" (French 71). No one ever suggested ways in which things could change. These idiosyncrasies of the husbands were seen as nothing more than silly quirks.

The idiosyncrasies of men is a theme that Erica Jong also discusses frequently, though in a much more ribald fashion. *Fear of Flying,* though it contains various topics relevant to the women's liberation movement, is most well-known for its frank discussion on female sexuality. As pamphlets and papers in the late 60s and early 70s such as the Boston Women's Health Book Collective's *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and Anne Koedt's "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" were published, there was a greater push to discuss female sexual autonomy, a task Jong took on with fervor. While the rules of femininity had previously made this sort of discussion taboo, the women's liberation groups of the late 1960s insisted that the open discussion of these issues was essential. In CR workshops centered on sexuality, women talked about their sexuality openly. These groups, "made understanding orgasm and learning to masturbate regular items at

consciousness-raising sessions" (Evans 48). In this vein, Jong's book becomes a source of CR as well.

Instead of complying with the taboo of secretive female sexuality, *Fear of Flying* includes hundreds of pages about Isadora's sexual history and constantly sexual thoughts. Isadora, like the women in *The Women's Room,* also criticizes men. For example, her mentions of sex are not always sexy, an example of which is highlighted in a scene where she talks about her sexual experience with a conductor so unclean that "He always left shit stripes on my sheets" (Jong 42). Additionally, it frequently puts men's faults and bodies at the forefront to critique, placing male bodies in a space that female bodies in literature had almost always been forced to occupy previously. While the housewives in *The Women's Room* talk about the exasperation they feel when their husbands refuse to change their baby's diapers or reject certain meals that their wives have made them, Erica Jong openly criticizes male bodies and male sexuality in a way that puts them in a position of less power. This criticism is tied directly to how Jong feels about men portraying female sexuality, which is especially relevant in that the explicit nature of the sexual content in the novel was nearly unheard of for a female writer and a female main character. In the novel, Jong further discusses what appears to be a contentious relationship with seeing only male writers portray female experiences. In one particular scene, Isadora remarks, "Until women started writing books, there was only one side of the story" (Jong 34). She continues to describe her early feelings of orgasmic inadequacy as she compares them to Lady Chatterley, leading character of the 1928 D.H. Lawrence novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover.* The book revolves around a relationship between an upper-class married woman and her affair with a working class man, her gamekeeper. In

Isadora's musings on why she felt she never lived up to the sexual experiences of Lady Chatterley, she finally comes to the realization that the problem might have been that Lady Chatterley was written by a man, and that it might therefore represent a male-centric experience of sex, even if the story is focused on a woman.

Isadora seems intent on rectifying this representation of women's sexual experiences, as she is frank from beginning to end of the book about her own. The fact that Isadora is a writer herself also shows the ways in which Jong was attempting to construct a new narrative for women. In *Where the Girls Are,* Douglas describes the ways women were portrayed by men in the media in the 50s and 60s, the decades Erica Jong would have experienced her teenage and early-adulthood years. She explains, "The media… urged us to be pliant, cute, sexually available, thin, blond, poreless, wrinkle-free, and deferential to men" (Douglas 9). Isadora herself comments on this phenomenon, saying "Growing up female in America. What a liability!" (Jong 14). For nearly a page, she describes a litany of sources which serve to tell women how to behave, how to look, and, ultimately, how to get a husband. "It didn't matter," she continues, "Whether you had an IQ of 170 or an IQ of 70, you were brainwashed all the same" (Jong 15). The socialization that Isadora has experienced for all of her life feels stifling and yet she also emphasizes that it seems inescapable. The struggles, then, that Isadora is rallying against are those grounded in gendered socialization. Rather than placing Isadora in an explicitly domestic sphere, Jong makes her experience more generalized. Instead of the need to escape the actual role of the housewife, Isadora is attempting to "create the self beyond the prisonhouse of femininity" (Whelehan 66).

Isadora attempts to navigate socialized femininity in a number of ways. The first way is that she centers the female experience as the most important in the novel. And not just her experiences, but her experiences beyond her relationship with her looks. As Douglas describes, “The mass media often trivialize our lives and our achievements, narrowing the litmus test of female worth to one question: Does she have dimpled thighs or crow’s feet?” (Douglas 12). Douglas is despairing in regards to the representations of women in the mass media in the 60s. Their impact was limited, “fleeting, superficial, trivial,” seen only as “mindless, hysterical, out-of-control bimbos” and even “empty vessels”, a description that can plainly apply to *The Women’s Room* (Douglas 5). Jong challenges these representations of women, the view of women’s stories as less complex, if only by being a female writer creating a female character who spends an entire novel discussing the female experience. Commenting on the explosion of feminist bestsellers, Whelehan says, “It was as if there was a sudden thirst for stories of ‘real’ women’s lives and novels often teased the reader with a closeness between author and narrator, between fiction and historical event” (Whelehan 94). Instead of only having female sexual experiences written by men for women to measure themselves up to, Jong penned page after page of a woman’s sexuality from a woman’s point of view. And this was a distinct way in which Jong challenged the social constructions of femininity.

These challenges to socialized femininity can also be recognized in *The Women’s Room.* For French, writing about women in the late 50s and early 60s, it was clear that these women had not yet experienced any exposure to being open about sexuality. In fact, it is recognized again and again that sexuality is binding for these women. First, it is binding in the fact that it was another way that women could be trapped in marriage. Mira

describes an experience in which she was nearly raped when she was in college, all because a man did not have a prior claim to her. “She was a woman and that alone was enough to deprive her of freedom no matter how much the history books pretended that women’s suffrage had ended inequality”, she explains (French 32). Mira feels trapped in the ways that men feel entitled to her body because she does not have another man with her to claim her sexuality as his own. Roller echoes this viewpoint in her book as well when she says, “women everywhere live in more or less patriarchal societies; and women everywhere are more or less discriminated against” (Roller 4). Unlike Isadora, for whom being sexual is a form of freedom, Mira being openly sexual in any way only reveals how trapped she is. *The Women’s Room* fictionalizes the beginning of this journey to recognize the strength in female sexuality, while *Fear of Flying* represents a moment further down the line in which women like Isadora are actively experimenting and exercising their sexual agency.

This is also present even in the context of women being sexual within marriage throughout *The Women’s Room.* Firstly, there is the initial moment when Mira talks about the fact that she does not enjoy having sex with her husband. And, when her husband realizes this, “strangely, this seemed to please him” (French 60). Because being sexual was perceived as unfeminine, a woman having no sexuality at all is seen through the eyes of her husband as respectable. When Mira tries to bring up ways that she might enjoy sex more, her husband teases her and calls her sex-obsessed simply for broaching the subject. And he ultimately refuses to discuss doing anything that might make the experience less pleasurable to him and, therefore, more pleasurable for Mira. This is a long distance away from the descriptions of marital sex in *Fear of Flying,* in which

Isadora initially throws herself in headlong and enjoys herself, but "Even if you loved your husband, there came that inevitable year when fucking him turned as bland as Velveeta cheese" (Jong 14). Isadora may often feel unfulfilled by the marital sex she has, but is still open in discussing those feelings and in resisting blaming herself for not being sexually satisfied.

Lily, another housewife whose story is told in *The Women's Room,* actually enjoys sex. She "would have orgasm after orgasm while [her husband] watched her with incredulous disgust", and over time began to feel that this made her "filthy" (French 147). Like Isadora, Lily enjoys sex, but it leads her to feel she has failed in some significant way to be a good wife and an ideal woman. Her enjoyment of sex is disgusting to her husband, and to herself, because she is supposed to be like Mira and not enjoy it at all. Over and over again throughout the novel, men exert their power over their wives in order to control their sexuality. For Mira, it is being silenced. For Lily, she is threatened and eventually – when she gets pregnant – is forced by her husband to get an abortion she deeply regrets. Mira's freedom from these oppressions doesn't begin until she begins to go back to school, when she separates herself from the perceived prison of domesticity and starts focusing on herself. As soon as Mira is away from this entrapped environment, "She began, for the first time in years, to think wishfully about sex" (French 209). When Mira frees herself from the forced femininity of being a housewife, she begins to come back to life. She starts to long for sex again, for the freedom to want sex that she hasn't experienced in years. French exemplifies the idea that stepping away from the supposed perfection of the nuclear family allows women to wake up again, to want more from their

lives. And when they wake up and realize that their lives have not been the way they should be, then they are allowed to have other desires as well.

Fear of Flying and *The Women's Room* differ in their tone and their approach to issues of sexual liberation and women's agency, however, they both represent an effort to raise the consciousness of female readers regarding diverse facets of patriarchal oppression. They exemplify women telling their own stories, and women coming to recognize gender inequalities in their lives. Both criticize the power imbalance of marriage, and how it stifles women. They also both discuss female sexuality and how recognition of that sexuality can be an essential step in gaining agency. While Isadora and Mira both live drastically different lives, one on a journey of self-discovery and the other trapped for a majority of her life in American suburbia, they both describe the same pressures of marriage and nuclear family life and questions of sexual liberation that face them. They also both attempt to escape the structures of femininity that have in some way or another made them feel powerless. While one takes on these issues with humor and the other with stark reality, they both struggle with key issues the women's liberation movement was attempting to discuss in the 1970s. Each of their journeys portrays specific anxieties that women of the time were struggling with. And though their stories followed vastly different tracks, each portrayed a woman coming into some kind of agency while simultaneously growing more confident in their own identities as women of the time. Though happiness it not guaranteed, both Isadora and Mira have come to understand something new about marriage and about sex, and through them women across America could read and do the same.

Chapter 2

Individualism Through Connection: Identity Politics in the 1980s

As the 1980s began, the women's liberation movement experienced an intense time of internal fracturing. The 70s had marked an explosion of women's liberation efforts, and the flocking to the cause for many women. However, the movement itself, as well as much of the media that came from it, primarily centered on white, middle-class, heterosexual women. At the offset of the decade, there was a greater push from marginalized women, especially women of color, to have their voices included in the message. Identity politics, and the push from many women to raise up voices beyond the white, straight, middle-class women who were loudest in the 70s, produced new feminist material focused on highlighting unheard stories; *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker was one of these stories. Walker embraced the identity politics of the time and gave her novel a narrative voice that had been relatively unheard before. Walker's novel highlighted those who had felt silenced due to their race, class, and sexuality and made intersectionality – though that word would not be applied to feminism until the end of the decade – and community essential parts of the women's liberation movement. Beyond that, she gave voice to the concerns of black women that were being silenced by white feminists and groups focused on black liberation. This chapter will use *The Color Purple*, another example of a consciousness-raising novel, as a narrative that highlights individual identity, but also as a space that emphasizes the importance of community in order to strengthen the individual.

The 1980s was a time of clashing ideals within the women's liberation movement. There was, of course, the increased focus on those women who felt ignored within the politics of the movement already in the 1970s. Groups like the Combahee River Collective were coming together and pushing the voices of black and lesbian women to the forefront of discussion. Black women felt ignored and without agenda, as black men and white women rose up around them but ignored their specific and intersecting needs. Duchess Harris explains in *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Clinton*, "Black men had articulated a political agenda in 1963 at the March on Washington, and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique…* provided a political agenda for middle-class white women. [Paula] Giddings asked the pressing question, 'Who has presented the political agenda for black women?'" (D. Harris xi). While movements were springing up around them, no movement seemed to acknowledge that oppression was not the same for every group that experienced it. Even from the early 1970s, black feminists were frustrated that their oppression was being regarded as the same as white women's. Linda La Rue in "The Black Movement and Women's Liberation" was particularly infuriated, arguing that there was no real comparison to be drawn "between the oppression of the black woman on welfare who has difficulty feeing her children and the discontent of the suburban mother who has the luxury to protest the washing of the dishes on which her family's full meal was consumed" (La Rue 164). While there were varying levels of rage portrayed in the feminist works being written by black women at the time, there was a clear feeling of being left out and ignored that many shared. There was a pushback against the very white nature of women's liberation discourse, with its emphasis on themes of female sexuality and autonomy in the nuclear family, even in the early 1970s with the formation of the

National Black Feminist Organization in 1973, an organization that also spurned the Combahee River Collective in 1974. Groups like these aimed to elevate the voices of black women in politics, as well as in creative works.

But beyond a disconnect between white, middle-class, heterosexual feminists and the marginalized women they ignored, there was also a clash in the basic politics of the movement. As the decade began, there was a very apparent divide between conservative and liberal women. A polarity was created, establishing a view of women in the 1980s as part of two specific categories. As Sheila Rowbotham explains in *A Century of Women*, "One was the model of competitive success – the business suit had made a surprise comeback; the other was a pastiche of a 1950s apple-pie mom in a crisp white apron" (Rowbotham 524). While the women's liberation movement pushed forward to demand greater equality and rights for women, within the movement the difference in the idea of family values allowed many issues to get muddled. Rowbotham adds, "Citizenship, mothering, connection and autonomy, communalism and individualism were invoked by women on the right *and* on the left during the 1980s" (Rowbotham 515). There was a push from more conservative women to steer away from issues that threatened the idea of the traditional family. The steps being taken by the women's liberation movement – the ERA, rights of gay parents, and issues surrounding abortion – were taken as highly offensive and wrong by the Christian right. Everywhere, identities and idea were clashing and there was a greater and greater discontent within the movement as to what exactly it stood for. This is the environment in which *The Color Purple* was written, published, and eventually read. And the politics of the novel reflect the contention surrounding identity – both personal and collective – at the time.

The Color Purple was written by Alice Walker and first published in 1982. It follows Celie, a black lesbian woman in the rural south in the early 1900s, and spans decades of her life. Whereas both *Fear of Flying* and *The Women's Room* used first-person narratives, Walker's is an epistolary novel told through Celie's written prayers that are first addressed to God, and are later addressed to her sister, Nettie. The novel first describes Celie's relationship with the man she believes to be her father as he repeatedly rapes her, and as she is forced to have two of his children. It then follows Celie as she is married off to and is abused by a man named Albert, as she loses her sister, and as she comes into an understanding of herself and the other women around her. It portrays her journey towards self-love, and towards the realization that the men in her life have always sought to silence her. Some of this discovery allows her to begin a romantic relationship with a female singer named Shug, the former mistress of Celie's husband. Celie's journey is about recognizing personal worth and identity but ironically, this individual journey involves gaining strength through the help of other women in her life by recognizing the structure of the patriarchy and critiquing the oppression black women feel.

In the novel, Walker allows for individual growth through reliance on other women. Celie, in her journey, is not alone. Though most of the novel is told through Celie's letters, a good portion of the second half is told through the letters Nettie has been trying to send her for the years of their lives spent apart. This communication between women is essential in Celie's journey, and is also a reflection of how black feminists banded together. In "An Argument for Black Women's Liberation as a Revolutionary Force" by Mary Ann Weathers, which was first published in 1970, she states, "We must

turn to ourselves and one another for strength and solace" (Weathers 160). This is a feeling that was emulated by the Combahee River Collective, a black lesbian feminist organization focused on discussing issues of feminism that were not being addressed by white feminists. The collective began first as a chapter of the National Black Feminist Organization, but took on its own life as a consciousness-raising group that many, including Duchess Harris, credit as defining identity politics. In 1997, three members of the collective wrote "A Black Feminist Statement from the Combahee River Collective", which included the line, "Contemporary black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters" (Smith, Smith, & Frazier 233). Alice Walker herself expressed the deep emphasis she places on the women who have come before and the role they have played as artists.

In one of her pieces, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," Walker talks about her mother's work in the garden as a daily expression of art. She says, "For her, so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life. The ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work black women have done for a very long time" (Walker, Gardens 242). For black feminists, there was a focus on supporting one another, and on calling on the experiences of women in their past. Because many had felt left out and ignored by other liberation movements, black feminism was highly focused on recognizing the strength of one another's voices and the need to present a united force. Walker, throughout the novel, insists on the importance of Celie relying on the other women in her life. It is through what she learns from them and the help they offer her that Celie is able to come into a confident and individual identity. This is a narrative going directly against the Reagan-era focus on hyper-individualism

that so pervaded the 1980s. In a time focused on individuality, Walker insisted upon the necessity of other women in Celie's life in order to help her become a successful individual.

Celie relies strongly on the other women in her life, a reliance that black feminists insisted upon even if the large-scale politics of the United States did not. Celie learns a great deal from the women around her. Judi M. Roller explains in *The Politics of the Feminist Novel,* "*The Color Purple* displays two women who possess their own individuality as the novel begins – Shug and Sofia – and two others who become themselves as the novel progresses – Celie and Mary Agnes" (Roller 54). Shug and Sofia are women from whom Celie and Mary Agnes can learn. These two women know who they are, and they don't allow themselves to be pushed around by men. Celie expresses to Sofia early on that she sees the way that Sofia is different than she is, but she doesn't know how to achieve that difference. When Sofia comes to demand why Celie told Sofia's husband, Harpo, to beat her if she refused to listen to him, Celie says, "it cause I'm a fool, I say. I say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't." When Sofia asks what it is that she can do, Celie explains, "fight" (Walker 40). Sofia fights against Harpo. She refuses to be told what to do or to be beaten, though Celie accepts both of these things in her life without much resistance. After this conversation, Sofia tells Celie she should "bash Albert head open", which earns her one of Celie's rare laughs and the invitation to sit together to work on a quilt (Walker 42). This conversation with Sofia allows Celie to begin a deep, interpersonal relationship with another woman, something she has been denied since her sister left. It is a relationship that carries them

through many other moments in life, particularly when Sofia is beaten and thrown into jail and finds that she has to rely on others for a period of time.

The family structure of *The Color Purple* disrupts the concept of a traditional nuclear family. Within the narrative, there are so many interlocking relationships and shifting understandings of how individuals are connected to that there is nowhere for this group of people to fit inside the family values of the 1980s Christian right and the Reagan-era. Celie is married to Albert, a man who spent years trying to marry Celie's sister. He used to sleep with Shug Avery, a singer that Celie later falls in love with. Albert has multiple children from his previous marriage, including Harpo, who Celie takes over raising as their new stepmother. Harpo first marries Sofia, and has countless children with her, and then later on has a mistress in Mary Agnes. Sofia also has her own affair with a man named Buster. When Celie was a child she was raped by a man she believed to be her father, only to find out decades later that he was actually her stepfather. The two children that Celie had due to this assault are given to a local family, and through a chance encounter they are raised with the help of Celie's sister Nettie in Africa until they are finally reunited years later. Nothing about this family structure is traditional, but it is through these different relationships that Celie begins to understand her place in life and her own strength. Sofia, in particular, is one of the people that teaches Celie that the constraints of society are not necessary, and that she refuses to be bound by the traditional rules people have in place for who she should be.

Sofia is frustrated by the fact that Harpo, her husband, is constantly trying to direct her and tell her what to do, and that he has tried to beat her. However, due to what Celie has seen in the world, she does not understand how Sofia could change the way

things are. She says, “He your husband… Got to stay with him. Else, what you gon do?” (Walker 65). There is no other option, in Celie’s mind, when a woman is unhappy in her marriage. If Harpo is Sofia’s husband, she will just have to accept the treatment she gets without question the way Celie has with Albert. However, while Celie doesn’t understand how Sofia can do anything but accept her fate, Sofia offers a different option. She explains, “My sister husband got caught in the draft, she say. They don’t have no children, Odessa love children. He left her a little farm. Maybe I go stay with them a while. Me and my children” (Walker 65). In the 1980s, when there was such an intense debate surrounding traditional family values, Walker’s envisioning of an earlier historical moment in which Sofia has an opportunity to just leave her situation with her children was a break against norms and an imagining of an alternative history to the contemporary feminist liberation movement in America. Sofia can still be a mother, even if she does not stay with her husband. Sofia sees her life as one that has value, stressing the importance of her individual identity. This is an idea that Celie takes up later when she finally leaves Albert. It takes learning from other women in life, taking examples from how they carry themselves and how they treat situations they come across, that Celie is able to escape the silencing structures she has become a part of.

Celie learns things from Shug that are in some ways similar to the things she learns from Sofia. Shug, from the moment she appears in Celie’s life, refuses to be bossed around by Albert and she is openly against many of the traditional roles that Celie assumes a woman has to take in life. In one of their first interactions, Celie asks if Shug has any children and she replies, “My kids with they grandma, she say. She could stand the kids, I had to go” (Walker 50). Shug has children, and yet they aren’t in her life. She

does not want them around. Where Sofia valued her children but not her husband, Shug does not seem to place much stock in either. She is a woman undefined by children or men. She also shows how much she does not conform to the standards of life that Celie has seen when they first become romantically involved. Celie shares her painful past with the man she thought was her father and the times he raped her. Finally, she breaks down and tells Shug that nobody has ever loved her. Shug responds, "I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth" (Walker 113). This reveals that Shug not only upsets traditional family life in terms of female roles, but she also shakes up the heteronormative roots that define that family existence.

Celie's same-sex attraction and subsequent relationship with Shug is relevant for a number of reasons. Like Jong and French's novels, Walker too represents a character who is in the midst of sexual awakening. However, unlike the heterosexual protagonists of those novels, the protagonist of Walker's novel is a lesbian. The relationship she has with Shug is another instance of Shug showing Celie that her ideas of life are not the only option, which is a break from the overwhelmingly heterosexual narratives being read in the 1970s. She has been shown by women in her life again and again that staying with a man is not necessary. This emphasis is a useful consciousness-raising tool for readers, a way for them to learn alongside Celie that relationships with men are not essential, and neither are assigned roles. But beyond that, it gives Celie and readers a new option. One that, Celie at least, had never considered. When she was a child, she explained in one of her letters, "I don't even look at mens" (Walker 5). She also explains that she feels nothing when Albert has sex with her and, "Only time I feel something stirring down there is when I think bout Shug" (Walker 65). Even near the end of the book, after Albert

and Celie have reconciled and become friends, Albert asks her if it is true that she does not like him because he is a man. Celie tells him, “Take off they pants, I say, and men look like frogs to me. No matter how you kiss ‘em, as far as I’m concern, frogs is what they stay” (Walker 254). Celie has never expressed a sexual attraction or desire towards men, and then Shug offers her a new outlet. She can feel the way that Shug and Sofia do, that the men in their lives do not take priority to their own, and she can also express her desires in a way that feels more natural to her. As Christopher S. Lewis explains in “Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness”, “*The Color Purple* works to assert the viability of black lesbianism in the face of its associations with silence and social death” (Lewis 168). The novel expresses queer identity as an option that had gone considered by Celie before.

While Celie had never experienced attraction to men, social norms prevented her from understanding that a relationship with a woman was a potential route. And the novel asserts the intense value of this relationship in the ways it allows for Celie to heal from previous negativity in her life. One of the first things readers learn about Celie is that she has been raped by her step-father, Alphonso. She has not been allowed to control her own sexuality for years. Then later, Celie explains to Sofia that Albert does not do much for her in the way of sex. However, when Shug arrives, she teaches Celie about her own body and about sex and masturbation. Shug becomes a female teacher that enters into Celie’s life to show her the ways in which the things she has learned from men are harmful. Lewis explains, “Celie’s same-sex experiences begin to soothe the (sexist) wounds inflicted by Alphonso and Albert” (Lewis 162). Celie’s sexual identity has been dictated by men since she was a child, but having a sexual and emotional relationship

with Shug allows her to learn how to experience sexual pleasure. Shug is the one to explain to Celie, with much greater detail, what her own female anatomy looks like. She tells her, "right down there in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody" (Walker 77). Like *Fear of Flying*, this moment embraces frankness regarding the female body and the validity of a woman exploring her own sexuality. These are things Celie has never learned about her own body. With her life dictated by men, Celie had closed herself off from her own sexuality. But Walker uses a relationship with another woman as source of education. Shug is knowledgeable, and she passes that knowledge onto Celie. Lewis continues on to say, "No longer an object for Alphonso's and Albert's sole viewing and sexual use, Celie, with Shug as the director, becomes inquisitive about her body and sexual pleasure" (Lewis 162). Without the oppressive force of male education, Celie is allowed to flourish and accept herself.

Duchess Harris describes *The Color Purple* as a novel "centered on the subject of Black relationships and a clear critique of patriarchy, as well as an examination of the social and economic structures that perpetuate such conditions" (D. Harris 49). Though Shug and Sofia's relationships with Celie are essential in her finding a voice, the first relationship that Walker examines is that of Celie with her sister, Nettie. This relationship is what establishes a base for Walker, a place to focus on the importance of the written word. As Celie is preparing to get married, she writes, "Us both be hitting Nettie's schoolbooks pretty hard, cause use know we got to be smart to git away" (Walker 9). This is a way for Walker to establish how Celie continues to use writing to express herself and the things she goes through. Writing becomes essential to Celie in terms of making sense of the world around her, much as writing was an essential for Isadora

Wing. But this focus on the written word also establishes the importance of writing in general for black women in articulating their own identity. This is something that Valerie Babb talks about extensively in her chapter of *Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston: The Common Bond.* Babb brings up the fact that "Both Hurston and Walker use words to mirror the attempt of black women to find a voice capable of articulating black female identity" (Babb 83). Babb also references a point made by Audre Lorde about how essential words are to the black female writer. The quote follows: "I looked around when I was a young woman and there was no one saying what I wanted and needed to hear. I felt totally alienated, disoriented, crazy… I was very inarticulate… I couldn't speak. I didn't speak… until I started reading and writing poetry" (Babb 83). This same desperation and need to articulate the self through the written word is apparent throughout Celie's journey.

The novel itself begins with Celie attempting to make sense of her own identity. It begins, "Dear God, I am fourteen years old. ~~I am.~~ I have always been a good girl" (Walker 1). Celie establishes what she knows about herself. She knows her age, and she is still questioning whether or not she qualifies as a "good girl". Later on, after Celie has married Albert, she struggles to take care of his children who refuse to obey her. She is ignored and silenced. Nettie insists that she has to keep on fighting, but Celie writes, "But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive" (Walker 17). Much like the conversation between Sofia and Celie later on, Celie expresses the fact that she does not know how to make a stand. She knows how to stay quiet, and how to let the world around her happen without interfering in it. Nettie offers more insight into how Celie thinks about her writing in one of her letters, a good portion into the book. She writes, "I

remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was" (Walker 130). Walker drives home the understanding to readers that writing is the only method Celie has had to convey and make sense of her feelings. Babb expounds on this, saying "Out of desperation, a muted Celie turns to the written word to alleviate her confusion, shame, and the silence that has been imposed on her" (Babb 90). Though she has been silenced over and over again, Celie always has the solace that writing offers in order to work through what she experiences. And as the book goes onward, her writing grows more self-assured. Babb says, "The more she knows who she is and values herself, the less her writing about her feelings consists of the mere statement of situation facts, and the more it consists of metaphors for her feelings" (Babb 90). And as has been shown, the way that Celie has learned more about who she is is through the intervention and helping hand of other women.

Walker uses *The Color Purple* to give a black woman the space to articulate her identity though the written word. She recognizes the ways in which black women have felt silenced, and gives that silence an outlet. Celie acts as the silenced, and she learns to find a voice. She finds herself through writing and through her reliance on other women. Walker shows readers the ways in which Celie has been beaten down, but also the ways she rises back up. And she fights against the culture of the time by insisting collective relationships between women were an essential part of Celie's growth and journey. Walker also uses the novel to call attention to the marginalized voices of lesbians within the women's liberation movement. Lesbians, specifically lesbians from already marginalized groups, were underrepresented in 1970s feminism. Sara M. Evans calls

attention to the fact that “minority women who were also lesbians experienced a painful silencing within their own communitites” (Evans 118). She takes a quote from Barbara Smith, one of the founding members of the Combahee River Collective, in which Smith says, “’In the early 1970s… I didn’t see any way that I could be black and a feminist and a lesbian. I wasn’t thinking so much about being a feminist. I was just thinking about how I could add lesbian to being a black woman. It was just like there was no place for us’” (Evans 118). Lesbian women, especially those from other marginalized groups, had a difficult time finding their own voices within the women’s liberation movement because they primarily stood against those women who were fighting for conservative traditional family rights.

Rowbotham expounds on this, saying “The idyll of the family dissolved the needs of actual individuals in real families and marginalized women who were outside of bounds – single mothers and lesbians” (Rowbotham 521-522). Walker’s main character, a black lesbian, gives a powerful and specific voice to one of those heard least within the movement. As readers learn from her interaction with Albert near the end of the novel, she has never been interested in men. She also does not have a way to articulate her identity. The first time she sees Shug naked, she remarks “I thought I had turned into a man” (Walker 49). Walker establishes Celie as a woman who loves women, but the time period does not allow for her to have a named identity for her sexuality. Even as Celie lacks the words to explain her own identity, she is still able to fiercely claim it. Walker’s focus on identity, and women who would have been the most harmed especially during the politics of the 1980s, creates a powerful idea that women like Celie have always existed, and have been silenced for far too many years. Because so many women, black

and lesbian women most specifically for this novel, had their voices silenced by the women's liberation movement, creating a narrative history that their voices have always been a part of the story is a valuable thing. Walker not only gave a silenced woman a chance to articulate her own identity, she also showed readers that these women were not new voices.

Celie's journey to overcome silence is central to her story. She takes most of the novel itself gaining the ability to loudly voice her desires and then to make those desires happen. For a majority of her life, Celie does not speak up for herself and her experiences. She speaks to God, and she speaks in small bits of dialogue to those around her, but mainly Celie knows how to be quiet in order to stay out of harm's way. The silence is tied to Celie's sense of personal worth, and her mantra that to stay alive is enough. When Albert's sister tries to tell Celie to fight, Celie says, "I don't say nothing. I think about Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive" (Walker 21). She does not speak up for herself because being alive is worth more than breaking her silence. The theme of being alive being enough is also present when Sofia asks her why people eat and Celie responds, "To stay alive… What else?" (Walker 58). However, as the novel goes on and Celie begins to assert herself, this feeling that she has about being alive changes as well. As she comes to realize that there is more to life than just being alive, she also begins to redirect her words. Though she spends the first half of the novel addressing God, this eventually changes. The last time she addresses one of her letters to God is just after she learns that her father was actually her stepfather. When she lists the things about her life that feel thrown into chaos, she ends her letter to God, "You must be sleep" (Walker 177). After

this, all of Celie's letters are addressed to Nettie, a woman. She has begun to see God as yet another male silencer in her life, another man who does not listen to her concerns and who does not help shape who she is.

On her own, Celie throws off the oppressive force she feels God has over her, but it is through her close relationship with Shug that she gains the ability to speak up for herself. Only through connection with another woman does Celie start gain a voice and an ability to free herself from patriarchal oppression in her life. When Shug asks why she no longer writes to God, Celie says "the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful, and lowdown" (Walker 192). This is one step towards breaking free of silence for Celie. She identifies God as a male force silencing her, and then identifies him as part of a group. She calls attention to the fact that she feels silenced by all men. Additionally in this conversation, Shug explains her own thoughts about God. She tells Celie that the God she believes in approves of pleasure. Initially, she is talking about sexual pleasure, but as she continues to explain to Celie she says, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (Walker 196). This is the final entry Celie writes before she describes leaving Albert for good. She shrugs off God as a male influencer, but then allows Shug to explain how, in her world, life can be about more than living. Shug is the person who shows Celie that life can be about enjoyment – enjoyment that can come from desire and indulgence – and that any God Shug believes in would want people to appreciate their life and the joys it can bring. In the next letter, Celie finally gets up the nerve to actually speak against the silence she has felt her entire life. This connection between Shug teaching Celie she can enjoy life and then Celie leaving Albert reveals how

much influence Shug has on Celie and how she chooses to experience her life once she grows more confident in her own identity. Walker has a letter that explicitly shows this main character renouncing male influence, and then being told by a female force to embrace pleasure.

After decades of silence, when Shug tells Albert that Celie will be leaving with them and he demands to know what could possibly be making Celie unhappy, she says, "You a lowdown dog is what's wrong… It's time to leave you and enter into Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need" (Walker 199). The shock from everyone present in the scene is enough to confirm that Celie has never spoken up for herself before this point, and certainly not in any way against Albert directly. As the scene goes on, Mary Agnes decides she is going to leave as well – another instance of women learning from one another and taking power in that connection. This united force of women standing up to men forces Grady and Albert to finally tell them that they should conform to certain ideals or else how are they to "git a man"? This remark is followed by the women in the room uniting together. Celie describes, "Shug look at me and us giggle. Then us laugh sure nuff. Then Sqeak start to laugh. Then Sofia. All us laugh and laugh" (Walker 201). Not one of the women is silent in the face of these men telling them they need to conform to certain feminine ideals. Judi M. Roller explains, "Stereotypes and enforced roles no longer confine any of these women" (Roller 45). Grady and Albert are assuming that women need men in some way in order to get by, but these four women in particular are rejecting that sentiment by laughing at them. They do not need men at all. Roller further explains of protagonists in feminist novels, "The eventual outcome for the main characters in these novels hinges in large part on their

ultimate rejection of authority" (Roller 46). Celie, and the other women she has learned from and who have learned from her, reject the silencing authority of the men around them. They will not be constrained or silenced any longer.

Walker gives Celie a powerful moment in which she gets to take the multiple identities she has been struggling under and make them all a way of saying that her voice matters. She gives Celie's identity validity and then makes those identities a source of strength. As Celie finally leaves the house behind, she claims she curses Albert, to which he responds, "You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddamn, he say, you nothing at all" (Walker 206). As she drives away with Shug, Celie says, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook… But I'm here" (Walker 207). Celie embraces the words that Albert has claimed are negatives in her life, and accepts them into her own sense of identity. The terms that Albert has told her make her worth nothing actually make her who she is. And she is no longer content to just be alive; she is now "here". Lewis explains that Celie "shamelessly embraces the terms Albert intended as insults… [she] again finds a means of articulating her experiences in the face of extreme degradation" (Lewis 164). Though Albert is still trying to silence Celie, she uses his own words to strengthen her voice. This moment reflects certain elements of the statement by the Combahee River Collective. It was an essential part of understanding intersection identity, and one of the first lines reads, "As black women we see black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face" (Smith, Smith & Frazier 22). Black feminists wanted to address all of the types of oppression that they faced, not just those due to their race or their sex. They recognized the intersecting forms that

oppression can take and worked to combat them all. And Celie echoes this feeling as she embraces each form of oppression she faces, and turns them all back around on the person who has silenced her the most.

Even after all this, Celie still has not fully embraced her own identity. She has spoken against those who have oppressed her. She has escaped the place where she has felt trapped for years. But she still does not feel enough about her own identity to sign her name at the bottom of the letters she writes to her sister. In fact, it is only through creativity that Celie is allowed to finally make that step to accepting the power in her own name. And her creative work even reflects the practical strain that art can take, much as Walker described her mother's gardens as art. After Celie leaves Albert, she begins to sew pants which soon become well known and loved. After the first pair she makes for Shug, Shug tells her, "You is a wonder to behold" (Walker 212). As she continues to make pants for the people in her life, she spends more and more time crafting the pants to perfectly suit the person who will wear them. They become a personalized form of art to her, and Celie finds that she "dream and dream and dream over" the ideas she has for pants (Walker 213). She finishes this particular letter about her new passion by describing to Nettie exactly the type of pants she would make for her. She tells Nettie, "I plan to make them by hand. Every stitch I sew will be a kiss" (Walker 214).

Though the pants become a way for Celie to make money – she is now a woman who can be economically independent – they also become a way for her to express herself and how much she cares about the people in her life. She is able to make each pair differently to suit the particular needs of each wearer. And at the end of this letter, when she has gained a way to express her creativity and her love for those around her, Celie

finally signs her own name to the bottom of her letter. The letter concludes, "Amen, Your Sister, Celie. Folkspants, Unlimited. Sugar Avery Drive. Memphis, Tennesee" (Walker 214). By embracing her own form of art, even though it is a very practical art, Celie finally feels assured enough in her own identity to claim her own name at the conclusion of one of her letters, and the conclusion of every letter after that. This emphasizes the importance of economic independence in Celie's life. Though she has been free of oppressive forces, it isn't until she can also sustain herself that her identity becomes powerful enough for her to claim it. It also places an emphasis on the fact that Celie gains that independence through the use of her own form of art. By embracing her ability to create, Celie is able to claim a life for herself. This moment of Celie claiming her own identity is essential in the way it points to black women needing an economic identity. Walker stresses Celie's journey to gain a sense of self, but only Celie's work is what allows her to finally gain it.

One of the biggest complaints that surrounded *The Color Purple* was the representation of black men. The complaint that men are represented in a negative light is a critique that was leveled against every text in this thesis project. However, the instinct to react negatively towards narratives in which men are not constantly positively represented also reflects an urge to ignore what these negative representations are trying to critique. For Walker, representing her male characters this way allowed her to explore that oppression could be perpetrated even by those who are already oppressed. Many felt that *The Color Purple* represented black men solely in a negative light, as abusers and neglectors who are never redeemed in a particularly positive way, despite the fact that there are black male characters that begin as oppressors in the novel but are eventually

forgiven and accepted back into Celie's life. *The Color Purple* was not the first work of fiction centered on black women to be criticized for this. Ntozake Shange's "For Color Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow is Enuf", a choreopoem first performed in 1976, came under similar criticism.

In many ways, "For Colored Girls" paved the way for *The Color Purple* to eventually be written and released. Duchess Harris explains the influence Shange had, saying that she allowed for women's right to tell their own stories while she also "expanded opportunities for Black women to explore, discuss, and understand the issues that affected their lives, as well as present these issues before a broader and more diverse audience" (D. Harris 40). But Harris also examines negative reviews given of "For Colored Girls", outlining the ways in which certain audiences retaliated against the negative portrayal of black men. She explains that the choreopoem "attracted strong criticism as a production that was naïve, immature, and anti-male" (D. Harris 40). Reviewers could find no redemption for the white or male characters. The same perceived issues plagued *The Color Purple.* Trudier Harris, two years after *The Color Purple* was first published, protests that the novel perpetuates negative stereotypes about black men, black women, and black families. She also calls attention to a student who complained that "Walker had very deliberately deprived all the black male characters in the novel of any positive identity" (T. Harris 158). The criticisms surrounding these two works clearly have similarities.

This negative portrayal of black men, Duchess Harris feels, "reflected fear, especially among Black men, of a popular book by a Black female author in which they are being criticized" (D. Harris 51). While negative reviews of "For Colored Girls"

argued that black men were aggressive due to their oppression and that they should thus be forgiven, Harris argues that the reviewers "did not acknowledge that people can be both victims and oppressors at the same time", a key issue in the black feminist movement (D. Harris 41). As black women attempted to find a voice, they were fighting oppression on multiple sides. Frances Beale brings up the issue in 1970 in "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" when she says, "Certainly black men are maintaining that they have been castrated by society but that black women somehow escaped this persecution and even contributed to this emasculation" (Beale 148). Also in 1970, Mary Ann Weathers complains that women have simply been asked to stand behind black men in their fight for rights, leading her to ask, "Are we women or leaning posts and props?" (Weathers 158). And again, in the early 1970s, Linda La Rue says, "Unless we realize how thoroughly the American value of male superiority and female inferiority has permeated our relationships… we can never appreciate the role it plays in perpetuating racism and keeping black people divided" (La Rue 169). All of these black feminists recognized a theme in the fight for black women's rights. That is, that even within black communities they still faced oppression as women. This is something that rings through clearly in *The Color Purple* and the more negative portrayal of men.

Throughout the book, Celie hears over and over again the complaints about a man's place and a woman's place. Her father is the one who tells her that Celie and Nettie's childhood teacher is not worth listening to because "She run off at the mouth so much no man would have her" (Walker 10). Then she hears Albert telling Harpo why he beats Celie, that it is "Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for—he don't finish" (Walker 22). Albert also later tells Harpo that "Wives is like children. You

have to let them know who got the upper hand" (Walker 35). When Celie wants to see Shug perform, Albert tells her "Wives don't go to places like that" (Walker 72). Celie is beaten down – sometimes literally – by the men in her life because they have such strict expectations of how she should act as a woman. The men are portrayed in a negative light because they have harsh expectations of the roles women should fit, and that role is that women should be subservient and obedient. Women as inferior individuals is a common theme for men in the book. However, the male characters are not without redemption. Albert spends most of his life abusing Celie, but by the end they have made up and even become friends, though they never again act as a married couple. When Celie and Albert talk about how she was treated, and about how she told other people Albert was beating her, he says, "I don't blame you. If a mule could tell folks how it's treated, it would" (Walker 270). Once Albert recognizes that he was treating Celie like an animal, he slowly begins to be redeemed. Once he treats Celie as an equal with whom he can have conversations about love and life, he is no longer the villain in her story.

This moment of Albert recognizing that Celie has been treated as a mule is also relevant for another reason. In "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens", Alice Walker discusses the tropes portrayed by black women. She explains, "Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one's status in society, 'the *mule* of the world', because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else – *everyone* else – refused to carry" (Our Mother's Gardens 237). Walker has recognized the trope of black women as mules, and she addresses that trope within the novel and allows the people who have perpetuated that trope – the men – to own up to their faults. Walker develops Celie as a character who has burdens she has carried, and then allows her to life up those burdens

and to proclaim loudly that they are no longer hers to bear. She calls attention to the ways in which Albert has degraded her because of her status as a woman, and he eventually – after many years – accepts that she was right. So Walker portrays her male characters in a negative light, but allows them redemption when they finally accept the ways they have allowed their own ideas of superiority to become a way of silencing women. Black men are seen as the enemies when they prioritize their own plight over the plight of women. Once they stop this behavior, and work together with women by their side, they become a part of the sympathetic community that makes up Celie's family and the reader can be allowed to forgive them. Through this journey, Walker can both point out the ways in which black men cause oppression while also acknowledging that there is a way to work together and right the wrongs that have been done. Black women could be allowed to navigate negative feelings towards black men in their lives while also seeing a way that the men could be redeemed and their relationship made stronger.

In a time when feminism was focused so centrally on identity and identity politics, Alice Walker wrote a novel that allowed black, lesbian identity to take center stage. She portrayed a main character that had intersecting identities as part of multiple marginalized groups, and gave her a narrative focused on finding her own voice. Celie's journey recognized the strength that she had through the support and strength of other women in her life. Through their reliance on one another, and their constant interactions, Celie became a stronger individual. In the 1980s, the political climate was encouraging individualism and Walker's book centralized the ways in which individuality was only possibly through connection. She wrote about the strength to be found in solidarity, and how communication between women makes them stronger and gives them the ability to

stand against the oppression that they face. Walker's work recognized the necessity of not ignoring any source of oppression that black women faced, and provided a space for black female readers to navigate these sources of oppression while also seeing that change is possible. In a time that caused division within the women's liberation movement, *The Color Purple* made reliance on other women and the strength of embracing personal identity the reasons why a black lesbian in the early 1900s south was able to find her voice, set herself free, and even have a happy ending.

Chapter 3

Navigating Sexual Assault: Anti-Feminist Backlash and the Third Wave in the 1990s

The gains of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s were met with a sharp backlash as the 1990s began. The decade was a time of confusion for feminism, gender politics, and the place of women around the world. It was a time when some were still desperately attempting to win equality for women while others believed feminism was outdated and that women had already accomplished everything they needed to. However, as the decade went on and more young women tried to revive the movement through their own means, there was also a general stirring around sexual identity and sexual harassment for women. The testimony of Anita Hill was one such moment in the 1990s that revealed that women may have made a place for themselves in the workplace and in politics, but that place was in no way on equal footing with men. At the beginning of the decade, in 1991, a film called *Thelma and Louise* hit screens and became a blockbuster. Its intense focus on the relationship between two women and the theme of sexual assault resonated with the time period. On one hand, this Hollywood production, with major film stars, brought enormous visibility to sexual assault. On the other hand, the film's confused relationship with rape reflects the conflicts within the women's liberation movement in the 1990s, a moment that some were referring to as "post-feminist". The film's presentation of the female characters and storyline reveals that anxiety about where women fit into society and how that space was being navigated.

As the 1980s wound down, there was an anxiety that came to be more and more visible for women. Living single was becoming a norm and Sheila Rowbotham explains

in *A Century of Women*, "The trend towards individual autonomy had been assimilated by the young and there were signs of shifts in gender attitudes which had both positive and negative results" (Rowbotham 561). On one hand, girls were doing better in school. They were excelling and becoming more individualistic. However, this new individualism was used as something the media of the time could easily pounce on, as it was relatively new. Though magazines tried to tell women that they could work and be professionals, it also questioned whether they would someday wind up lonely. And, Sara M. Evans explains, "Despite overwhelming evidence of life satisfaction and mental health among working women, whether married or not, many women began to believe that they should be lonely and panic-stricken" (Evans 185). Through all of this, media further pushed the idea that feminism was an old fad, a thing of the past. Evans finds a quote from *Elle* magazine in 1986 that says the younger female generation "'no longer needs to examine the whys and hows of sexism… All those ideals that were once held as absolute truths – sexual liberation, the women's movement, true equality – have been debunked or debased'" (Evans 186). Young women were being shown that they could be independent, but not too independent, and that they should be pleased with where they stood in the world as women. If anything, they were told they should scoff at those who still insisted that feminism was necessary.

At the same time, access to knowledge about women's activism continued to grow. Women's studies courses became more readily available at universities. Though the world around them was insisting that feminism was no longer necessary, these courses became a new way for a younger generation of women to band together and learn how to move forward, as well as how to look back. Evans describes, in language

reminiscent of that used to describe 1970s consciousness-raising groups, “women’s studies classrooms became a crucial incubator for a new generation of women whose voices gradually became audible in the late 1980s and early 1990s, challenging the fragmentation of the movement” (Evans 202). These classrooms became a new place for women to discuss and to learn about the work that needed to be done. Women were learning about their place in the world, and how to change it, only these discussions were in classrooms instead of in living rooms. Though the setting had changed, groups of women were still coming together to discuss their feelings as women just as they had been doing for decades, while also evolving to the point that these groups became an analysis of the patriarchy opperates. And because there had been a push to silence women still demanding liberation, the next generation of feminism was angry and loud.

Evans describes, “The culture of this emerging generation was assertive, multicultural, and unabashedly sexy. Gone were the rules and the academic theory (mostly). In their place were powerful, sexual women who claimed to have no limits” (Evans 215). Women were angry. They were furious that they had been silenced, and furious they had been told that their feelings were invalid. And activism in the early 90s became increasingly more centered “around the issues of reproductive choice and violence against women” (Evans 222). The vocal outrage surrounding sexual harassment became even louder after the hearing of Anita Hill. Anita Hill’s accusations of proposed Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas became a rally cry for women. After a march and demanded investigation allowed Anita Hill to make her accusations publically, reports of sexual harassment became louder and more frequent. “From private homes to political campaigns, the debate, once ignited, catalyzed a new wave of activism”, and the

anger of women only allowed this activism to grow in strength (Evans 226). Anger was a thread that appeared frequently for women, and especially for feminists, in the 1990s.

In 1991, Susan Faludi wrote *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, a book that argued the media had been actively pushing back against feminism and the steps that the women's liberation movement had begun making in the 1970s. She argues that, despite the fact that women were told they were at the peak of equality, not nearly enough had changed and over time their anger had only been silenced and declared unimportant. Faludi explains, "In other words, the antifeminist backlash has been set off not by women's achievement of full equality but by the increased possibility that they might win it" (Faludi 464). She also gives some devastating statistics about the fact that, at the time, only ten states required arrest for perpetrators of domestic violence, and that "reported rapes more than doubled from the early seventies" (Faludi 464). Over and over again, anger and sexual violence appear as themes in women's lives in American in the 1990s, each part only serving to make the other louder. As cries for justice for sexual assault victims became impossible to ignore, women continued to grow more furious. And as the anger became ever more visible, more women were willing to stand up and publically accuse their co-workers and bosses and husbands of assault. Even as a media backlash attempted to silence women's complaints, women grew more willing to speak up and demand change. Callie Khouri, the screenwriter for *Thelma and Louise*, plays with both of these themes heavily throughout the film as it exposes more visible anger over sexual assault in the 1990s while also reacting against the anti-feminist backlash of the decade.

Thelma and Louise (1991) is a film following the two title women, played by Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis, as they set out on a road trip. This adventure leads to murder, armed robbery, and both women fleeing the law until they finally drive off a cliff together rather than be captured by the police. Thelma, a housewife who lives under the thumb of her husband, and Louise, a waitress angered by her boyfriend ignoring her for days at a time, initially decide to go on a weekend trip together to a cabin. After stopping at a roadhouse along the drive, Thelma meets a flirtatious man, Harlan, who gets Thelma drunk, dances with her, and finally attempts to rape her in the parking lot. This leads to Louise shooting Harlan and both women running when Louise firmly explains that the police won't believe that Thelma was raped, and they certainly won't understand why the two women killed Harlan. Throughout the film, Louise reveals her knowledge of how the world works in regards to sexual violence. Though there are many moments when she insists that the assault was not Thelma's fault, she also navigates her anger that Thelma was too naïve to realize she was being tricked by Harlan initially. *Thelma and Louise* allows for this navigation, and the reliance of women on one another, to become a central point for teaching Thelma, Louise, and the audience about sexual assault and how much it is a part of the life of women every day.

While the film does not prescribe specific methods of how to deal with sexual assault, multiple avenues of response are explored and near the end of the film Thelma gets to insist that it was not her fault she was assaulted, just as Louise has been telling her. Lisa Maria Hogeland explains in her book *Feminism and Its Fictions* that in the 1960s and 70s, feminists considered the relationship between consciousness-raising and large scale change in practical ways. For them, "CR was a starting point for feminism, a

place from which to begin doing more public, activist organizing, rather than an end in itself or an investigative model" (Hogeland 25). *Thelma and Louise* does not act as a consciousness-raising tool that suggests women who have been sexually assaulted should go out and kill their attackers. Instead, it is a starting point; the film is an acknowledgement of rape culture and the multiple avenues of response available to women. The film emphasizes that response itself is essential, not a specific type of response, all the while calling attention to the dangerous way sexual assault was being silenced.

As the film goes on, Thelma's naiveté lessens more and more as she learns from Louise and both women come into a better understanding of how the world works and how to take care of themselves and one another. Together they are able to go through a variety of possible responses to sexual assault, and to rely on one another to understand the outcome of their actions. This understanding also allows for Thelma growing confident enough to rob a store while holding a gun in the air and calmly threatening the cashier and fellow shoppers. It also allows Louise to grow to rely heavily on another person in her life, enough so that their story ends with a kiss and their hands united as they drive off a cliff, an emphasis on female connection that can be connected back to *The Color Purple.* Though the movie is a play on rage and sexual violence, it is also an examination of female characters that are more morally gray and embrace anger. While Mira, Isadora, and Celie are not perfect characters, they all also make moral decisions that readers can understand and encourage. This becomes more complex in *Thelma and Louise* as both women do things – i.e. kill and steal – that audiences have a harder time agreeing with morally. Rowbotham explains of the period, "The story that unfolds when

we look at this century as a whole is neither a straightforward march of progress nor one in which debacle is ever absolute" (Rowbotham 575). This ambiguity and difficulty in defining the right moves and the wrong ones is clear throughout *Thelma and Louise* as they frequently make morally questionable decisions. Their decisions are not easy to define as inherently right or wrong, just as so many issues faced by 1990s feminists did not have clear answers. The film gives a certain amount of leeway regarding ambiguity, a space to explore that gray area without necessarily bringing any firm closure. But throughout each of the decisions Thelma and Louise make, it is clear female rage plays an important role.

In an interview in 2013, Khouri discussed the creation of Thelma and Louise as characters and ultimately said of the situation that she decided to write it because she had never seen in film "the anger women feel about the way they're talked to" (Khouri). It was, as Khouri explained, an emotion she herself had felt and was frustrated had not been really explored for women in film. In the interview she goes on to tell a story of being harassed on the street by a man and the moment when she finally yelled at him, stood up to his remarks, and made him face the consequences for his harassment. She acknowledged the risk in responding, but also described a feeling of elation because she had "responded like a normal human being who respected myself" adding that she had "Not only allowed myself to feel anger, I also expressed it" (Khouri). In a time when women were experiencing so much rage, Khouri was frustrated that women were not really being allowed to explore that rage on screen. As real women's anger was being silenced by the media, Khouri felt that the film industry was not doing its part to make that emotion visible. She was a woman angry with what was happening, and she wanted

to create female characters that could act on and explore that rage. Throughout the film, Thelma and Louise explore all different kinds of rage aimed at each other, at men, and at the systems that have put them in the situation they are in.

First, there is the rage Louise very visibly feels when she finds Harlan assaulting Thelma in the parking lot. In the scene, the audience first hears Louise shout to at Harlan to stop, though she is not visible on screen. When Harlan does not back down, Louise finally puts a gun to his neck, only her hand visible as she begins to speak. As she says her line, the camera pans from Harlan's face to Louise, who is visibly shaking, saying "You let her go, you fucking asshole, or I'm gonna splatter your ugly face all over this nice car" (Thelma and Louise). She reprimands Harlan as she gets Thelma away from him, explaining that when a woman is crying it means she isn't enjoying what is happening, her eyes wide and her tone of voice serious and angry. Finally, Harlan tells both women that he should have just raped Thelma, and when Louise demands he repeat himself, he says "suck my cock". In response, Louise lifts the gun she had allowed to fall to her side and shoots him. Her final words to Harlan as Thelma runs for the car are, "You watch your mouth, buddy". Throughout this scene, Thelma is in hysterics, sobbing, but Louise is a firm hand both instructing Harlan what to do and telling him exactly how she feels. She is furious from the moment she enters the scene, and that fury is what leads to her pulling the trigger.

Louise is also angry numerous times as she gets into arguments with Thelma throughout the film. Right after the murder, Thelma and Louise are panicked and trying to decide what to do next. Thelma suggests they go to the police, and an increasingly desperate and angry Louise responds, "Just about a hundred goddamn people saw you

dancing cheek to cheek with him all night, who's gonna believe that? We don't live in that kind of a world, Thelma" (Thelma and Louise). This line, which is steeped in a lot of the anger that Louise feels towards Thelma in that moment, also points towards a critical critique. In so many ways and throughout many different conversations, the film questions the pervasive and dangerous nature of sexual assault and rape culture. As Louise gets angry at Thelma over and over again, it comes back to the way they each view rape and how the culture processes it. Despite the fact that Harlan first got Thelma drunk, and then attempted to have sex with her when she begged him not to, Louise has a very specific idea in her head as to how others will see the situation. In *Watching Rape,* Sarah Projansky sums up Louise's state of mind, "While Louise and the camera saw Harlan coercing Thelma, Louise assumes that the law will see Thelma consenting" (Projansky 130). Louise visibly projects anger, but she does so while also criticizing the response to sexual assault in the world around her. She understands that Thelma has been assaulted, but she comes from a place of knowledge about the situation of women at the time.

Thelma also has moments of anger, though they build more slowly than Louise's do. The first real instance of apparent anger from Thelma is when she calls her husband, Darryl, to tell him that she will return home from their trip the following day. Darryl threatens Thelma and tells her she has to come home immediately, talking the controlling nature that was apparent in his character from the beginning. As Darryl continues to yell at and chastise Thelma (including a moment where he tells her that Louise is a bad influence) she finally snaps and says, "Darryl? Go fuck yourself" before rapidly ending the phone call (Thelma and Louise). This anger, this willingness to fight back against

male aggressors, is something that Louise has from the beginning of the film but that Thelma slowly adopts by the end. Thelma learns from Louise how to express her anger in a variety of ways, and how to use that rage to make changes. Mostly this exchange of knowledge is visible in the women's relationship with a truck driver they frequently encounter on the road. He makes obscene gestures at them each time they drive past.

The first time they see him, Thelma remarks that truck drivers are the best drivers on the road as he lets the women pass. Louise seems markedly unimpressed, first ignoring Thelma's remarks and then commenting on the sexualized woman on the truck's mud flaps. As they drive past, the driver makes a number of obscene gestures at them and both women are disgusted and unimpressed, but they drive away. The next time they see the driver, he shouts at them and Louise tells Thelma, "just ignore him" Neither of them respond to his gestures or yelling, and in fact they don't even look him in the face. The final time they see him, Thelma and Louise's car comes to a stop and they flirt with the driver before telling him to pull over. After they get away from the road, both women confront him and Louise asks, "where do you get off behaving like that with women you don't even know?". The confrontation ends with both Thelma and Louise pulling out guns and shooting at the vehicle's wheels, and eventually blowing up the whole truck. While previous texts like *The Women's Room* and *The Color Purple* primarily shape female response as escaping the oppressive situation they are in, *Thelma and Louise* makes response violent. The women don't just escape the situation, they react and cause destruction in their attempts to defend themselves.

These scenes emphasize the inescapable nature of sexual harassment in the lives of Thelma and Louise. Thelma has been attacked already at the beginning of the film, and

they have had to deal with this driver throughout their journey. The film also makes constant suggestions that Louise has been raped in the past. This is emphasized both in her detailed knowledge of how the police will respond to rape accusations as well as the hints the audience gets from Thelma when she asks Louise if she was raped in Texas, a state she refuses to revisit. Though the film never directly comes out and says it, the implication is clear that Louise has had some kind of relationship with sexual assault in the past. Khouri wanted to leave any explicit confirmation of Louise's past out of the film entirely. She emphasized that whatever happened to Louise happened, and that's that. She explains, "There are thousands and thousands of women walking around that have something in their past we don't know about and they deserve to be treated with respect, whether we had anything to do with it or not" (Khouri). But this hinting at her past does make a clear chronology for the women. These separate instances of harassment show the ways in which it follows both women constantly, "as past unspeakable horror (Texas), present unavoidable event (Harlan), and future inevitable threat (truck driver)" (Projansky 127). In each instance, the women respond differently.

The audience does not know how Louise dealt with her past experiences, which leaves them to make assumptions based on what they know about the world, but there is the implication that she ran away. Though considering her understanding of the law in connection with assault, it is also possible she tried to get the police involved and her story was not believed. In the instance of Harlan, they reacted violently and killed him. And in their last interaction, "instead of killing the trucker, instead of destroying his *power* to rape and harass, they destroy the *symbol* of his power to rape and harass; they blow up his truck" (Projansky 129). This final response is so markedly different from

Harlan's murder because, as it plays out onscreen, the background music is upbeat and both main characters are laughing. It is a comic release after the film spends a majority of the time on elements of drama. In this moment, the film offers a solution to sexual assault that is pleasurable, while still punishing those who have perpetrated the harassment. All of these instances are criticisms of sexual assault, and Thelma and Louise are allowed to explore all the possible different responses without criticism as to which response is right and which is wrong. All of this serves as a way to raise the consciousness of women watching the film by allowing women to navigate their rage in response to assault. The audience, as it sides with Thelma and Louise, are able to refrain from more strict moral judgements and are allowed to simply enjoy the justice both women are apparently getting. They are criticized by the law for their responses, but Thelma and Louise criticize the law right back. The film allows women to feel angry, and specifically calls attention to the fact that the victim of the assault is not the one to blame.

The anger and active nature of both Thelma and Louise also stood out at the time period due to representation of active women in cinema. Evans explains, "Film images of women and men had seemed to be moving in the 1970s toward androgyny, but the 1980s saw a return to stories in which raw male violence and aggression dominated and women were either absent or depicted as sexualized accessories" (Evans 185). Women were denied aggression, and denied the violence men were allowed in film. And if they were permitted this violence or rage, they also had to deal with being sexualized. In her essay, "Return of the 'Angry Woman': Authenticating Female Physical Action in Contemporary Cinema", Lisa Purse examines the physicality of women in film who are in active roles. In these films with active women, the women were forced into a position of hyper-

femininity, never allowed to look as though they were really performing much of the action. They maintained made-up faces and rarely had bruises or bloodied wounds. Purse explains of the situation, “Depictions of female agency came at a price, frequently including titillating nudity, sexualized rape victims, and pre-vengeance ‘seduction’ scenes”, a clear extension of Evans’ examination (Purse 193). However, compared to these active women on screen, there is a distinct difference in what happens to Thelma and Louise.

Though they are women in action, given what seems to be a nearly unlimited mobility, Thelma and Louise are not forbidden to shed their femininity and are not hypersexualized. In the scene where Thelma is assaulted, and in a few of the scenes afterwards, she is visibly beaten and bloodied. Her hair is a mess, she is bruised, and blood runs from her nose. The assault scene is not sexualized. And as the movie continues, and Thelma and Louise attempt to escape to Mexico, they do not maintain the careful outward appearance they began the movie with. They become increasingly more dusty and dirty, and their clothes begin to yellow and show sweat stains. By the time both women reach the point where they shoot at and blow up the truck, Louise has completely left behind her housewife exterior. Her dress is gone, replaced with a black screen-printed shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Instead of maintaining her hyper-feminine exterior in the face of a situation where it makes no sense, she is allowed to dress down and be less sexualized. She has a gun tucked into the back of her jeans that she is readily willing to pull out and use. There is no pressure on either woman to maintain a feminine front as they run from their actions. Both women are allowed to be angry and active, but they are also permitted to not be hypersexualized. Though, as Purse also points out, this more

realistic depiction also frightened many (especially male) viewers. She explains that due to the women being "depicted in a naturalistic, contemporary, everyday setting" there was a backlash, and that "journalists worried that thousands of women across the United States would copy the onscreen pair's actions" (Purse 187). Because Thelma and Louise were allowed to be unfeminine, reviewers were concerned that the fantasy of revenge would seem like a real option for female viewers. And this fear is played up as reviewers also complained about the negative portrayal of men throughout the film.

This response may be tied to a frequent issue in 90s feminism. Imelda Whelehan explains, "The new feminism appears to be about learning to love men and disapproves of any hint of criticism of them, even if the criticisms are more abstract and levelled against the ways structures of patriarchy are maintained" (Whelehan 166). Despite the fact that the film appeared to be calling out the omnipresence of rape culture, and criticizing society as a whole, critics clung to the specific representation of male characters. In "Hardware and Hardboadies: What Do Women Want?" Sharon Willis explains, "A range of critics took issues with the film's depiction of men. In a rhetoric clearly borrowed from feminism, but crudely reduced, they found the film guilty of male-bashing" (Willis 120). This response reflects a very visible double standard in the society in which this film sits. Despite the fact that many other films of the time with male leads allowed these male characters to be violent and angry, depicting women the same way created an assumption that women would take seeing violent female characters as a sign that they should be the same. Judith Halberstam examines this double standard in "Imagined Violence/Queer Violence: Representation, Rage, and Resistance". The discussion of violence in film shifted after *Thelma and Louise*, and "Debates raged about

whether we really wanted to condone a kind of role reversal that now pits female aggressors against male victims" (Halberstam 191). But, as Willis continues, the film offers a very specific call for viewers. She says, the film "suggests that we need to conceptualize feminine desire, and to shift our framework so that it can accommodate not only need or want, but also demand" (Willis 128). She claims that film, and audiences by extension, need to learn to validate a more aggressive form of feminine desire. It demanded that their rage be seen as legitimate, and that viewers acknowledge the oppressive forces women were still facing. Willis feels that the negative response to the film is also rooted in a fear of women shedding femininity and becoming aggressive or assertive, but that the narrative surrounding women who are active must be forced to change as well. *Thelma and Louise* insisted on a changing narrative for women.

Much like the media backlash described when women began to make large steps through feminism, the film experiences a backlash against the conceptions of women as more active figures. They shed their femininity, criticize rape culture, and over and over again insist on the fact that they do not need men to survive. In fact, at the end of the film they drive off a cliff, away from the group of male police officers and straight to their deaths. Cathy Griggers explains in "*Thelma and Louise* and the Cultural Generation of the New Butch-Femme", "Between subjection to a hetero-phallic law and the ecstasy of the abyss, Thelma and Louise choose the abyss with very little hesitation" (Griggers 133). This response, the visible anger and violent reaction that Thelma and Louise go through in the film, is feared because it takes women away from their role as passive observers in active fiction and allows them to control their own fate. Willis observes, "Women are emerging in our collective imagination as agents of culture and of fantasy,

and not just their objects" (Willis 128). Halberstam sees power in this shift to view women as in control of imagined violence in film, saying "Films like *Thelma and Louise* suggest, therefore, not that we all pick up guns, but that we allow ourselves to imagine the possibilities of fighting violence with violence" (Halberstam 191). Much like Projanksy suggested, Halberstam sees *Thelma and Louise* as simply a way to encourage female response to aggression, not a film motivating women to go and kill their attackers. The narrative surrounding this film was an apparent fear of reaction from women, a terror that they would fight back and make their own actions aggressive.

Thelma and Louise are not an ideal for women to emulate. But their existence creates a potential for consciousness-raising that allows their actions to have meaning despite the fact that they die. As in *The Women's Room* and *Fear of Flying*, these women do not get an ending because their reaction to the patriarchal aggression surrounding them is not allowed to continue indefinitely. Jane Elliot explains, "Not only is it difficult to imagine and represent the path to a feminist future, but it is also potentially hazardous to do so" (Elliot 147). Imagining a world in which Thelma and Louise survive at the end was not a possibility for Khouri. These female characters could only exist to criticize the society, not to make the actual changes themselves. Because, as Elliot also points out, "fictions that err on the side of feminist fulfillment can be charged with offering a novelistic substitute for genuine political change – a kind of literary opiate for the oppressed female masses" (Elliot 152). If Thelma and Louise survive at the end, then things in the world around them must not be as terrible as they appear. If they make it out, their oppression is not as absolute as it is when they cannot survive their violent reactions. The film is a piece of consciousness-raising fiction in that it reveals how

deeply rape culture is embedded in Thelma and Louise's world – the real world. They are surrounded by stereotypes of patriarchal oppression that attempt to contain them over and over again, to the point that death is perceived as a superior form of freedom.

However, Khouri views their journey, not their deaths, as the more essential part of Thelma and Louise as characters. Khouri explains, "Even though they lose their lives at the end, you watch them as society's convention is pulled further and pulled out of their grasp, so they become more and more themselves" (Khouri). Though it ends with their deaths, the film is a journey of Thelma and Louise disentangling themselves from societal conditioning until they are free to embrace their true identities. And they do this by frequently and constantly communicating with and learning from one another. Though Thelma is portrayed as the more naïve of the two, she is not only the one learning throughout the film. She is there to help Louise and teach her new things as well. She shows Louise the power that exists in relying on one another. Though it seems as though Louise has been without any firm connection, and in fact she originally wanted to go on the trip because she was not getting the attention she wanted from her boyfriend, she winds up relying on Thelma intensely and their relationship is what allows them to come into their own identities.

This relationship is yet another way in which the film acts as a consciousness-raising tool. Neither Thelma nor Louise is portrayed as perfect. On the larger morality scale, one is a murderer and the other is an armed robber. Both of them have contributed to (fairly dramatic) destruction of property. They also attack a police officer and trap him in the trunk of his own cruiser. But even on a smaller scale, Louise sometimes fails at not blaming Thelma for the place they are in because she lacked the socially acquired

knowledge Louise had that allowed her to recognize Harlan as a threat. She yells at Thelma and criticizes her for not knowing certain things. And Thelma is, of course, naïve about the world. She believes people when they tell her things. She trusts JD, a drifter and a thief, because he treats her better than the other men in her life have. However, what Thelma and Louise as characters offer is their continual growth. Projansky explains, "Louise does not function as an ideal toward which Thelma moves; instead each character influences the other in the process and illustrating that there is no one right way to respond" (Projansky 130). Together, both women are allowed to make mistakes and they are allowed to learn from those mistakes.

As the film goes on, Thelma becomes gradually less passive and less trusting. Louise has to tell her multiple times to stop trusting people, and by the time both women are pushed to their breaking point, it is Thelma, not Louise – that hangs up the phone on the police. She is the one to recognize Louise is being emotionally compromised and to do something about it. This is the role Louise has been playing for most of the film, but Thelma has learned from her and becomes more able to handle these situations. And while Louise spends a lot of the movie insisting that Thelma is not at fault for being assaulted, Thelma is the one who finally gets to repeat the fact that it wasn't her fault near the end. Louise grows more open and afraid as the film goes on, and Thelma grows more assertive and willing to take action. They shift and change due to the example the other sets, and the continual conversations they have about their situation. Projanksy further states, "while overall Louise functions as a more knowledgeable teacher and Thelma moves from being naïve to being informed, both characters also continually shift positions" (Projansky 131). This element of the film encourages women communicating

with one another and growing as they collect knowledge from each other. The film represents women learning from one another, especially as Thelma, a woman more naïve about the patriarchal structures of the world, learns from Louise, who understands the space women occupy.

This relationship between knowledgeability and the passing on of learned experience is a particularly fascinating way to draw connections between the once energized feminist movement and the angry young women moving into place to make up the third wave. Evans explains of this new uprising of women, "When 'third wave' women appeared in the mid-1990s they set out to claim a place within feminism distinct from that of their literal and figurative mothers" (Evans 230). These young women set out angry, and they were working with the knowledge they had gained from communicating with another generation of feminists, while also establishing themselves as a group apart from that of the past. They had to work together to create a new and distinct identity that was uniquely their own.

This new rising third wave learned from their mothers, they learned from the treatment of women in popular media, and they learned from women's studies classes that were finally becoming more and more available. They were able to see the history of the movement that had come before, and used those moves to build up a new wave that was distinct and angry. They were furious, like Thelma and Louise are allowed to be, at the attempt that had been made to silence them. They were ready, like Thelma and Louise, to name rape culture and criticize its pervasiveness. *Thelma and Louise* reflects its time period through that anger, though the connection between women, and through the backlash that both main characters enact against the men who have put them down.

Though the film did not act as a way to tell women violence was the only answer, Halberstam points out that "Imagined violence does not stop men from raping women but it might make a man think twice about whether a woman is going to blow him away" (Halberstam 199). The film's violence is not necessarily advocated, but it is pointed out as a powerful educational tool. It acknowledges the power in making women believe they can fight back, and understands the essential nature of conversation with other women through it all.

Thelma and Louise recognized firmly that women can be angry, and they can fight back. This rage clearly would have spoken to the incoming third wave of feminists. Thelma and Louise as characters emphasize that there is space to fight back and to criticize the way society treated issues like sexual assault and female anger. The film pointed to the ways in which sexual assault was so visibly a part of patriarchal culture and a part of every moment in women's lives, all while allowing the main female characters to shed femininity and become more authentically themselves through conversation, anger, and the willingness to fight against established systems. By leaning on one another, Thelma and Louise grow closer and slowly are free from the societal pressures that led them to feel so contained at the beginning of the film. Through their time leaning on and learning from one another, Thelma and Louise grow stronger. This relationship allowed female viewers to see the power in female connection and in learning and growing through those relationships. It allowed them to see the reality of anger and the ways in which that rage was not only acceptable, but that fighting back is acceptable too. For Thelma and Louise, in the end, there is power in fighting back.

Though they did not get to survive the end of the film, the women walking out of the theatre did, and with a renewed ability to recognize the power in their own resistance.

Conclusion

Over the course of this thesis project, I have discussed fictional works that are informed by the political space they occupy; and have shown how authors use those works to intervene in gender politics being discussed in the world around them. Within each work, whether in the domestic sphere like Mira and Celie or free to roam like Isadora, Thelma, and Louise, women have an established place within their respective narratives. When they are examined side by side, these works create a timeline for women in late 20th century U.S. feminist fiction. While some feminist politics remain just as widely discussed across many years, like the recurring theme of sexual violence present in each text over all three decades, some are specific to the decade and the feminists who are currently becoming the most vocal, as in the varying discussions of intersectionality, the nuclear family, and acceptable forms of resistance.

There is a provision for a wide variety of women's stories, from the bawdy Isadora Wing, to the contained Mira, to the un-silenced Celie, and the resistant Thelma and Louise. As time goes on, there is greater freedom for women to act, as well as less defined ideas of morality. While Isadora and Mira want to break free from the constraints of marriage and sexuality, they are in no way allowed to steal and murder along the way. Even as the earlier protagonists break away from home life, they are limited by the confines of what is deemed as acceptable in the eyes of those in power. This timeline gives us a way to look at the past as it has led to the present day. By looking back, themes begin to emerge for various feminist heroines. From the women of *The Women's Room* to Thelma of *Thelma and Louise,* the home still represents a form of entrapment. For each protagonist across all three decades, the threat of sexual assault is very real and is actually

acted upon in every text besides *Fear of Flying.* In seeing these themes emerge as constants, it is easy to wonder how feminist fiction will evolve as time goes onwards. In the 26 years since *Thelma and Louise* was released, are authors creating new feminist characters that will stand the test of time and emerge as moments of feminist popular culture? Or are we a part of Faludi's backlash, attempting to make women feel unsure of their place in the political and social world? The answer to this question becomes even more difficult to define when it comes to more modern works and the debate over whether or not they count as being feminist. When I decided to look at the past and see how feminist fiction had evolved, I wanted to understand how it had led to the types of popular fiction being written today.

Gone Girl by Gillian Flynn was released as a novel in 2012, and then turned into a film in 2014. The book was a bestseller, and the film was similarly positively received. Over the course of both the film and book releases, there was a lot of debate over whether or not the story could be counted as feminist. The original novel follows a married couple, Amy and Nick Dunne. On the morning of their 5th wedding anniversary, Amy goes missing and as the mystery unfolds it becomes ever increasingly obvious that Nick must have murdered Amy. However, halfway through the novel, the audience is finally let in on the actual plot. Amy, tired of being ignored and pushed around by her husband, has faked her own death and framed her husband for the murder. Over the course of the big reveal, Amy has a speech that has gone on to be labeled the "Cool Girl" monologue, in which she complains about the various types of performed femininity women try to act out in order to please men. Amy claims she was the Cool Girl who never got upset, who let her husband walk all over her, looking pretty and always understanding of his needs.

She claims men are always after the Cool Girl type and explains, “There are variations to the window dressing, but believe me, he wants a Cool Girl, who is basically the girl who likes every fucking thing he likes and doesn’t ever complain” (Flynn 223).

Amy Dunne goes in and out of various types of female characters over the course of the novel. In the first half of the novel, when the only things we learn about her are through Nick’s eyes and through the diary she has carefully left behind as evidence, we see a doting stay-at-home wife who cooks, cleans, and looks after her slob of a husband without complaint. This version of Amy invokes the women of *The Women’s Room*, drowning under the patriarchal forces that Nick exerts over her. But at the turn of the novel, Amy becomes much more morally complex. She frames a man for murder because she does not think he has been playing his part of the helpful husband as well as she has been playing the doting wife. She is vengeful and willing to go to any length to get what she feels she is due. She becomes much more similar to Thelma and Louise, willing to do things that are morally questionable because she has been wronged. And, like Celie, she puts a sort of curse on a husband who has mistreated her in the past when she leaves and lets him be consumed by a police investigation.

Amy first plays the part of an oppressed housewife in order to get Nick to fall for her, and then to get the sympathy of the police as the investigation unfolds. As she is on the run while Nick is under investigation, she stays at a motel and plays the part of an abused wife in the hopes that she will go unnoticed. When she meets up with an old friend named Desi, she becomes a femme fatale, seducing him and then killing him. Throughout the novel, Amy subverts the various tropes of femininity that I’ve discussed over the course of this paper by using them at will to get what she wants. Many take all of

these things and they consider the novel to be a work of feminist fiction. The author herself has written morally dark female characters of her works because, as she explains on her website, "I wanted to write about the violence of women" (Flynn). Much like Khouri and her frustration at the lack of angry women in film, Flynn was sick of seeing "generations of brutal men, trapped in a cycle of aggression" without fictional women being allowed the same option (Flynn). And yet, Amy does something over the course of the novel that has caused many to claim that its place in feminism is null. She accuses multiple men of rape that they did not commit. She becomes the angry, vicious woman that cries rape and commits murder in the name of oppression. She is a caricature of feminism, giving other feminists a bad name.

Gone Girl does not fit within my rules of feminist fiction. Amy shares half of her story with a male narrator, and her consciousness is not raised over the course of the novel. And yet, at the same time, it fits the other rules. Amy intervenes in popular culture, calling out the ways in which women are still pushed to fit certain roles of femininity in order to please men. She provides a validation of female violence in fiction. It becomes unclear if she is an intervention in gender politics that have allowed fiction to shape female characters as non-violent, or if she is a part of the backlash that shows feminists are man-hating, vindictive shrews. Can she be an intervention in female representation – a female character allowed to be explicitly and frighteningly violent – while also reinforcing negative stereotypes of feminism? It may be that this debate is exactly what makes the novel worthwhile as part of the discussion. Much like this project as a whole, it forces readers and viewers to consider what exactly makes fiction feminist, and to think about how creators are staging an intervention in the gender politics of the present day.

Even within my own set of rules, *Gone Girl* would have been eliminated as a topic of discussion for a full chapter.

Debates like this are the reason to think that there are rules and definitions in this project that are possibly too narrow. My focus on exclusively cisgender female main characters, which eliminates transgender narratives as well as stories about cisgender men which might also intervene in gender politics, is not fully representative of the scope of feminist thought. While this project is a representation of how cis female characters have evolved over time to question and encourage feminist discourse, it does not fully grasp the number of ways in which there can be intervention in gender politics. Beyond that, these works, while representative of certain aspects of their time, do not stand as sole works to define a period. Many other female-authored works exist in all three decades that could easily complicate the representations of feminism across time. The texts I chose are all works of popular fiction that do represent part of the feminist thought in individual moments, but they do not fully contain the multitude of ways feminist work could exist in the decade. However, each of the texts I've discussed, from first person narratives, to epistolary fiction, to film all tackle many of the same topics while seeming relatively dissimilar. Though the protagonists of each come from different backgrounds and time periods, they still each make attempts at intervention through fiction. There are limits to what a single project can do, but Isadora, Mira, Celie, Thelma, and Louise all exist on a timeline that takes us back and then makes us look forward to who might be added to the list next.

It is hard to decide what works will be enduring. In a time when information is so readily accessible, it is difficult to consider how fiction can continue to raise the

consciousness of readers. It could be in terms of a novel, a film, or possibly a television series streamed in a single day. Stories are more readily accessible in this day and age than they have been in the past, which provides women with more opportunity to use their words and their characters to intervene in the present day social struggles women face. However, looking back, it is clear to see a path along which female characters from feminist fiction have both drawn on the past, and looked towards the future. These fictional women, and the female writers who created them, makeup a timeline of intervention in the nuclear family, female sexuality, intersectionality, anger, and retaliation that begins with a woman afraid to fly, and leads to women clasping hands and willingly flying off a cliff side by side.

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